

## Fire Circle

Many generations ago, there was a great Fire Circle. In the age our grandfathers called the time of the Ice Mountains, all the medicines from all the Peoples trekked to the high lake. They came from every Region, from the cold Land Bridge, from the land of boiling mud, and from the Finger of Land far down the edge of the World.

This coming together had never happened before, but a great longing had spread through the Peoples, and they sent their strongest medicines to ask the Great God for an explanation of the World. Some Regions felt that this was wrong—that asking such questions would anger the God. Others saw that asking was in the very nature of the People. Since asking could not be stopped, it came from God with fear and anger and love and memory and must be intended to help the People fulfill their purpose in the World.

The medicines began to arrive at the high lake in the early spring, but it was full summer before all were assembled. When all were present, fourteen days from the last round moon, they went by canoes to the island that sits at the center of the western bay, where no-one hunts or camps. The traveling companions brought the canoes back many times, towing wood for the fire, and carried it to the hilltop at the center of the island, where there were no trees. After sunset, a great fire bed was built, of logs and branches well selected for their variety and quality from all the surrounding forest. As the night darkened the land the medicines from each Region performed their best sacrifice or ceremony to prepare for the Fire Circle. When all was ready, the fire was lit and surged many spans high, bright and vigorously crackling, and the helpers and travel companions paddled the canoes back across the lake and retired to the forest. The medicines took their places

around the fire, and they numbered twenty-six, and they sat on the ground, men and women alternating so the God would see them as one.

To summon the God is both easy and arduous. The God is in everything and everyone, so there is no need for summoning, but to converse with the God is a rare thing that only a few medicines have ever done. Why the God is so reluctant to be seen—this is not known. It is one of the great questions, one of the reasons the Fire Circle had been called. Some of the medicines knew of performances that had summoned the God in ages past. Others saw deeply into things, in the now-time, and offered new chants and offerings that might bring the God to the fire. Most of the medicines were not sure how to proceed, and kept to themselves. All hoped that such a great assembly of the best minds of all the Peoples would be sufficient.

The Fire Circle began with recitations, each medicine invoking the visions of his or her Region, until all had spoken. Then the youngest medicine, Tendo of High Lake, took the walking staff of the eldest medicine, Sanna of the Finger, who had seen more than one hundred summers. He passed the staff to the medicine who sat opposite Sanna on the other side of the towering fire. Each medicine then took the staff and named someone to be the speaker for the fire. Almost all named Denaramelgu of the Shore People. When she stood to accept the vote, all the medicines stood together to give her honor.

Then all the medicines sat and began their meditations. Each Region had its own favored inner rituals, even as they do today, but the travel companions who peered from the forest saw only the dark shadow of the island and the tall fire blazing into the night sky at its center. The twenty-six best medicines in the land were only dark silhouettes sitting in their silent circle.



It is said that the night of the Fire Circle lasted for one hundred hours, and the watchers from the forest feared it would never end because the God was offended. We are here, of course, so the night did end, and the God did appear to the assembled medicines. Their travel companions could not see this from the shore, and their worries became stronger in the long darkness.

At the Fire Circle, a long time passed while the medicines collected their thoughts and became more and more silent inside. The fire burned tall and strong, only slowly consuming the fine hard logs of the best trees from the forest. The sky was blackened with night and smeared with the Great Arch of light and all the stars and the wanderers. There was no moon, but red sparks flew up and swirled around, and the seated medicines waited patiently. No invocation was spoken: the Circle itself was the greatest petition of the Peoples and the God would come if it was appropriate.

When the God did come, or just before, the medicines all opened their eyes and gazed into the fire, which had subsided from its initial towering blaze. The flames began to swirl together, and then reversed and swirled in the other direction. The medicines looked up and saw only the sky and the sparks and the smoke. The flames slowly shrank down until only the glowing logs and embers remained, and then it surged up again, and a tall figure stood in the air surrounded by the flames. The medicines bowed their heads in awe and gratitude that the God had answered them.

After a suitable time, Denara-melgu, speaker for the fire, rose and raised her arms toward the God. "We thank you for blessing us with your presence," she said.

A voice sounded inside each of the medicines without making a sound. It spoke no words, but visions formed and waves of love and power flowed through them.

After a suitable time, Denara-melgu spoke again. "Please, oh God, help us. All the Peoples are tormented by a deep and unslaked thirst for knowledge of the World you have created. Please, if we deserve it, explain the World. Tell us the greatest truth that we may bring back to our People and give them peace of mind."

This time, the God spoke in words, but they also appeared in the minds of the medicines without sound. "What if you cannot understand?" it said.

Denara-melgu thought for a while. "Will great truth harm us?"

"No," said the God. "Truth only advances the World and the Peoples."

"Then we beg for your knowledge, however little we may understand."

The God said nothing for a few minutes, but the figure solidified into the shape of a man with robes of multicolored feathers, seated as the medicines were seated, but very large and unburned amid the flames. The

fire subsided again until it was just a glowing bed of coals and smoldering logs, and the God began to explain the World.

As the God spoke, the medicines saw visions of the World, from many angles, from near and afar, in light and in the glow of World itself. They saw the bright lights of living things, intertwining like the flames of the Fire Circle, rising and falling with the ages of the World. Some of the medicines became satiated and closed their eyes and fell into their inner silence. Some became agitated and shifted nervously, seeking to reconcile their own thoughts with the vast thoughts from the God. Some opened their hearts and entered into different states of ecstasy and surrender or awe and bliss. A few saw nothing, and heard only a few simple phrases they had heard before at the feet of their elders.

After some time, the God ended its explanation of the World. The circle of medicines waited in silence, not knowing what to do next. After a suitable time, Denara-melgu spoke. "Oh God, we thank you with all our hearts for this generous gift of knowledge. We shall take this to our Regions, and pass it on, as we may be able, to our Peoples. Our gratitude shall know no bounds."

The God smiled at Denara-melgu and said, "This is not all."

Embarrassed, Denara-melgu began to apologize, but the God said, "My brother comes."

The fire rose up again, and amid the tall flames another figure appeared, taller than the God, and wearing robes of unfamiliar color. He stood still while the flames again subsided, and looked down at the Fire Circle with a benevolent smile, but he said nothing, and no visions formed.

After a suitable time, Denara-melgu said, "Are there many Gods? We did not know. We are ashamed. Forgive us our inexcusable ignorance!"

The new God spoke, soundlessly into the minds of the medicines. "You could not know. Be not ashamed for you are not judged."

Emboldened, Denara-melgu spoke without pause and said, "How many Gods are there?"

Both Gods laughed and the new God said, "One."

"I don't understand. Our ignorance may be insurmountable." Shocked at her own impertinence, Denara-melgu fell silent and bowed her head.

The second God spoke now, in soundless words and unbounded visions, and began to explain the World. The medicines were amazed

as the truths of the World expanded before them and deep within their minds. This explanation was so different from that of the first God that some medicines who had been unable to understand were now nodding their heads enthusiastically. Others, even some who had gone deep into the first God's knowledge, became puzzled and distraught. The new God's explanations went on for a long time, in continuing contrast to those of the first God.

When the explanation ended, the medicines were confused. Which God was right? They were such different visions they could never both be true. The medicines looked at each other, hoping for some confirmation of their confusion. The Gods looked down at them and continued to smile, gently, as benevolent parents might smile on their own children, and gradually the medicines became calm again.

After a suitable time, Denara-melgu spoke. "Oh Gods, we thank you for your knowledge, and for your patience with our inability to understand. Your explanations were perfection in every way, but we are more confused than before. Can you explain how these two visions of the World, so different in so many ways, can be reconciled?"

The first God said, "This is not all. My sister comes."

For the third time, the fire rose up, and amid the tall flames a third figure appeared, a most magnificent woman with fiery hair and robes of silver and gold. She stood next to the second God, looking down at the Fire Circle.

The medicines gazed in awe at the three Gods. How could they not have known? This explanation of the World must answer that question as well. If there are three, why do they never show themselves? What is the reason for more than one God? Denara-melgu considered her next question, but the Goddess began to speak.

Again the minds of the medicines were filled with glorious explanations and clarifications of all the intricacies of the World, how everything works, and why it is so structured. But again, these visions and notions were so unlike those of the first two Gods, that different medicines began to understand, while others became confused.

After a long time, the Goddess finished her explanation of the World. She looked at the first two Gods, and all three smiled at each other. The medicines sat still, filled with explanations and confusion.

Before Denara-melgu could speak, the Goddess said, "This is not all. My sister comes."

The fire rose up, and amid the tall flames a fourth figure appeared, a woman of glowing black and silver, wearing gossamer scarves that billowed in the rising air of the fire. She gazed benevolently down at the medicines and began to explain to them the deepest truths of the World. Her words and visions bore no resemblance to those of the other three Gods. The medicines were filled with awe and knowledge and some felt a blazing new clarity while others fell into deep confusion.

When the second Goddess had finished her explanation of the World, another God came to the Fire Circle and explained the World in another way. Many more Gods appeared, each one explaining the World differently, until the medicines could no longer remember how many there were, and which truths made sense and which did not.

And then the lake water lapped against the island and distant night animals called to one another, and no more Gods appeared. After a suitable time, Denara-melgu spoke. "Oh Gods, we are so ashamed that we never knew of your existence. I fear we can absorb no more knowledge, no more truths. Are there more Gods still?"

The multitude of Gods laughed quietly among themselves, and a distant rumble like thunder bounced off the surrounding mountains. The first God spoke. "Many, many more."

"Oh Gods," said Denara-melgu, her voice shaking, "Pray tell us how many Gods are there?"

The first God said, "One."

Denara-melgu did not understand, but so deep was her confusion that she dared not speak.

The first God sent a wave of comfort and love over the assembled medicines, and their fear left them. "Be not confused. You made a brave and laudable request for knowledge. We have given it to you so that all may understand whatever can be understood. Cleave to what you understand and abandon confusion. Know that all Gods are one, and in complete agreement."

The Gods continued smiling at the circle of medicines, but there were too many Gods to count. The flames surrounding them rose up again, and the Gods blended together, first one or two and then all at once, until one

God—they could not tell which—stood above the medicines, floating in the fire, and spread his hands wide. He placed his hands on his breast and bowed his head toward them. The flames roared up again, showering the black sky with red and orange embers.

The next day the medicines and their traveling companions restored the island clearing and their campsites on the High Lake and dispersed, making the long treks back to their Regions, bearing new knowledge of the World, and preparing suitable explanations for their People.

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