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Brave

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CHAPTER ONE

WILD HORSE

This was the kill that Wild Horse yearned for. *Father will be proud of me again*, he thought. The vision of Bear Face holding up the tusks, showing them to the rest of the tribe around the evening fire, twisted about him. It was this picture in his mind that made him cross the river, though he knew it was dangerous to approach such a large animal on his own. One swipe with that trunk would break his back.

There was no time to remove his leggings and moccasins. The cold water curled round his legs as a bitter breeze stung his nostrils. At least he was downwind, his own scent carried away from his prey. Barely aware of the

whoosh of the river, the rustling of the reeds, the caws and carks of the birds, his own breathing, Wild Horse gripped his spear tightly. He climbed up the riverbank, keeping his gaze on the danger he was about to face.

The mammoth stood nearly twice as tall as him, those prized tusks almost as long as his own body. It munched the scrubland as he edged forward.

He had to get near enough to thrust his spear-point deep into the throat, piercing the thick matted hair. The mammoth would not get far with such a fatal wound. Then he would chase it and finish the kill with his newly sharpened stone knife. He wished he had another spear – if he missed his target he would be crushed by the beast, or hurled back across the river.

Too late to worry. He was close now, so close that he gagged at the reek of rancid grass surging from the mouth of his prey. The mammoth looked up, and Wild Horse lunged. He hurled his spear as hard as he could.

The mammoth flicked away the weapon with its trunk.

And Wild Horse had no idea what to do next.

The creature stood in front of him, still chewing, sturdy as one of the rocks that punched its way out of the earth. A rock with eyes, watching him. A rock blocking his way to the safety of the woodland beyond the river. A rock with long curved tusks which could thrust his body into the sky or rip him apart. But hadn't – yet.

It was a young bull, not quite full-grown, probably abandoned by the herd when its mother had a new calf. It was a grass-eater so it didn't need to kill him for food, and

if he was the first human it had seen it would not know to fear him.

But Wild Horse had threatened it. What would it do now? He knew he must not show his fear. He had to stay calm and still.

As the son of a chief, Wild Horse had been hunting since he was old enough to run. His father had taught him that the animals he hunted would kill him if he didn't kill them, but he had been eager to learn more; to become as good a predator as any animal. He had watched and listened and smelt. From the uneven sound of its breathing, Wild Horse sensed the young mammoth was nervous. He tried to breathe deeply and slowly, to fill the air around them with calmness. Spreading his arms wide to show he had no more spears, that he was no longer a threat, he looked deep into the creature's eyes.

He spoke softly. 'We have both shown courage this day. Let us both live that we might meet another time.'

They stayed motionless for what seemed an age. Wild Horse waited for the mammoth's first move, his body ready to spring in the opposite direction. He wasn't *afraid* to die, but he wasn't *ready* to die either. He flinched as an image of his brother's body, ravaged by a bear, flashed in his mind. Running Bear had been killed during the last Snow Moons but his passing was still raw.

Suddenly the mammoth raised its head and bellowed, sending the birds in the nearby trees screeching into the air. Then it stepped back, splitting Wild Horse's spear under its hoof before swerving away from him.

Wild Horse watched the beast lumber towards the rugged Land of Hills and felt his whole body sag with relief. He had survived to tell his father about his courage.

'What do you mean, you let the animal go?' Bear Face roared. 'You should have run after it.'

'But, Father, it had broken my spear.' Wild Horse held up the point he'd rescued from the splintered shaft. 'I'm lucky to be alive. I thought you'd be proud that I'd challenged the mammoth alone – like a brave hunter.'

He looked around, hoping for nods of support from the tribespeople who had looked up from their tasks, but they quickly returned to the sharpening of tools and scraping of hides. They knew better than to come between their chief and his son. His mother gazed up at the sky, as if she was thanking the Spirits for sparing Wild Horse's life, before moving away towards her shelter.

'Why did you only have one spear?' Bear Face bared his teeth. 'And why were you on your own, again? Running Bear would have had at least three spears – and as many hunters.'

Once more Wild Horse was compared to his dead brother. And worse, it was true: Running Bear always carried several spears. And he took other hunters with him, apart from that one time – his last hunt. Wild Horse felt as empty as a dry riverbed, unworthy of respect.

'As it let me live,' he stuttered, 'it deserved to live too.'

'Deserved to live!' bellowed the chief. 'You think an animal deserved to live? As my eldest son, the son of the

great hunter Bear Face, you must bring food and honour to your tribe. A mammoth kill would have given us both. It is so long since we have eaten mammoth.' He licked his lips as if savouring the lost meat. 'But now you have shamed me and yourself.'

Wild Horse felt glances firing into him like spear-points, and he could hear his cousin Zuni sniggering. His two younger brothers, Grey Horse and Little Bear, looked down at the ground, as if sharing his humiliation.

As he stood alone, the honour Wild Horse had hoped for faded into the scrubland along with the mammoth he had failed to take.

'Chief Mogoll arrives in two days,' said Bear Face. 'A mammoth kill would have impressed him. I have had word that he has already visited other tribes during the Snow Moons to find a husband for his daughter. But who would want a boy who lets a mammoth escape?'

'I'm not ready for a wife, Father.' Wild Horse shuddered. 'I've only seen thirteen winters.'

'I'll decide when you're ready,' Bear Face said. 'A wife is exactly what you need. It will bring honour to our tribe.' He grabbed Wild Horse by the shoulders. 'It is time you stopped running off on your own. When Mogoll arrives, you will lead the hunters and bring back a mammoth for our feast.'

Zuni was suddenly there. His hair was pulled tightly off his face in a taut braid, emphasising his dark, darting eyes. Although three winters older than Wild Horse, he was not much taller. He stabbed his spear at the ground.

'*I* have led the hunters since Running Bear died,' he said. 'I should be the one who does it for Mogoll.'

'Brother,' said Zuni's father Great Wolf to his chief, 'it is Zuni's place to lead the hunters. He has done it well until now.'

'Yes,' said Bear Face, 'but now Wild Horse must take his brother's place. He is the eldest son of the chief and that is the way of this tribe.'

Zuni gave Wild Horse a look of pure hatred, then marched to his shelter, followed by Great Wolf.

Wild Horse cursed his dead brother. If Running Bear had still been alive he'd be the lead hunter. Although Wild Horse had always wanted to hunt as well as his brother, to run as fast as his brother, he didn't want to lead the hunters or the tribe.

But he could never admit that to his father.

Bear Face's greying hair hung loose over his hunched and weak shoulders, as if even his shoulders understood that a new leader would soon be needed. And Bear Face had now chosen his son's path; the only way Wild Horse could gain his father's respect was to hunt and kill animals, and also to somehow win Mogoll's daughter.

If only there was another way he could impress Mogoll. He didn't want to be married; he wanted to be free to hunt on his own, free to learn more about the animals they had to hunt for food.

'You'll need a new spear-shaft,' said Bear Face. 'Make sure it's strong and worthy enough for a lead hunter.' The old man glowered at his son, daring him to argue.

Wild Horse walked to the wood store at the edge of the camp, where they had settled for the winter Snow Moons. Their six shelters huddled between rocks. On the other side of the river, coarse grass savannah was scattered with trees. Beyond that lay many rivers and sinkholes, rocks, cliffs and caves.

The tribe had gathered and dried logs and branches. Some had been used to support the hide shelters. The thick logs had been stored for fires, but they had treated the branches with fatty oils scraped from under the skins of carcasses, for use as spear-shafts. Wild Horse chose the longest and strongest branch. Using tools made of chert and bone he crafted a spear to replace the one broken by the mammoth. And two more. He would never again walk with fewer than three spears.

As he worked, Wild Horse watched Zuni talking to Great Wolf by their shelter, saw how they cast angry glares at him. Wild Horse knew Zuni would not give up the role of lead hunter easily, and he wondered what his cousin and uncle were planning.



CHAPTER TWO

BLUE BIRD

Blue Bird clawed Burning Fire's face as she fought to save the tiny newborn, but the woman was bigger than Blue Bird and forced the creature under the surface of the shallow stream.

'Let Paska keep *one* of the puppies,' screamed Blue Bird, trying to scoop up the five lifeless bodies already lying in the water. 'Release it or I'll tell Paska to attack you!'

'You will not.' Her father Mogoll strode towards them from the camp.

Paska whimpered as she pawed at the bodies. Blue Bird knelt in the stream next to her and rubbed her face against her dog's fur.

'Burning Fire killed all the puppies,' she sobbed.

'And look what the wild she-cat of a daughter of yours has done to me.' The woman turned her bloodied cheek towards Mogoll. 'I shouldn't have to suffer so from a child.'

'I am not a child,' said Blue Bird. 'And I am the one who suffers, you snake!'

'Only a child would cry at such a thing,' said Burning Fire. 'I've done the right thing by getting rid of them.'

'It is the right thing, Blue Bird. We do not need puppies,' Mogoll said. 'We are getting ready to leave camp. You have no right to fight with Burning Fire. She is heavy with child. You must say sorry.'

Blue Bird knew that her father wouldn't take her side; he never did – not since that woman had given him two sons. But she would not show any regret for scratching Burning Fire's face. She gathered the six tiny bodies into the rough wooden bowl in which Burning Fire had carried them, and ran upstream, Paska close behind.

Nobody followed her. Nobody heard her crying, or saw her heaving shoulders as she laid the dead puppies on a flat rock. Four of them were grey with black splodges like Paska, but two were the colour of a muddy river.

Blue Bird wanted the Spirits to find their souls before the wolves or the vultures came to eat the remains. While she waited, she made a decision. She could not stay here. She had never known her own mother who had died giving birth to her, and now her father had another wife she didn't feel she belonged any more. She was going to run away.

She waited for darkness to fall before creeping back to the camp, expecting the tribe to be asleep. A hand grabbed her shoulder as she reached her shelter, and she jumped.

It was Burning Fire. Paska snarled.

'Let go of me or Paska will bite.'

The woman leant so close that her face almost touched Blue Bird's, the deep scratches visible even in the darkness, her breath reeking of raw meat.

'I'll make sure your father has that dog butchered,' she hissed. 'At sunrise, before we leave this camp, I'll tell Mogoll it will slow us down, that it is best to end its pathetic life before we set off.' Then she slapped Blue Bird so hard she fell to her knees.

Paska nuzzled Blue Bird as Burning Fire strode away. Hatred for her father's wife welled up inside her, and she shivered at the thought of losing Paska as well as the puppies. Now there could be no change of mind – she had to leave. And she had to be gone before sunrise.

Before that woman ordered Paska's death.

She crawled into the shelter she shared with her aunt Sacred Cloud and her daughter Fawn. They were asleep. Blue Bird quickly rolled all her belongings into her sleeping-fur: stone scrapers and fire-stones; sinew, a bone awl and needles; slabs of pemmican, nuts and dried berries; and a frayed rabbit-skin pouch with a wooden pot of Sacred Cloud's healing balm inside. She slung a water-skin across her shoulder, and checked that the hunting pouch tied to her belt held her knife and two spare points.

It was time to go.

She crawled out of the shelter. Blue Bird knew that Sacred Cloud and Fawn would look after each other, and hoped that they'd forgive her for leaving them. Looking up to the sky she asked the Spirits to bless her with a safe journey.

Sacred Cloud had told her many times about the place where she and Blue Bird's mother had grown up. She would go there and look for her mother's tribe. That was where she belonged. But first, she had to get away from this one.

She set off, walking beside the stream. The rippling sounds and the way it reflected the light from the moon and stars made it the easiest course to follow, but the howls of a wolf made her reach for Paska. Her hand trembled as she stroked the dog's neck. Paska wasn't a large dog – she stood not much higher than Blue Bird's knees – but it was easier being brave with Paska by her side. She gave Blue Bird the strength not to turn round, even when a whoosh of wings swept low over her head: an owl, clutching a mouse in its claws. She flinched but kept walking.

All night.

To think about the threats lurking in the darkness might send her back to what she so longed to leave behind.

When the stream disappeared underground Blue Bird followed the outskirts of dense woodland, which led over a ridge and down towards a river. As they drank, Blue Bird looked across the water to where a massive craggy rock jutted out of the darkness: it might be a good place to find shelter. Paska hadn't fallen behind once, though she must

be exhausted after giving birth, and now the dog lay down panting – Blue Bird feared she might be too weak even to cross the river.

'Come on.' She squatted to pick up Paska, grasping the dog under her chest and rear legs, then waded across the river, using the remains of her own strength, grateful for the moonlight on the water to guide her across. 'We must find somewhere to rest,' she said, placing Paska on the ground.

They scrambled up the rock face. A dark hollow emerged as Blue Bird pulled herself up to a ledge. Half hidden by scrubby bushes was a cave like an open mouth. She only had to stoop a little to enter it, brushing away the spiders' webs that clung to her. It was dry and empty; a good place to shelter. Beetles scuttled away as she wrapped her sleeping-fur around her and snuggled next to Paska for warmth.

She didn't remember falling asleep, but the sound of voices woke her.

Voices she knew.

She moved to the entrance of the cave, clutching her spear, then dropped to the ground behind a bush and held her breath.

Her father and his hunters were looking at what must be her tracks on the other side of the river. The rest of the tribe waited behind them. She was sure they could all hear the pounding of her blood, deep inside her.

Finally Mogoll led the tribe downriver and Blue Bird breathed a sigh of relief. She watched Sacred Cloud

hesitate, and wanted to call out, to reassure her aunt that she was still alive. Then Fawn took her mother's hand, and Blue Bird knew it was right she travelled alone. Neither had her strength and resilience. She would not have made it this far through the night if they'd been with her.

Burning Fire shouted that if Blue Bird had survived the night, she'd soon come crawling back to them because the dog would be dead.

Mogoll roared at Sacred Cloud not to linger.

Their harshness strengthened Blue Bird's resolve. She could not return. She *would* not return.