

Wolf Night

by Martha Wells

It was the dead end of winter and Parker was riding through the Little Sally pass, his saddlebags filled with a payroll he really oughtn't have, wearing every stitch of clothing he owned and wishing he was someplace warm, like Hell. Up in the highest notch, just before the canyon started to slope down, he saw an old Indian standing alongside the trail.

The old man was knee-deep in snow, a ragged hide robe wrapped around him, his head slumped down and stringy gray-white hair falling forward so Parker couldn't see his face. He looked as if he had come just so far and couldn't go a step more. At the moment, it wasn't hard for Parker to sympathize.

He reined in, leaned forward and tipped his hat back. "Old man, do you need some help?" The horse couldn't carry two for long, but judging by the bony shoulders outlined by the shabby leather, the old man couldn't weigh much more than a child.

The Indian didn't answer. The horse stamped and snorted, uneasy. It was late afternoon, thick gray clouds overhead and the wind rustling the fir trees down the pass. Snow was falling, very gently, little flakes catching in the old man's hair. Parker wondered uneasily if the man had died like that, frozen stiff, standing up.

Then the Indian lifted his head.

His eyes were red, as if the vessels had burst and filled the whites with blood. The pupils were open slits of blazing light.

Parker's feet came out of the stirrups as he fell sideways off the horse, dragging the rifle out of the saddle sheath on the way down. As he landed hard, the startled horse leapt away like a deer and Parker had the gun aimed, all in one furious heart-stopping, scared-witless moment.

The Indian hadn't moved. Parker expected him to be doing something by now: turning into a *wendigo*, growing horns and batwings, or big teeth to eat the meal that had stupidly stopped to chat, but he hadn't moved. Parker kept the rifle trained on him but didn't fire. On the off chance that this was a shaman who hadn't decided to kill him yet, he didn't want to make this worse than it already was.

The eyes he didn't want to look at were fixed on midair. Very quietly, the old man started to speak. The voice was raspy and hollow, but human. Parker couldn't understand him; there were three tribes around these mountains and the language could belong to any of them. Parker stayed where he was until the old man stopped speaking, and his head slumped again.

Cold was creeping through Parker's blood. He pushed to his feet, chilled from the snow. Nothing happened. He started to make a wide circle around the Indian, but when he got even with him, the figure disappeared. *Damn*, Parker thought, irony coloring his fear. *This is going to be a day*. He took an experimental step backward, and from that angle he could see the old man again. Someone coming up the trail from the other direction would never have noticed anything.

Clumsy in the deep snow, Parker went on up the trail and spent a while catching his way horse, and another while calming her down. And calming himself down. It had to be a warning, but he had come this way last year, and he knew this wasn't anybody's sacred ground. So what was the warning for? It was undoubtedly clear as glass, if you understood whatever language the old Indian's chimera spoke. Common sense said to heed it anyway and turn right around and go back. "Can't do it," he told the nervous horse regretfully. The payroll in the

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