

Prayers for a Safe Return

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The cold spring morning air stings my face, my legs, and my arms as I hold Koda's reins tight. Dawn has barely broken the night sky. I snap the straps of leather again, knowing I need to put as much distance as possible between home and me. I feel his body lurch forward, pushing himself to go faster, obeying the command the snap of the reins gave him. *Don't go back. Don't look back.* My thoughts echo in my mind, in sync with the sound of Koda's hooves thudding against the ground. My heart beats loudly in my chest, reminding me with each heartbeat that I'm alive. The knapsack on my shoulders hits my back with every one of Koda's strides.

The sun has shown half of itself in the middle of the sky when I pull at the reins, slowing Koda to a stop atop a knoll. I pull the reins left, telling him to turn around. The wind stirs my hair, my dress. I let out an exhale, my breath appearing before me in a ghost of white steam, disappearing barely before I have a chance to acknowledge it. I shiver, but I'm not cold. I should be, but I'm not. In the distance, I see the plumes of black smoke rising out of a place I used to call home. I watch with a solemn gaze, a neutral demeanor. I can't go back because there isn't a place to go back to. No tears roll down my cheeks, no pit forms in my heart or in my stomach. My eyes look down at Koda, and I run my fingers through his mane. "I guess it's just me and you." He lets out a heavy breath through his nose as if he understands. I lean down and kiss his bridle path, the place above his mane and right past the top of his head. "Come on, boy. There's nothing left for us here." I pull on his reins, turning him back the way we were originally headed. I lightly tap his side with my foot, causing him to walk, and we head on our way.

Koda drank from the body of water, and I let myself relax against a tree. We had been traveling since we left this morning, and the sun was beginning to set. The white men had burned my home town down, destroying the gardens my family had grown for generations. All of my belongings, all of my mother's items I had kept after she passed away....they are all gone. Tears threatened my eyes, but I closed them, taking deep breaths. All I had known all of my life was *gone.*

As if he knew something was wrong, Koda's muzzle nudges at my cheek affectionately, his big brown eyes sad and understanding. A solemn smile rises on my lips, and I reach a small, tanned hand up to him and pet the bridge of his nose. "We're going to be all right..." The words are more reassurance for me than for him. I take out another blanket from my knapsack and lay it around me, and before I knew it the darkness of sleep filled me.

"Spirits of the earth and the sky,"

I'm awoken by the chanting of words in my native language. I rub my eyes and sit up slowly so as not to scare Koda, my eyes adjusting to the darkness of the dead of night.

"We ask for you to watch over her."

I look around, wondering where the voice was coming from. I hadn't heard anyone speak my native tongue since Mother passed away. This voice was familiar to me, though, which drew me to it.

"Keep her safe on her journey, wherever she may be."

I lay the blanket on Koda and follow the feminine voice cautiously.

"We give you this incense and this food as atonement for what you've done for us."

I see a glow coming from the midst of the trees, the smell of sage and lavender filling the air. I make careful steps so that I don't disturb or scare the other people.

"Please accept this offering and payment. Please keep Aiyana safe, spirits."

How did this person know my name? Why was she praying to keep me safe? My hand rests on the hilt of my knife on my side, and I slowly step into the light. As soon as I see her, my body freezes.

I didn't know whether to run away or cry. My mother, whom I thought had been taken by the white men and killed, looks up at me from her prayer and gently smiles. "So the spirits *have*

heard my prayers.” Her voice is soft, calm and inviting.

“Come, child. You’re finally home.”