



DARK TALES OF THE BRUCE ♦

Mishipeshu, the Great Lynx

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Come in close to the fire tonight, friends, and let me tell you a story that is not mine to own. It belongs to the Anishinaabe peoples, the Ojibwe of these great cold waters, who have carried it and kept it and honoured it for countless generations, long before any of my people set a boot on this shore. I tell it tonight the only way I know how, with humility, as a guest at the edge of something far older than me. This is the story of Mishipeshu, the Great Lynx, the Underwater Panther, the mighty spirit who dwells in the deepest places of Lake Huron and Lake Superior. And Carol, to understand him, you must first stand at the edge of that water and feel how vast and how deep and how cold it truly is.



CAROL

Oh, Marty, I have stood at that edge, up on the Bruce, looking out over Georgian Bay when the water goes on forever. There is something under a lake like that, isn't there. Something you feel more than see. Tell me about him, this Great Lynx. What does he look like, the spirit down in the deep?



MARTY

He is a wonder and a terror, Carol, and the old descriptions give you chills the way they are meant to. Picture a great cat, they say, with the body and the fierce face of a lynx, but crowned with horns like a bison, curved and heavy. Down his spine runs a ridge of sharp scales like a serpent's, for he is part serpent too, and behind him trails a long tail of shining copper, coiling through the black water. He is a manitou, a spirit-being, and he is enormous, and he lives where no light reaches, in the deepest, coldest hollows of the lake bed where the water is the colour of ink. And Carol, he is the keeper of the lake's riches. Especially the copper. The sacred copper of these lakes belongs to him.



CAROL

The copper. Marty, I have heard there truly was copper in these northern waters, that people found it along the shores. So to the Anishinaabe, that copper was his, it was under his keeping? A person couldn't just take it?



MARTY

That is exactly it, Carol, and it is the heart of the awe here. The great copper of Lake Superior, those pure shining nuggets and veins, was understood to be Mishipeshu's own treasure, guarded jealously in the deeps. And to take copper, to carry a piece of it away across the water, was no small thing. It was to hold something that belonged to a mighty and dangerous being. The old stories tell of people who lifted copper from the sacred places and tried to bear it home by canoe, and how the lake rose against them, how a voice or a dread came over the water, and how they gave it back, or were made to. He is not a spirit you cheat. He is not a spirit you rob and walk away laughing.



CAROL

I can feel the weight of that, Marty. It is not superstition, is it, it is respect, a whole way of understanding that the lake is alive and it belongs to something. And you said master of storms. That water is famous for its storms. Is that him too?



MARTY

That is him above all, Carol. Mishipeshu is the master of the sudden fury of these lakes. You know how it goes on Huron and on Superior. The water can lie flat and silver and gentle as a held breath, and then in the space of an hour the sky darkens and the wind comes shrieking from nowhere and the waves stand up like grey walls and the whole lake turns to white rage. Sailors and paddlers have known it forever, these squalls that rise out of calm with no mercy and no warning. And the old understanding is this. When Mishipeshu stirs down in the deep, when that great copper tail lashes and coils, the water above answers. His tail lashes, and the lake turns to fury. The whirlpools that open, the towering seas, the sudden squalls, that is the moving of a living, mighty being beneath the surface.



CAROL

Oh, Marty. That gives me such a shiver, because it makes a kind of sense no chart can give you. Every one of those terrible storms, every whirlpool, it is not empty weather, it is him moving. And the drownings. These lakes have taken so many. Were those understood as his doing too?



MARTY

They were, Carol, and this is where the tale asks for our deepest respect, because it touches real grief. These waters have swallowed countless souls over the centuries, canoes and later great ships, and people who went out on the water and simply never came back, who vanished under a calm surface with no storm to blame. And to the peoples of these lakes, that was Mishipeshu. Those who took what was his, or who crossed his water carelessly, without respect, without asking, might be pulled down into the depths by that copper tail and never seen again, down to the cold home at the bottom where the light does not go. The lake did not take you by accident. The lake took you because something in it was owed, or was angered, or simply because you had forgotten to be humble on the back of a living, dangerous thing.



CAROL

And so you would not cross carelessly. Marty, is that where the offering comes in? I have heard that people gave something to the water before they went out. Tell me about that, because it sounds like the most tender, careful thing.

MARTY

It is the most beautiful part of it all, Carol, to my mind. Before a crossing, before setting out over that deep open water, the people would offer tobacco to the lake. Sacred tobacco, cast gently onto the surface, or set down at the water's edge, with a prayer. It was a greeting and a request all at once. It said, I know whose water this is. I know you are below me. I come with respect, and I ask you for safe passage across your home, and I ask you to let me and mine come home again. It was not fear alone, Carol. It was a relationship, a courtesy between a small human being in a birchbark canoe and the mighty manitou beneath. You asked. You did not assume. You gave a gift, and you went out onto that vast deep water knowing exactly how small you were.

CAROL

A gift, and a prayer, and then you paddle out over him. Marty, imagine being in that little canoe, the water so deep and dark under the hull, knowing he is down there. That is the feeling I get standing on the shore, that old and mighty

something below. Is that the feeling the story is really about, do you think?

MARTY

I think it is, Carol. When you stand at the edge of Lake Huron or Superior, or out on the tip of the Bruce where the water drops away deep and cold, and you feel that hush, that sense of an immense old power just under the surface, you are feeling the truth the Anishinaabe have always named. That the deep water is not empty. That it is the home of a being far greater and older than us, and worthy of awe, and worthy of care. Mishipeshu is not a monster to be conquered in a story, Carol. He is a manitou, a sacred power, a keeper and a guardian and a danger, and the people of these waters have honoured him for longer than any of us can count. So I tell his story tonight with my hat off, so to speak, borrowing it with gratitude and giving it back the way I found it. If you go out on these great lakes, remember whose they are. Offer your tobacco. Cross with respect. And never forget what waits in the deep and cold. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I will be thinking of that deep dark water and the great copper-tailed spirit who keeps it, and of all the generations who have paddled out over him with a prayer and a gift of tobacco and a proper humble heart. When you stand at the edge of a great cold lake, feel how small you are, and how old and mighty the deep is, and give it the respect it is owed. Cross with care, keep the ones you love close, and always, always come back to the fire.