

## The Hunt

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The trail towards the frontier was set. No one was to be sent out from the village except for him. The wooden gates behind him shut, and young Yokun, tall, tanned, and mounted on his father's horse, Yanaba, set forth in the late hours as the rising sun drew near. His task was to venture out into the wild and hunt for prey, alone, as a service on behalf of his misdeeds. His growing discontent with the tribe's traditions, his alienation of himself from communal duties, and the frequent vociferous arguments against the local clan chiefs on matters that they deemed "impractical," led to the immediate decision of sending him out on a "spirit hunt," as a way of clearing his mind in a practical manner. To him, however, his troubles were existential, and this hunt for cattle was no different than the rest. Only this time, he was alone.

The gates behind him were now shut, and the path awaited him. The entire country was silent. Nothing could be made out from that darkness, although he had the trail memorized by heart thanks to his father, his true mentor.

With a deep breath, Yokun bade his horse to strut forth into the dark, as he recollected every hunt he had ever gone on with his mentor. They had said that the reason for his going in the dark at such an unearthly hour was to catch the grazing bison early and off their guard. Yokun didn't object; getting away from the village for a while seemed like an opportunity too foolish not to take. In fact, if

his return with prey confounded the elders, Yokun would be all the happier.

For the clan, hunting was a very salient ritual. It was not just a necessity, but taken with such seriousness that not even a trace of emotion should be shown on the faces of the hunters, not even joy or dread.

This was a thing that greatly irritated Yokun. He could never understand why it was that after they caught or killed their prey, it was tradition to say, "Nia-wah". Why should they give thanks to an animal after slaughtering it? To whom would this gratitude even be offered? Or by whom would it be noted and accepted?

He had cast away his faith in the tribe's beliefs, including the omnipresent *Wakan Tanka*, or The Great Spirit, and all its other deities entirely, though it had been dormant all his life. This, of course, was not to the elders' liking. He had been favored by everyone, not only because he was his father's son, but because of his incredible hunting skills, his exceptionally fast riding, and his well-reserved behavior around elderly folk. But this had all changed

Now his absence from the village gave them all breathing room, for his temerity and impudence were increasingly threatening and burdensome for the chiefs. If only his father were alive, they thought, Yokun's insatiable and fiery spirit might be tempered.

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Though it was dark, the large grey clouds were still visible. Yokun could tell by the change in the weather, the stiffening of his knee, and the scent of the place that it was to rain soon and the day would be grey and cold. He persisted on. Then, after travelling for a mile or two, he came upon a high mound overlooking a vast golden prairie. A small far-away mountain stood on the other side.

At the mountain's feet were green fields, and dotted all around them were some spruce trees that lay near a river. This was also the mound that his father used to muse and meditate on. His father would sit and observe everything that lay beneath that distant mountain, then he would ride out against the prey.

He had once told Yokun, "A good hunter must always ascend the highest mound, or the steepest cliff, so that he can see all that is. You must see first before the hunt... before anything."

On the mound Yokun sat, and there he would remain for another hour until the morning came, and in its light revealing the prey. His father was nicknamed "The Grey Gecko" for his patience and silence. Yokun, too, was taught to be a grey gecko. So was his brother, though only Yokun truly showed it. Now he proved it; an hour passed slowly with Yokun sat crouched on the mound, clothed with nothing but his bare skin. No ordinary man could withstand the cold like he did. As would usually happen when he was alone or quiet, his troubles crept back into his head again.

The conflict with the other clan had cost them so much, and many lives were needlessly lost. Seeing their returning soldiers who had endured brutal torture by their

captors, had shaken Yokun's very soul. Although Yokun was strong and shrewd, seen by many as an heir to tribal power, his spirit was tremendously marred. He no longer felt rational or sane anymore. Burying the dead was the hardest part, next to the passing of his father.

Then the clan's provisions were taken as a tribute to the enemy, and the dangers of running short on materials loomed over them. This was when Yokun became disturbed and infuriated with everything around him. He looked at his own home with a feeling of dread and danger. Yokun now saw the world only in fire and chaos, and its waters only poisoned with ash. The singular thing that freed him from this mentally regressed state was hearing a survivor saying a prayer to The Great Spirit. He knew what this man had endured, and yet his soul and faith remained intact. This stuck with him even now.

The morning sun broke, and his inner thoughts focused. Every sentient thing around him that noticed his presence looked upon him in dread. In the past hour he had appeared as an immovable statue planted on the ground. To them, he was no different than a gazing hawk searching for anything that moves. And so, everything in his sight became still and quiet. Now the sun rays peeked over the western slopes and dawned over the mound. Its warmth on his back rewarded his tolerance of the midnight cold — and then he saw it. There had been a blue poppy sticking out of the ground right underneath his nose the entire time. It hadn't woken up yet, but this type of flower was dying out in the place. He took a moment to observe it, for he knew that he would probably not see another one again. And beyond the blue poppy, the light of the

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dawn gleamed over the golden fields, and he saw at last the assembling army of the bison by the riverbank. He had almost forgotten that he was hunting for them.

Yokun turned his back to the prairie and knelt to the ground his hand feeling the warmed earth beneath him, and then he held his breath for a few minutes. Suddenly, he jumped up and down wildly, and squatted again and again rapidly, blowing into his hands like an ape, until, against his conscious will, he cried out the name of the warrior spirit, "Anpétu-Wi." He mounted his horse with his horn-bow hoisted onto his back and descended deafeningly down the mound.

He hadn't realized that he had chanted the very names he resented. But for now, his mind was reignited with an empyreal flame, focused and determined. The beating hooves did not fail to alert the bison who, by this point, had discerned the tribe's hunting patterns and prepared for their onslaughts. Now, Yokun had to face them alone. He counted fifty of them, and a dozen calves at least. He quickly thought of splitting them up and driving one herd into the water.

Down he went, and he came near the rear side of the bison where he spotted multiple calves at the river dike. Though his spear was more effective, he kept it away and used his bow instead. He was as swift as his own arrows that he drew. Six arrows fired towards the calves, and they fled into the water. Killing multiple calves was more favorable than risking a clash with the mother bison. He drifted away from the dike – but persisted parallel to it — and continued firing until the other bison, who retreated briefly, noticed that he slowed down. It was then that the bison formed a rearguard and charged furiously

towards Yokun, who immediately fell back away from the river.

Now he was the one being chased, and they were fast. Yokun thought of moving towards the steepest side of the mound towards the west slopes, so that the bison's short hinds slowed down compared to his horse. Thus, he played his chance and drifted sharply towards the ascending slopes. The raging rearguard was not far off and Yokun did what he could, shooting what he had at the wheeling force behind him. Finally, they began to slow down and the rearguard disbanded as Yokun scrambled over the steep mound and turned around. He felt the battle fury of his ancestors flow through him.

He took another breath and saw that two calves stuck in the dike were barely able to move with his arrows lodged into them. The bison of the rearguard were tired — one of them had even collapsed — and they failed to regroup quickly enough with the herd. Yokun spotted an opening. He became so enmeshed in the hunt that he completely forgot about the world and his troubles. He cried out once more a war speech and galloped again down the slopes. He went down faster, then he burst into a roaring song that was terrible to hear for all but himself.

Towards the gap between the divided herd, he steered right into the wounded calves where a few bison were protecting them, who now saw that they were being left behind. Yokun held his spear aloft, and the mother bison was compelled to charge against him. He reached back as far as he could and hurled the spear with all his strength, striking the bison on her large head. She wobbled to her side away from Yokun. He looked back

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and saw that every other bison fled away, and only his targets remained.

With that, the battle came to an end. He struck the final blow with his dagger after latching onto the bison's wobbling neck with all his limbs, plummeting with it to the ground and puncturing it once more. He caught up with the other calves and then dragged them all —for an hour almost – to an even terrain not far from the river, where he set up a temporary camp. From noon until the golden hour he finished skinning the carcasses, butchering them, submerging them into cold water, until he took them to smoke in a cave north of the fields. When the sun was clouded and rain fell, Yokun took his rest.

His work for the day had now been done, but he was not due to return until at least two days had passed. He spread the bovine fur like a carpet on the cave floor and pondered on his troubles, which had now returned after the thrill of victory quickly faded. The hunt had tempered his incessant mood of desolation, like laughter after anger. Returning to it now felt painful instead of despondent. He asked himself why he called out to a seemingly fictitious name for aid in his work, especially after his recent riveted nihilism. And not just that, but also why doing so genuinely felt good, or, *real*.

"Real!" He scoffed aloud.

But fooling himself, especially when alone, would not work now. He knew very well that this 'fictitious' thing was awe inspiring. Shouting it out while charging down and mimicking its image gave him strength. Without it perhaps his conviction and faith in himself would not have manifested, and the hunt would have failed.

"Remember... The Great Spirit flows in and through everything..." He recalled his father saying.

Another thing that made him sense a change in his heart was the bison's behavior. He noticed that although he fatally wounded the calves and managed to maneuver around a charging flank of them, the mother bison did not despair at the sight of him charging towards her with his spear – wailing and crying out like a beast.

"Unlike me." He muttered to himself. "Unlike me."

The mother bison did not fall to weakness, nor did it falter. Although it had a strong desire to live and see its children safe, it was prepared to die. Worse still, it was prepared to endure pain. Inspiring, much like the fictitious warrior spirit. What would it matter then, asking if it is real or not?

"Not if it's real." said Yokun, "but a real *what?*"

To him, he could not find much of a great difference between Anpétu-Wi and the mother bison. Both of them, he wished to be like. In both of them, he saw a faint gleam of hope. And The Great Spirit flows in and through everything.

It had been many days and weeks since he was able to feel something — anything — that granted him the ability to form a conclusive thought. But still, an untempered resentment for the tribe remained. And there was still not enough of anything that took him out of his miserable purgatory. Or that made him lean towards a tenet or a certainty for something. There was still much to accept and much dejection over the fact that his sole mentor, who he was assured could have helped him now, was gone. That was final.

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Yokun stood outside the cave, watching the heavy rainfall. His head swelled up with memories of the blue poppy, and the hand that gave it to him. But finally, under the thundering rain, Yokun collapsed onto his knees and wept. Often, reactions to sudden catastrophes are postponed to later dates, and the world did not stop for him, but at least the cave and the rain covered him.

Some time had passed when Yokun awoke from his sleep. The sun was setting and the rain clouds lessened. With the final golden light of day, Yokun desired to set out one last time. He didn't have long before the day ended, but he wished to set out again. He had heard before he left that the clan was to send out a company of men at some point in the coming days to capture wild hogs for their teeth and tusks.

But the hogs in the tribe's area were not ordinary. They were called hell-hogs, and they were far mightier and angrier and larger than the average boar. Yokun had earlier spotted them from afar while skinning the bison. If he were to capture at least one, alongside the bison he killed — which in of itself was a major feat— then his clan would be even more dismayed by his capabilities, and Yokun would no longer be so paltry and easy to ignore.

The hogs resided in the white mountain that lay north of the mound. The mountain where his father had taken him on their first hunt together. Where his father had shown him the blue poppies and nicknamed him after them. Even without the hell hogs, he desired to visit the mountain again. The thought of it was perhaps the truest motivation of his service all along.

So it was that Yokun rode past the river and went up towards the mountain with his spear by his saddle and his horn-bow on his back. Yokun's horse, Yanaba, was glad to ride out with him again, for she had bonded with him at last after being passed on by his father.

The world had turned red and blue, and he was borne upon Yanaba even as the great warrior spirits of old in the tribe's sculptures and carvings. She would bear him hence — happily, to all the ends of the earth if he wished, but the mountain was his heading.

His father once asked him, "If you were on that mountain, how could you be sure that you are, in fact, on top of it?"

"Because I climbed it?" asked young Yokun.

"Yes, precisely." His father said, "You must have climbed it first to know that you are on it. If you were on the ground, and you wished to see it fully, you could. But you will not know what a mountain *is* unless you go to it — unless you experience it. To see a mountain from afar is to know of its existence, but to climb it is to understand its nature. And atop the summit of the mountain, when you see the world it shows you, you will no longer see the mountain itself, unlike in the beginning. Only then will you know what a mountain *is*. Only then will you see what makes it thus. But you must climb it first."

At that time, Yokun never quite understood what his father meant. Now he felt, strangely enough, that he would understand if he went up there.

He reached the upstream river, for the mountain was where its source came from. Alongside it he rode; the presence of pine trees increased and rocky formations surrounded the area. It was twilight now. Stars

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and distant dreamy dust, far up in the skies, emerged above him. He halted when he encountered the exact place where he had rested with his father years before. It was now coated with yellow grass weeds sticking up to his knee. Next to it was the ageless tree that he had laid upon when he slept. At this sight he smiled, finally. The joy of nostalgia had been inert for a long while now, but he was comforted at last.

He dismounted to lay on it one more time, at least for a minute, when he heard a twig snap. Immediately he drew his bow and looked towards the sound. His eyes failed him, for the light of day had already passed and whatever it was clothed itself with the trees' shadows. He walked slowly backwards towards his horse but noticed that Yanaba had moved further away than he thought. Turning his head again, he caught sight of two shimmering eyes in between two bushes. It was undoubtedly a boar, he could tell. It was apparent now that he had become the prey. They both remained still and immovable. Yokun's heart pounded like a hammer. Then the boar stepped forward, as if to challenge him. The fear of pain and unbearable thought of defeat crawling through Yokun's twinging fingers let loose his arrow that was aimed between its eyes. Only, it landed on the tusk instead.

The boar snorted angrily and charged towards him. Twice he shot at it, and twice it took it. Yokun threw himself to the side and the boar barely missed. Its tusks were locked in between his bow and string. He tried to evade its thrusts whilst veering it away, but his hand slipped and the boar thrashed Yokun's side and grazed his head in an eruptive fit of rage. Yokun barely stayed conscious, but his

vision for a moment had turned dark and his hearing faded temporarily. Then he felt the wave of pain. His head was throbbing and his side burned. He saw the dark blood on his chest. He was fighting for his breath, and when he gained it he saw it going at him once again. Yokun was able to draw his dagger this time and catch it by its neck. He was barely able to stand up again with the wound to his side.

Another boar ran out of a bush and began to turn around widely before charging at him. Quickly but painfully, Yokun skipped with a limp to Yanaba's saddle and the boar pursued him. Finally, he grabbed ahold of the spear and swiftly launched it toward the animal. With a shriek the last boar fell, skewered.

The pain was intense. Yanaba bore him away towards the north-east, under the crescent moonlight, staggering over a few slopes and rocks until reaching the foot of the mountain. Yokun saw that the wound in his side was smaller than he thought, but he could barely see anything in the darkness. Still, the pain was worse, and he knew that if he fell again he would not get back dragging the carcasses doggedly, he placed them beneath the tree he had gazed at earlier. Then, although the clouds started to pour again, he gathered bundles of wood and dead logs and wreathed them in flame. He managed to skin the fur off the boar, draping it over tree branches above the fire. The harder part now was the wearing off of his battle fury, and the mending of the wound. He did what he could with the few supplies that he had. Then he cleansed himself in the river, and the piercing cold from the wind and the rain made it even worse. He remained near the fire, his

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back to the tree like before with grueling pain all over him.

Yokun was changed. He recalled the debate he had in his head and thought once again about the tribe and his troubles. Like the bison, the boar did not show fear or dread, unlike Yokun. More importantly, the boar handled pain like it was nothing. Taking two arrows and numerous piercings, it still wanted to live. It still seemed to fight back with a hope of victory or relief. Unlike Yokun who, after feeling pain, was in existential dread and despair. There was still pain now, but he could not help himself and admire the boar, yearn to imitate it.

Using the meat from one of the hogs, he cooked a large ham for himself. Before he took the first bite he said, "Nia-wah."

He hadn't realized that he had slept until he woke at dawn. The fire had been extinguished, everything around him was damp and wet. The pain that cut between his bones hurt even more now and he was chilled to the core. He looked around, and there were no sounds save for the waking birds. Yanaba was gone. She was nowhere in sight and his belongings and the saddle that he took off of her earlier were laid on the ground beside him.

It was most unusual, and he tried whistling for her multiple times, but nothing came. Immediately he realized that there was no chance on earth that he could walk back to his home while wounded. He was stranded where he was, and no horse as loyal as Yanaba would ever desert him like this unless something forced it to. And then it seemed to him that he missed his home. He missed his brother, but after the trials of yesterday he felt changed. Now he was sure that being in pain

unnecessarily or being in nihilistic dread was of no use to him. There could be no continuation of life if he remained like this. It is impossible to be in despair for this long. He missed his home. He thought to himself, "We must be better than this."

Yet Yanaba was gone. And now, it felt like all that he did and all that he went through led to nothing. He was not expected until tomorrow, and with himself wounded like this without Yanaba, the day would be long and painful.

The instant after he turned around, and barely seeing it, Yokun was struck with horror beyond horror. A tree, not far from him, bore the markings of giant claws on its bark. He couldn't bring himself to believe it, but such facts told him that a large Kodiak bear had been here. He even smelt its wet stench, but he could not see it yet. *That was why Yanaba fled*, he thought. Fear swept through his body, and the drums of dread were beating loudly with his heart. Weeping was not far off, but it wasn't right. No man should ever go through all of this and falter at the very last minute. He was sure—of his death because of his wounds and the stench of the carcasses, which he was sure that the bear wouldn't leave behind. But even now there was hope. A fool's hope that there was always triumph at the end of everything.

Then he remembered something his father had told him, long before this day, and before his own passing: "Death is not a punishment. The men who came ashore believe that all which may veil them from death, and prolong their life, is worth more than understanding what death is. Though they are fools; they are dangerous fools. This thinking weakens a man. If you come by them,

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inherit any qualities that they have save for this one. Knowing what death is is the last triumph. Death is the last triumph. Seeing it for what it is, will kindle you a flame imperishable. And fear no pain!”

Now, Yokun finally felt it. At last, he made a decision. At last did the great debate in his head cease. He would not fail himself now by being foolish or stubborn. He chanted a prayer to the Wakan Tanka slowly under his breath, until rising and ending in a loud cry did it cease. He felt it flow through him and everything around him.

As if in answer, a terrible huffing sounded behind him. Yokun crouched behind the tree and saw that the bear was near him, feeding at the carcasses, not ten meters away. It had crept up silently, now alarmed by his cry. His fate was sealed and there was no escape. It was either fight for a chance or die without trying.

Yokun crept slowly away and towards his spear, for there was no outrunning this beast. And he remembered his horn. It was in his saddle, and perhaps if he were to blow loud enough into it the bear would cower from it. But its attention drifted back to the carcass, and seeing Yokun draw near, the bear perceived an attack.

Yokun dashed to his spear and with his other hand snatched his horn as the bear roared and charged. Holding it above his head, he threw everything he had into the force of the spear, but he was far weaker than before. And though it pierced its neck, there was no stopping it. Yokun desperately blew the horn, but not loud enough, and the bear sprang onto him. Waves of searing burns were cruelly inflicted onto his torso when it hacked and slashed him. Yokun had grabbed

ahold of the spear, trying not to let go, and when the bear lunged at him once more its weight pressed onto the spear’s end, digging itself further into it. But Yokun’s hand let the spear slip, and the bear turned him onto his side and tore his wound even more.

After hovering over him for a bit, the bear perceived that his threat was eliminated. Yokun knew that it just wanted to make sure no other animal tried to steal its food when it wasn’t looking. Yokun had been shouting and moaning until he felt the weight of the beast release him. The side of his abdomen was devastated, but he no longer felt anything more than what he had felt before. Yokun crawled slowly to the dagger in his saddle. The bear’s injury was no better, and it slowly began to lose balance. Yokun crawled on in suffocating pain and weighty breaths, until with the tip of his fingers he grabbed ahold of the dagger and the horn. The bear returned to him and leaped onto him once more. Although he was thrashed in its jaws Yokun struck the bear’s neck multiple times before it stumbled back. Then Yokun, with the remaining strength he had, blew his soul into the horn one more time, until it was rent asunder. At last, the beast withdrew and no longer wished to endure this place any longer.

The battle was over, and so was the morning twilight. The orange sun rays passed through the trees and warmed Yokun’s face. He neared his end now, and he knew it. The hurt and wounds fixed him to the ground, and his body was gashed and crushed, and this was to be the end.

Yokun was no longer in despair. He had fought to his last breath, he resisted the weaknesses of panic and pain, and now he was in true relief. He knew that he did not let

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his father down. He would have, had he remained in his desolate state. Even if it seemed to be too late, Yokun displayed what many men could not: courage and faith, by protecting his life and accepting his death.

Over the hills, far and unheeding to Yokun's battle, the sounds of horns blowing wildly could be heard. Then, soon enough, the galloping of horses. It was his kin. Yokun's kinsmen had heard his horn twice before, but they did not know it was him. Dakota, his brother, was among them. When they came upon him, Yanaba was with them. They found Yokun still alive, but not for long. They understood immediately what had transpired, and some were in disbelief. His brother dismounted and knelt by his side, with the others holding him up and assessing his wounds. For a moment, the scene mirrored that of an image of a fallen king, or a warrior, or a god among men.

Yokun could barely speak when he said, "Brother, forgive me for leaving you like this. I was in pain, but now I am better. This is it for me. Now listen, you must know... so that.... in the hearts of your descendants.... and generations hence... that they may be kindled as I have, with a flame of faith when all else is doused. Remember what father told us? About the mountain, and the hunt, and death? I am its living example. Pass it on. Pass this torch that I leave you with. Pass on all that father said and never forget what he told us."

"I remember." said Dakota.

"Now I go, but unashamedly... for our father has been honored, and The Great Spirit flows through me." These were Yokun's last words before he gave his brother the blue poppy that he had been given before, to be a symbol for the clan, and for life. Thus passed

Yokun, son of Makoda, in his brother's arms, at the break of day.

Though the tribe never knew that Yokun relieved himself of his unhappiness before he died, they knew from Dakota that he died after a duel against a colossus, in hopes for a chance to live on and return to his home. For that, he was renamed "Valkon," meaning fire in their tongue.

Yet, he was remembered more fondly as "The Blue Flame." Dakota, in mourning and in memory, wove a short verse in his name, which endured in the hearts of the clan's heirs even unto the breaking of their line. A lay that, like a blue flower amidst ash and barren soil, was eternally cherished amongst them. Long there it remained, as a memory of a sublime past for when they ever felt that all was broken or forsaken and all potent flames had been extinguished. The Lay of Yokun was there to remind them:

*I walk, unclad and unsheathed,  
Into the blinding blackness  
Alone and outnumbered, but not afraid,  
for death, I embrace,  
And an imperishable flame, I am.*