

## Fiction Excerpt 2: The Sun Dance

*For many Native Americans of the Plains, the Sun Dance is the way to ask for or to repay a favor granted to them by one of the great powers or gods. Because the dance involves great effort and sometimes even pain, the dancers undertake it only for the most important reasons. Some dance so that a sick friend might be healed. Others in the past have danced to celebrate military victories. Many of the tribes tell stories that explain the origin of the dance. The story of Feather Woman, Morning Star, and Scar Face is told by the Blackfoot.*

One summer night, a young girl named Feather Woman left her airless tepee to sleep in the sweet-smelling breeze of the plains. When she woke, she found the Morning Star winking back at her. She lay under his spell, and laughing, said, "Morning Star, I would like to wake to your bright welcome every morning." Then she rose to help her sister gather berries and herbs for the dyeing of buffalo skins.

The sisters had wandered far into the woods. They had drifted a great way from each other, when Feather Woman discovered a tall, young man standing in the midst of a juniper bush before her. His head was crowned with eagle feathers, and his hands and face glistened as though he had passed through a spider's web.

"Feather Woman," he said. "I am Morning Star. Would you come away with me?"

Feather Woman laughed so hard that she spilled all of her berries on the ground. "Oh, you foolish boy," she said. "Why would I leave my family for a stranger?"

As Morning Star took her hand, Feather Woman felt the warmth of the sun on her skin. "Feather Woman," he said, "I have tried to read your thoughts during the many early mornings that you have lain dreaming on the plain. I would like to marry you and take you to Star Country."

Taking his other hand, Feather Woman stepped onto the silk gloss of the spiderweb as he showed her and flew with him into the sky, as magically as the spider casts his silken threads.

Feather Woman discovered a country much like her own. The prairie grasses sang in the wind, the star people stitched soft, white deerskins, and women dug for roots to dye them. Morning Star took her to the tepee of his parents, Sun and Moon. Moon welcomed her with smiles; when Sun returned in the evening, weary from his passage across the sky, he bid her to learn the ways of his people if she wanted to stay in the country of the stars.

He said that Moon would teach her.

Morning Star and Feather Woman were married and soon had a child, Star Boy. Whenever Feather Woman went with Moon and the other star women to do their daily work, she would bundle her child in soft clothes and carry him with her.

Moon showed her which roots were edible and which cast the perfect colors for a painting. She also pointed to a large turnip root, which grew nearly as high as the trees, and told her never to dig there. The turnip root was a mystery known only to Sun.

One afternoon, Moon returned her smiles only weakly and asked her to go to gather the roots alone while she rested. Feather Woman wandered into the woods, hugging her child for company. She sang the songs of her own people and wondered if her sister had married. Deeply homesick, she discovered that she had wandered near the turnip root. Curious, she forgot Moon's warning and began to dig.

She had made little progress, when two white cranes alighted beside her. They cooed, "Can we help you? Our bills are sharp. We can unearth the root for you."

Not knowing that there was a terrible history between the cranes and the star people, Feather Woman consented. The cranes tore at the turnip's roots, and finally the plant fell to its side, pulling up a great chunk of ground. Gathering her baby close, Feather Woman jumped away from the opening. Urging Feather Woman to "Look, look," the cranes spread their wings and disappeared.

Feather Woman lay on the ground and peered into the yawning doorway to the Earth. Far, far below, she saw her sisters running on the prairie. Her father was returning from a hunt, and echoes of her mother's singing reached her ears. Her heart yearned for home.

That night when she returned to the tepee, Sun gazed on her face and saw her sadness. Harshly he asked, "You have seen below the turnip root to the Earth and your people?" When Morning Star heard her say yes, his hands turned cold.

Sun sighed and said, "There can be no sorrow in the Country of the Stars. You must return to Earth."

Morning Star and Moon begged him to allow her to stay, but Sun refused. "She must go," he said. "You can talk to her as you used to, when you travel across the sky."

That night, as Feather Woman's family lay in the prairie grass, they saw a star falling toward them. When they awoke, Feather Woman lay beside them. Her child, scarred on the face by their rapid journey, was crying.

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Feather Woman missed Morning Star more as the years went by. To protect her son from hurt, she did not tell him who his father was. They spent much of their time alone. One day, when Star Boy tried to wake her, her spirit had left for the sandhills.

Because of the mark on his face, the boy was called Scar Face and was treated unkindly by many people in the tribe. His birth was mysterious, and they did not want to be near him. In time, so many called him Scar Face that everyone forgot his real name.

When Scar Face was a young man, he fell in love with the daughter of the chief. She talked to him kindly when they met. She never looked away from his face, but smiled and looked in his eyes. Scar Face wanted to marry her.

But when he asked, she said, "I have seen the Sun in my dreams and he told me to wait for him."

Scar Face knew that many men wanted to marry her. They held dancing contests in which each tried to dance better than the others to gain her attention. Scar Face knew that she could marry anyone. Ashamed for asking, he turned away.

Several days later she met him near the river where she was gathering water. "Scar Face," she said, "if you find the Sun and ask him, I will marry you. But you must bring me some proof that he has agreed."

"But the Sun lives far in the West," he cried. "No one knows how to reach him."

The young woman gave him moccasins she had made and a new shirt. "You will find him," she said.

Scar Face traveled far into the mountains. He climbed until he reached the highest peak farthest to the West. Hoping that he might receive a message from the great forces, he began to fast and pray. One night, the Milky Way seemed to reach down to the peak where he was sitting. Scar Face stepped into the air and journeyed into Sky Country.

Scar Face waited in the path until he saw that Sun had risen, made his day's journey, and was home to rest. Then he entered his tepee. "My name is Scar Face," he said, "and I love a young woman who was told by you that she must follow your word all of her life. I have come to ask your permission to marry her."

Sun knew who Scar Face was, for it was Sun who had marked the boy's face as he fell to Earth. He wanted to know him as he traveled overhead.

Looking at her husband, Moon knew that Sun felt kindly toward the boy. She smiled and said, "Stay with us while Sun decides. You can keep our son, Morning Star, company."

In Star Country, people do not age as they do on Earth, so Morning Star was only slightly older than his son Scar Face, whom he did not recognize. The two became good friends, and both received the words of wisdom that were given to them by Sun.

One day, Morning Star explained why the cranes were so feared by the stars. "They wait until a star begins to cross the sky, and then they attack, using their bills to tear the fragile ladder that Spider has spun for the stars to climb."

Morning Star explained that the cranes had attacked his brothers when they were very young. Falling, his brothers burst into fire and then disappeared in the black sky.

One afternoon, when Morning Star and Scar Face were hunting, the cranes appeared and began swooping down on them. Morning Star frantically ran for cover. Scar Face waved his spear at them, daring them to come closer. As the birds closed in, Scar Face turned to meet them. He did not care if they threatened to hurt his face; it had always hurt him. He felled them, one by one.

When Morning Star saw that his friend had saved him, he gathered the heads of the cranes. He was afraid that no one would believe his friend's bravery.

When Sun heard the story, he danced a celebratory dance, and Moon sang praises for the young man's courage. Sun took Scar Face to a hole in the sky, and together, they looked down upon the Earth. Sun traced its shape with his hand, and when they returned, Moon had gathered willows and used them to build a lodge in the Earth's shape. She dug a hole in the center of the lodge and filled it with stones. When the people had raised a sun pole outside, the family entered the lodge. Moon poured water over the hot rocks, and the steam rose up to cleanse them.

When they emerged from the lodge, the scar was gone from the boy's face. Instantly, Morning Star knew him as Star Boy, his son. The father and son walked to the edge of the Milky Way and bid each other goodbye. "In the morning," Morning Star said, "look up. I will be watching you and your good wife."

Star Boy found the chief's daughter near the river. When she saw him, she knew that Sun had consented for them to marry, and she was happy. Together, they returned to tell the others. In this way, the people learned the Sun Dance.