

WHITE SKIES BLACK MINGO

By

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CHAPTER 1 BLACK MINGO

EARLY SEPTEMBER, 1854 OHIO COUNTRY - Disfiguration and death consumed us like a torch ravaging a dry grassland. The devastation is behind us now. Grandmother, Mother and I are all who remain of our clan. Our wagon sits in front of a white man's trading post in a small town with a name of little importance. We need their tools, clothes, blankets and weapons. They want our tobacco, corn, squash and beans. We all must learn to live in peace and harmony. But fear creates a hateful demon in the hearts of men. Fear gives that demon an illusion of great power. Remove the fear, and vanquish the demon.

We've taken only what is necessary. What is most important. A heavy overdress and leggings to fight off the Fall chill. Moccasins to warm frozen toes. A cherished cornhusk doll providing comfort and companionship when friends are scarce. An ancient tradition. Its colorful clothing, beads and long black braids are sentimental reminders of home. Clutching it endears those memories.

It is wise to stay out of sight. Remain invisible among the woven baskets of goods stored on the weathered boards of the small family wagon we travel in. Out of reach of names like *Black Mingo* or *Iroquois*. Both offensive words to the Haudenosaunee and the proud Wolf Clan of the Ohio Seneca. But the white man sees the world through ignorant eyes and claims whatever lands that please him.

What is taking Mother and Grandmother so long? Do they need my help? No. I should wait here in the wagon until they return, as I was told. Grandmother would scold me if I disobey her.

Familiar, soft whimpering and whining reaches her ears. *A fine set of work dogs those two are.* So impatient and restless from being tethered to the front of the wagon. They try so hard to sit and remain obedient. Maybe it won't hurt to step off the wagon for just one minute. Their thick fur is plush and soft. Their necks heavily muscled. Father rescued them as pups. Hybrids of Shepard and wolf. Their tails slap the dirt. Warm, wet tongues lap her cheeks and nose.

"Kake. Aw. Such a good boy. Sit Hato. We'll be leaving soon. Just a few minutes more."

Her cornhusk doll is ripped from her arms.

"What's this? Some kind of doll? It has no face! Ha-ha! Look. Where's the lips? No eyes."

"Toss it to me. C'mon. Let me have a look."

“Here. Take a gander at this.”

Who are these boys? Why did they have to take my doll? “Give that back! That’s mine.”

“Whoa, she speaks English.”

“Yes. I do. I’ve been to your schools. Maybe you should learn to speak *better* English. Now give me my doll!”

“Here. Catch, Mingo.”

Her arms stretch high in the air, but the doll flies over her extended fingers and into the hands of the other boy. The doll flies back and forth, just out of reach each time. Their laughing and mocking words are hurtful and cruel.

“I didn’t know injuns played with dolls. I thought ya’ll were savages, like your mutts over there.”

Why are the whites so cruel to us? I did nothing to them, yet they enjoy tormenting me.

It came out of nowhere. An instinctive reaction perhaps. The sting on her hand raises a welt on the boy’s cheek. “Give it to me. It *belongs* to me.”

A pair of hands slam into her chest. She hits the ground in a heap. Dirt pelts her face and body. Breathing turns to choking. The gritty crunch of sand fills her mouth. Brittle husks tear and crunch. The doll bounces off her chest in two separate pieces laying in the dirt beside her.

“There’s your doll, Mingo girl.”

No ... no. The doll is broken. Why? Why be so mean?

A soft whistle penetrates the heavy air overhead. Splat! Blood drips from the lips of one of the boys. He yelps and clasps his mouth. His eyes widen, stumbling backward. A single bloody tooth drops into his hand. He shrills, turns then flees, disappearing among the wooden buildings along the main road.

The other boy glances in the direction of the whistle. A stone pelts the knuckles of his right hand. He grasps his injured hand and cries out. He chases after the other boy, crying, “Isaac! Wait for me.”

Who is this boy standing over me, now? His face is pleasant. Friendly. He looks younger than me.

He holds a branch shaped like a vee in one hand. A rock in the other, which he allows to drop. His dark bushy brows raise in unison with his smile. He extends a callused hand.

His grip is strong. But ... I am taller than him. Ha!

The vee-shaped branch now protrudes from a trouser pocket. He retrieves the two halves of the cornhusk doll.

“Here you go. I’m sorry ... looks like it’s broken ... but hey, you have twins now.”

He’s kind. And sort of funny.

“Niá:wen.”

His nose crinkles. He slightly cocks his head. “What? I ... don’t ...”

“Thank you, I meant to say.”

“Oh. You’re welcome.” He extends his hand toward her.

What is he doing?

He nods and extends his hand further. “Take it. It’s a greeting. I’m Charlie. What’s your name?”

“I ... I am called *Kateri* in my native language. Margaret is my English name. How old are you, Charlie?”

He glances toward the ground with a slight but crooked smile. He’s embarrassed. *My question embarrassed him.*

“I’m ten. But I’ll be eleven soon.”

“I am twelve years, Charlie. So, I am older than you.” She smirks.

“Well, pleasure to meet you Margaret. What does *Kateri* mean?”

“It means one who is pure in spirit. But I do not know if I am worthy of such a name.”

“I’m sorry ... but I have to ask this. Why doesn’t your doll have any eyes ... or a nose? Or a mouth, even? Is it finished? I mean, it can’t see nothing. How does it eat or smell? Kind of mean to make a doll go through life like that, isn’t it?”

“Uh ... no ... yes, it *is* finished. We do not allow ourselves to be concerned with an individual’s physical beauty. We are all equal in our beauty and in our spirit. The cornhusk doll is faceless to reflect that truth. And it *is* a doll, Charlie.”

He shrugs, rolling his eyes, chuckling. “I see. I guess not having a face would take care of that, huh? Wonder if none of us had a face? What would that be like?”

He ... doesn’t get it. Another dumb boy, just like back home. Patting and brushing her clothing forms a cloud of dust and an urgent need to cough.

“Margaret.”

Grandmother’s voice is stern and an alarming reminder she should be waiting in the wagon. Certainly not standing here, talking to a strange boy.

“I have to go. Thank you ... again.”

The weight of the basket stresses her shoulders as she helps Mother and Grandmother load the goods. She takes her place at the rear of the wagon, drawing her knees into her chest and glancing at Charlie as the dogs begin to pull the wagon along the road away from town. She tightens the braids of two thick ponytails, loosened by the fall, and re-secures them with colorful-beaded leather bands.

What’s he doing, now?

Charlie crouches and approaches the slow-moving wagon removing an object wrapped in paper from his pocket. Her throat tightens and her eyes widen as he nears the wagon. She glances at Mother and Grandmother, then back at Charlie. He hands her the object, and resumes walking upright—clearly amused at her distress.

Scrambling to find an appropriate gift to exchange with Charlie she removes a beaded bracelet from her wrist. A bracelet made of bone, blue seashell beads and leather. The central bead has a pale-blue pearly sheen shaped like the moon.

She whispers, “I made this when I was seven. Catch ... to show my gratitude.”

She tosses the bracelet into the air. Charlie snatches it before it can touch the ground. He stares at the jewelry, eyes unblinking and mouth slightly open. His gradual smile sparks a pleasant nervousness in her tummy and a slight sadness in her heart watching him grow smaller in the distance as they move away from the small town.

What is this gift? The waxy paper crinkles and slides away revealing a small round biscuit. White powder highlights the top, like virgin snow powdering a mountain peak. Red jelly oozes from a hole in its side like a mortal wound. She sniffs. A combination of sweetness mixed with berry and the scent of the sap of maple trees fill her senses. The dough crumbles in her mouth. Her salivary glands burst and burn with an overpowering sweetness and unexpected combinations of saltiness and tartness. She spits and frowns. She tosses the sweetbread from the wagon and wipes her lips with her dress.

She gazes back towards town. He’s completely out of view now. He was kind. Funny. Different from the others. He has the spirit of the sky in his eyes and the spirit of the bear in his heart.

Thank you for helping me, Charlie.

Our people have suffered. The white man’s theft of our lands devastates our way of life. But all the damage their weapons and greed have cost us, doesn’t compare to the white man’s most lethal curse of all. A curse they brought with them from their many lands across the great waters. Their sicknesses. Their bad medicine. A curse ravaging and consuming our lands and villages like a quenchless plague of locusts.

Grandmother’s medicine and gifts of healing could not fight these evil spirits. She was powerless, even as Clan Mother and healer. Fevers raged within our clan. The marks began to show on the skin of both young and old—male and female. Grandmother said the evil spirits traveled through the breaths of the sick, poisoning the air around us. Her grandfather was a great Shaman. A position usually reserved for a man. But he did not have a son, and his gift passed to Grandmother and that gift now passes to me.

She teaches me to be a healer. She says Mother did not inherit the gift ... that it skips a generation. Since I was a young girl, she has told me I possess this gift. What good is such a gift if it is powerless to save the lives of our people?

Most of our clan have died. We could stay no longer. The ones who survive, will soon die. The other Clan Mothers begged us to leave. Their men burned our homes. Burned our dead

in the traditional burial ceremony. Freeing their spirits. We took what we could carry. Food. Skins. Beads and shells for trade. And now we are here. On the trail. Headed for Virginia to find a new home. We left our brother and our father behind. Carrying their memory with us. Abandoning our home. Uncertain what we will find, or how we will live.

“Margaret.”

“Yes, Grandmother.”

“We will rest here for the night. Help your mother set up the shelter. Then help me build a fire and we shall eat.”

Wood crackles, popping cherry-red sparks into the night sky. The sounds calm the spirit with hypnotic songs of whispering wood. Flames flicker casting a soft glow dancing off the faces of Grandmother and Mother. Grandmother’s face is aged and wrinkled from years of carrying important responsibilities for our clan. A strong face, weathered by time. Time that has stolen teeth and dulled the shine from her once luminous nutbrown eyes. Eyes she has passed down to me. Her body is crooked and frail. But her spirit is strong like the mountain. Her voice carries authority like the raging river. The women of our clan are strong leaders. Highly respected by all.

Mother’s face was once youthful. Now her ebony eyes are swollen and sunken. She neglects her beauty—her thick hair unbraided and tattered like ruffled feathers of a raven. Lips and cheeks chapped and reddened. She speaks very little. It’s almost as if the loss of Father and my brother has already claimed her spirit. Sweat beads on her cheeks and brow. She doesn’t eat. I do not know how to comfort her. Or what words to speak. Even Grandmother cannot find the wisdom or words to give her rest.

It was Mother who taught me the importance of keeping my hair tightly braided and sleekly oiled to manage its bulkiness. She taught me how to look pretty, telling me it will help me attract a good husband someday. But I don’t know if I’m pretty. I hate the scar on my chin. I stood too close watching a game of stick ball. A boy we call Kicking Elk whacked me in the face as he slung the ball down the field. And I have the body of a boy. Something I hope will change soon. My legs are long and skinny and I am taller than most of the boys. But I can run like the whitetail. I could outrun every boy in our clan. They made fun of me for it. But I don’t care. It made me feel special beating them. I wanted to play stick ball, but girls aren’t allowed. Probably because they are afraid to lose to us. The boys tell me I smile too much. And that stick ball is a serious game. I tell them I also smile when I race. They have no answer for that.

A full belly after a long day brings on a trance and a heaviness too hard to fight off.

“Goodnight, Grandmother. Goodnight, Mother.”

“C’mon, Kake. Here, Hato. Into the wagon. Let’s go. You’re both keeping me warm tonight.”

I would sleep with Grandmother and Mother, but there isn’t much room in the teepee. The warmth of Kake and Hato and the deerskin covering us are enough to feel safe by the fire and sleep well.

Stars flicker across a vast purple-blackness as moonlight bathes the land with a soft serene glow. The forest is alive with the sounds of the night mixed with soft incantations and the gentle shaking of a snapping turtle rattle. The sweet scent of burning tobacco permeates the air.

Grandmother's voice? How long have I been asleep?

“Stay, Hato. Lay still, Kake. I’ll be right back. I promise.”

A pounding heart steals her breath as she lifts the flap of the small teepee. Dread reverberates through her bones from guarded anticipation. These incantations are familiar. Grandmother wears the wooden mask of her grandfather with its deep-set eyes, bent nose, horse hair and red and black paint. A tobacco leaf tied to its forehead. She sprinkles ash onto Mother. A bowl of corn mush sits next to her as an offering to the spirit of *The Old Hunched Man*.

“Mother? Grandmother? What’s happening?”

“Margaret, close the flap. Sit next to me granddaughter. Repeat the chants with me.”

Mother’s sweats have turned into a raging fever. The marks have appeared on her arms, legs and torso. After finding the rhythm and cadence of Grandmother’s voice, two voices now chant as one in the night.

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CHAPTER 2

RED PLAGUE

Mother coughs, struggling to catch a breath. Her clothing is soaked. She fades in and out of sleep, growing weaker as the hours pass. Very few survive the fever. Nothing can stop it. Its grip is fierce and without mercy. Grandmother continues to chant. She's wearied from hours of incantations and prayers to the Invisible Agents. The lesser spirits who will call out to The Great Spirit. But she perseveres. I've never seen her meditate so intensely.

"Grandmother, please rest. Nothing seems to be working."

"Child, you must pray with me. Continue to learn the incantations. Two spirits speak with a greater voice."

Grandmother rocks back and forth. Shaking the rattle, singing chants and sending prayers to the heavens without pause. I haven't her strength. I try to join her, but I can't keep going.

"Mother. Mother, please don't leave us. Please fight. I can't lose you too. I don't know what I'd do. Stay with us. Mother ... please."

Her tired eyes meet mine. Glazed. Swollen and red. Her left eye bleeding. Yet, I *see* her. Her tenderness rises above the sickness sending a silent message of adoring love into my heart. I *feel* her love. She places visions in my mind. But, how is this possible? She paints pictures and images my spirit can see. A time when she was young. Holding me. Suckling me to her breast. Her love for me is beyond any words I could ever speak. I grasp the depth of her love for me, now. *This* is Mother's gift. She's not a healer, but she can embrace my spirit and whisper thoughts and visions into my mind. But why does she choose to reveal this gift now? At this moment?

"Mother. I need you. Please don't leave me. Not yet. Please fight ... fight for me. Fight for us."

"Grandmother, I must rest. I'm so sorry."

Grandmother's lap. I loved to lie here when I was a small child, while she braided my hair and stroked my scalp. I'm safe. Her soft chanting and the rhythm of the rattle tranquilizes my thoughts and fears.

Travel is impossible. We are forced to stay. Many days pass. Grandmother continues to chant and watch over Mother. Neither has eaten much. Where does Grandmother find her strength?

Mother appeared to be getting better, then fell into a raging fever. I just don't know if she'll make it. I pray to the Lesser Spirits each day and night hoping they will send my prayers to The Great One. Winter is upon us and the snows and deadly cold will soon come. We must continue our journey to Virginia *sooner* rather than later.

Grandmother devotes her time teaching me the healing arts. Preparing me to understand how different plants, berries and barks of trees interact. Explaining how they are used and their secrets for healing.

“Grandmother, what is this one? This one in the bone flask. Why is it black?”

“Be careful with this one granddaughter. This one is *nightshade*. It can be very useful, but in the wrong dosage it is deadly. Our men would often dip their arrowheads with its poison to bring down game or enemies. Just a few drops can kill the mightiest of warriors. In tiny doses, it can ease pain and allow surgery. Guard its contents well.”

“I will Grandmother. Is there a cure?”

Grandmother displays a small corked flask with a brown liquid inside.

“This.”

“When will I possess the tools of a healer?”

“First learn the secrets, Margaret. When my days have passed, all that is mine will belong to you. The *responsibility* will be yours. Use it wisely and only for the good of others.”

“Grandmother? How will I recognize the boy who will become my husband? How will I know him?”

“Keep your heart pure, child. The Great Spirit will give you a sign. A sign of *innocence and purity*. No matter where that sign leads, you must follow and not question.”

Grandmother’s hugs absorb all my fears and wipe away my many tears. Her loving embrace eases my spirit of its restlessness.

“Margaret.”

“Yes, Grandmother.”

“Sleep inside with us tonight. Give your voice to me and to your mother. We must cry out to the Good Spirits and pray they will speak to The Great Spirit on our behalf.”

Matching Grandmother’s pace is near impossible. Her energy comes from the heavens. From our ancestors. Her lap is my safe place. The droning of her voice carries my mind into deep rest.

“Margaret ... Margaret. Wake up, daughter. Wake, child.”

Mother’s voice. Her gentle whispers. Is it morning?

“Mother? You’re awake. The scabs are looking better. Thank you, thank you, Great Spirit.”

Mother frowns. Her eyes filled with worry. Her finger trembles and points to Grandmother.

“Oh, yes. I must wake Grandmother and tell her the great news.”

“Grandmother. Grandmother, wake up. Mother is feeling much better. Your prayers ... our prayers have been heard ... and answered. Grandmother?”

She is seated in a position of prayer. Her hands tightly folded. Her mask firmly in place.

“Oh no. No, no, no. Grandmother! Wake up ... please wake up. Mother. What’s wrong with her? She’s gone ... Mother, she’s gone.”

Warmth of sorrowful tears well, wetting her cheeks, muddying her vision. Sobs turn to wails of grief and shock. Mother’s feeble hand gently massaging her scalp cannot prevent her heart from shattering.

Grandmother was Clan Mother and healer of our people. She sacrificed greatly for all who needed and depended on her wisdom and kindness. I loved her. I was special to her. She favored me over my brother and the others. I don’t know what she saw in me. She was my shelter in times of trouble. The wisdom in her words and the authority in her voice quieted my spirit and encouraged my heart.

She has sacrificed herself. Making a bargain with The Great Spirit. No man or woman could refuse her stubbornness or her persuasiveness. Not even The Great Spirit could refuse her bargain. She forfeited her life in exchange for Mother’s. And now, I must take her place as healer.

The pyre’s flame consumes the physical. It returns to the earth what once belonged to its fertile soil. Grandmother’s spirit rises with the ashes to freedom, becoming one with the wind and the trees of the mountains. Our hair bears the scent of smoke. Our tears evaporate from our cheeks.

We must depart with great haste. But Mother is too weak to travel on foot. She will need to ride in the wagon, covered in deer skin and fur. Our race is against time and the threat of weather that looms. Our treacherous journey forces us south along the Ohio River to Wheeling, Virginia.

“Kake. Hato. Let’s go.”

“Mother, rest and stay warm. I will get us to Wheeling. I promise you. I promised Grandmother.”

Fall has arrived in the Ohio Valley. A mixture of goldenrod, maroon and burnt orange leaves scatter in the breeze and blanket the forest floor. Roiling gray clouds portend the oncoming weather. The crunch of leaves under the wagon wheels mix with hisses and whines of blustering winds.

Follow the Ohio River southward, Grandmother said. The river will guide us to Wheeling. To a new life, a fresh beginning. Travel is slow. Kake and Hato pant and struggle pulling the wagon carrying Mother and what is left of our supplies. Kake is the strong one. He has the size and stature of the gray wolf. His youth makes him restless. Hato is the wise one. More, white Shepard than wolf. His wisdom keeps Kake calm and focused.

The forests near the river are dangerous. Not only because of the terrain, but because of the fur trappers, bears, wolves, and other tribesman. We are exposed traveling along its banks. No weapons to defend ourselves. Only Grandmother’s herbs, tree bark, rattles, surgical blades

and ceremonial mask. Tools of a healer that now belong to me. I have returned her mask to its ceremonial blanket. The mask must be treated and cared for with the same respect as an ancestor.

“Mother, that small clearing against those trees will make a good camp for tonight. I’ll gather wood for a fire and set up shelter while daylight still remains. We can eat and rest.”

Her voice is a raspy whisper, “I would like that, daughter.”

Mother is feeble. Her fever has cooled, but she has lost vision in her left eye. Her face is thin, gaunt and scarred. Shadows and puffiness deaden her eyes and spirit. She is my responsibility now. I must take up the chant and the prayers and recall all that Grandmother has taught me of the trees, plants, berries and the herbs of the forest and why each one was given to Mother Earth.

Mother’s lips tremble with each bite I feed her. Her eyes tear. I see her pain and her discomfort with her bedding. A touch of oil of lavender glistens across her upper lip and nose. It will help her to rest and quiet her spirit.

“Goodnight, Mother. Sleep now. I’ll be right here beside you if you need me. I love you.”

Her fingers run through my hair, relaxing my body, creating tingles of electricity as she glides her finger tips across my scalp. Her fingers slow, her breathing softens to a steady wheeze. Crickets chirp and toads belch. The howl of a wolf in the distance blends with soft trickles of the river’s water splashing against the riverbank. Night is upon us.

We have traveled many weeks. Following the Ohio River. Staying out of sight and blending as one with the trees of the forest. Mother grows weaker each day. She eats so little. I pray over her and chant as Grandmother taught me. Feeding her herbs to calm her pain. I *will* make her well again.

Cold weather crept upon us. Our travel is slow. The snows have not yet arrived, but they will come soon. We *will* make it to Wheeling. I *know* we will. I promised I would get us there, and I will keep that promise.

“Mother, here is my pelt. It will help keep you warm tonight.”

“Margaret. Look at me, child.”

Her gentle hand is soft across my cheek. Her touch speaks affection to my heart words cannot. My eyes are reluctant. Fearing the truth, that might be revealed in hers. Maternal eyes growing dim of life, but glowing strong in their adoration.

“Daughter. I am slowing us down. You know this. We will not reach our destination if we continue at this pace.”

“No. No, Mother ... I’m not listening.”

“Hear me, my sweet child. Winter is upon us. The snows will come very soon. We won’t survive out here alone. Take what you can carry on your back. Take Kake and Hato and travel quickly along the river.”

“I cannot leave you here, Mother. You cannot ask me to do that. I will *not* do that. I promised you ... and I’ll keep that promise. Please. Please stay with me. Don’t give up, Mother.”

“Rest, my precious child. You are a *healer* now. Like Grandmother. You have a great responsibility. Grandmother’s spirit lives within you, as will I. Rest now my daughter. As I must.”

“Yes, rest Mother. You’ll need your strength for tomorrow. I know we are close. We’ll get to Wheeling any day now. You’ll see.”

Mother’s soft breaths rise and fall in gentle rhythm. Her maternal face graced with peaceful dreams.

A kiss on the forehead and a whisper. “Goodnight, Mother.”

Anxiety breeds a dagger of fear. Twisting and turning its blade inside her gut. Stealing away precious sleep. What if she can’t lead them to Wheeling? What if she isn’t the person Grandmother believed her to be? Grandmother passed this responsibility to her. But what if its burden is too demanding?

Sunlight bathes her face with hues of rust and amber. Her deerskin vibrates from her shivers. The fire has gone out. Only embers remain. Smokey puffs fade and blend into the frozen morning air. A painful reminder of how late in the season it has become. Mother remains asleep.

Opening the flap of the teepee reveals a new layer of frost on the ground. A couple fresh logs and the fire rages again, providing warmth and comfort. Shivers subside. Her eyes close allowing the heat to bathe her cheeks. Tails smacking the ground and panting interrupt her moment of solace. Two bodies plop next to her. Kake whimpers. Hato yips and barks.

“Ugh. I know, I know. I just need to warm up. Then I’ll make breakfast and wake Mother. Be patient you naughty boys. All you two ever think about is food.”

Hato tucks his tail between his legs, rubbing his head along her arms and attempting to lick her face.

“Yes, you’re such a bad boy. But I still love you.”

Kake flops on his side and whimpers.

“What’s the matter, Kake? Why are you being such a crybaby this morning? Why aren’t you chasing birds, or running around on those crazy long legs of yours? Are you sick or something?”

Kake rolls onto his stomach and flattens his body against the ground, resting his head across his paws. His eyes glance at her then look away.

“Okay. I’ll wake Mother and we’ll eat and get moving. Will that make you both happy?”

Mother continues to rest. Her face is peaceful. It’s going to be difficult having to wake her, but we must keep moving.

“Mother, it’s time to wake up. I’ll make food, then we must go. It’s very cold out this morning ... Mother? ... hm ... okay, you rest a little while longer while I make breakfast for us all.”

Our baskets are nearly empty. Only scraps remain. We’ll need to fish and hunt. Skills the boys were taught. Skills we’ll have to learn on our own. My days were spent weaving baskets and learning to grow food from the land.

“Here boys. Your favorite. Beans and squash wrapped in corn bread. C’mon, eat it. It’s all I got. Eat it or starve. Or go find your own breakfast ... There you go. Good boy Hato. Kake, what is the matter with you? Eat.”

Ah. How can Mother still be sleeping? The ground is rough against her knees. She nudges Mother. Then nudges her again. She caresses her face. A face cool to the touch.

“Mother? It’s time to wake up now. I have made our morning meal. Mother. Please wake.”

No movement. No response. A dull ache develops in the base of her throat. She gulps a pocket of air. Tears well and drip from her long lashes, creating tiny pitter-patters atop the furs covering Mother. Her breaths are quick and shallow. A paralyzing realization of dread flows from her chest to her feet. A cruel truth she already knew, but refused to accept now grips her heart with sobering reality.

“Mother?”

I lie my head on her bosom. Waiting for her gentle touch. A touch that doesn’t come. Listening for her gentle heartbeat. Finding only silence. Winds whistle a haunting melody through the flap of the teepee. My heart empties like Autumn leaves from a tree. My mind in a trance, numbed by denial. How cruel and wicked the spirits can be. Why?

Alone. Alone in an enormous world. Everyone gone. No one to hold my hand, or rub my scalp. No lap to safely rest my head upon. No place to hide myself. Desolation has found my soul and claimed it.

She slips beneath the furs and lies next to Mother’s rigid body. Holding her. Gently pulling at thick strands of her hair. Kissing her cheeks. Closing her eyes, she rests her head upon the bosom that once suckled her. Hours pass. Her hopes and dreams drain over the earth like spilled milk. The end of the journey. A journey of unimaginable loss.

The Great Spirit can claim us all now. I won’t fight him. You can take my soul, too.

CHAPTER 3

NIGHTSHADE

Winds push the pyre's flames in every direction, forming wisps of smoke rising and blending with the graying skies. Warm tears cool as they run along her cheeks. Emptiness envelops her. Reddened eyes blankly focus on the smoldering embers and Mother's remains. A forlorn loneliness paralyzes her spirit with a realization of the terrible finality she faces.

She's with Grandmother now. How I wish I were there with you both running through the Great Meadows beside the clear trickling streams and crystal waterfalls.

Hato and Kake lie at her side. Kake whimpers. Hato rests his snout against her lap. Winter snows are coming. Time is growing short. But how much further can it be? We must keep following the river and search for food. What's going to happen to us? If the snows come before we reach Wheeling, we won't survive the bitter cold without shelter. Without food.

There's no point in pulling the wagon any further. Most of the food is gone and its weight and bulkiness will only hinder us. The little food that remains can be carried. One deerskin and two furs to stay warm. The teepee is too cumbersome to carry. It must be abandoned.

Hato presses against her thigh as the journey continues along a path of the winding river. Guarding her. Kake darts about, barking and nipping at the air trying to catch birds or anything that moves. The pace has hastened and their purpose urgent.

Freezing drizzle dampens her clothes and tingles her cheeks. The road ahead is foggy. The temperature has dropped. It is too dangerous to travel.

"Kake, c'mon. Let's head into those trees. C'mon, boy."

The umbrella of the treetops filter most of the drizzle. She tucks beneath a deerskin and furs. Kake and Hato huddle on either side adding their body warmth to hers.

"We'll wait it out here, boys. Till the weather clears."

The squash has become mushy and barely edible. Forcing it down and fighting the urge to gag becomes necessary. It does calm a grumbling belly, however.

Voices! English voices. Along the river.

"Kake. Hato. Sh. Stay still. Let them pass."

Her heart pounds. Blood swooshes through her ears. She conceals herself beneath the skin and furs. Her panting slows as the echoing voices fade in the distance, replaced by the peaceful trickling of the river.

Hato growls. Kake leaps and barks. After throwing off her coverings her heart goes rigid, stifling her breathing. Standing several feet away is a large white man. A trapper. Wearing heavy skins and furs, a thick peppery beard and a scowl. He holds a long flintlock musket. Kake stands his ground, growling, ears pinned, baring teeth dripping with saliva. Hato snarls and positions himself between her and the trapper.

“Call off your dogs, Mingo. Or I’ll put a musket ball in this one.”

“Kake. Kake easy boy. It’s okay. Hato, calm down.”

Kake continues a low resonating growl. Hato stands steadfast by her side, eyes focused on the trapper.

The trapper grins, revealing several missing teeth. The ones remaining are yellow with rot. He carries the stench of a dead animal.

“Where’s your tribe? You lost out here, girl? You hungry?”

She braces her back against the heavy base of a tree and slips one of grandmother’s surgical blades from her satchel into her palm. She grips it, pointing it at him. Trembling.

He guffaws. “What are you going to do with that, little girl? Pick my teeth?”

He raises the musket. “Toss me that satchel. While you’re at it, toss me your skin and pelts.”

“No! Leave us alone, thief.”

His chuckle is raspy and grumbling. “Then, I’ll just have to take them from you, girl.”

Kake lunges, gnashing his canines and growling. The musket fires. Kake yelps and squirms, lying on the ground howling and whimpering. His coat, soaked in crimson.

“No! Kake! Why did you do that? You dog-faced animal! Kake! No ... no. You evil devil! Attack him, Hato!”

He drops the musket and yanks a wad of netting from under his coat. Hato’s charge is met with a weighted web of rope, entangling him and pinning him to the ground.

The trapper bites off a chunk of tobacco, cackling and hacking as he approaches. He spits brown syrupy juice onto Kake’s face.

Her blade trembles. She discreetly reaches into her satchel and removes the small bone flask of black liquid. Her heart races, her breathing ragged and shallow. She pours several drops of the liquid across the blade with quivering hands and braces herself.

He drops a leather backpack from his shoulders, allowing it to hit the ground behind him with a thud. He grabs her ankles and drags her towards him, leaving her flat on her back and at his mercy. Her breath is pushed from her lungs from his weight. She’s suffocating!

Stab him! Stab him!

Her wrist. He’s crushing it with his meaty grip. The blade slides from her hand. He tosses it into the brush.

“Let’s see what you have under these leathers, girl. Maybe something wet and warm for me?”

Her body is jerked upward, cloth ripping, buttons popping. He snorts like a wild boar. Slobbering. His breath mixed with rotting fish and tobacco. He sniffs her neck, the sound of his putrid lips, smacks inside her ear. His filthy beard chafes her face.

He whispers, “You’re gonna enjoy this, Mingo. But not as much as I am.” He chortles, raspy and guttural. He pins her wrists to the ground.

Kake yelps and howls making a desperate lunge at him, tearing his ear and ripping beard and flesh from his face. He groans, releasing her wrists. He pulls a twelve-inch Bowie knife from his hip and drives it into Kake’s ribcage. Kake squeals, then lies motionless in silence. He wipes blood from the blade onto his pantleg and jams the blade back into its sheath. He chuckles.

She grasps the bone flask, raising it to her lips. She sips the sweet black syrupy contents and holds it under her tongue.

He turns his attention back towards her. “Sorry about your dawg. Now ready yourself, girl. It’s gonna hurt. You’ll remember this fine experience the rest of your days. And you’re never gonna forget my face.”

He places his crusty lips to hers and forces his rancid tongue into her mouth. She spits every drop of the black liquid into his mouth and gnaws at his tongue. He gulps and rips his tongue from her clenched teeth. He leaps to his feet, wiping his lips across his sleeve, spitting and spewing blood, saliva and black liquid into the air in a fine mist. Tinges of blood stain his filthy beard.

“What was that, Mingo? What’d you spit into my mouth, bitch?”

She recoils, bracing herself against the base of the tree, spitting and wiping her lips and tongue with her sleeve. She glares and grins, defiant and focused like a viper waiting for its venom to take effect.

“I have given you what you deserve, dog-face. Now you will answer to The Great Spirit for all your evil deeds. The Evil Minded One will claim your soul this day.”

“What the hell you babbling ‘bout?”

“It’s too late for you, now. The poison is in your mouth and already fills your veins.”

His eyes widen. He gags. Foam drips from glistening crimson lips. He drops to one knee with a thud, gripping his throat. He unsheathes his Bowie and glares. His eyes wild, his pupils blackened. He hurls his blade barely missing her head. Its cold steel nicking her cheek and embedding deep into the tree trunk with a shuddering thump. His eyes roll white as he collapses. His body convulses, writhing in the dirt. Gasping and gurgling.

Her temples throb. The world becomes hazy. Trees bend, changing hue. Her lips tingle. She throws open the satchel and grabs a corked flask. She drinks, sucking every drop. Its vinegary flavor causes her to gag and salivate. Light becomes intense and blinding. She falls forward, numbness tightens her throat, she wheezes.

Am I dying? If I am, I am ready. Kake. Hato. Where are you? Grandmother? Mother?

Swirls of confusion grip her mind. Visions of a blazing fire flash through her memories. Mother's face smiles then twists, and deforms. Pustules form and burst, bloodying the fading images. Thunder explodes.

“Mother!”

Twitching and shivering, she pants and gasps. Fading in and out of consciousness. A black rotating vortex engulfs her. Everything turns to blackness.

Hato's whimpers startle her. She lifts her torso upright and braces herself against a tree, gathering her thoughts and pulling her senses into focus. Head throbbing. Disoriented. The twisted body of the trapper lies still, staring at her with opaque lifeless eyes. Bloodshot and protruding. Dried blood and vomit matt his ratty beard.

Her eyes meet Hato's. His tail wags. He yips and barks, still entangled by the web of ropes.

“Hato. I'm coming, boy. I'll get you out of there.”

With both hands on the hilt and one foot on the tree she wrenches the twelve-inch Bowie from the trunk. She slices the ropes freeing Hato. He leaps on her, yelping and crying. His warm tongue wetting her chin.

“Good boy, Hato.”

She kneels next to the body of Kake. The spirit of her old friend is gone. He sacrificed his life for her. Somehow finding the strength to pull himself off the ground to make one last lunge at her attacker. Hato whimpers, licking and cleaning Kake's snout, then dropping to the ground beside him, softly whimpering.

Using the Bowie, she digs a shallow grave and lays the body of her beloved Kake to rest. She gently smooths the earth over him, then covers him with stones. She sits next to the grave, legs crossed, remaining very still. The weight of Hato's head rests upon her lap. His white coat runs thick through her fingers. Streams of tears silently drip. Tears blessing Kake's grave with their purity.

“Rest well, old friend. We will miss you, wild one. Run with the spirits of the wind now. Chase the birds of the sky and always remember us. We will never forget you my brave, fearless Kake.”

The trapper's body is frozen with animation. His stench far worse. She removes a large leather pouch tethered to his shoulder. One of the trapper's smaller furs has a slit where it can be worn over the shoulders like a cloak.

“Hato! Time to eat boy.”

She pulls several strips of jerky from the pouch and hands one to Hato. He devours it.

“Bad manners, Hato. Mm ... mm ... this is very salty. What kind of meat is this?”

The pouch is deep with more items inside. Colorful dried fruit and berries. Strips of jerky, and the small body of a dried fish. She closes the flap and slings it around her shoulder.

A small leather bag drawn with a leather string is attached to his overcoat. Inside are several round metal balls, small tools and a metal flask. She tosses it aside.

“We’ll keep the pouch, Hato. Maybe we can use it. Let’s look in his backpack and see what else he has.”

She steps to where the trapper dropped his backpack and cautiously opens the leather flap. She pulls out a large tin cup and examines it, returning it to the pack. She removes a singed tin pan and two small beaver traps attached to a single chain.

“We can learn to use these. Maybe trap small game. I can carry the backpack on my shoulders. But we can only carry so much, Hato ... let’s take his blade, his food and his pack. Let’s take his two beaver pelts. Maybe we can use them for trade.”

The backpack stresses at the seams from the deerskin, fur and other items stuffed inside. Her head slides through the opening of the fur cloak and her arms slide into the straps of the backpack. Top heavy and awkward she adjusts her weight to accommodate her balance.

“The musket is a mystery to me, so I will leave it here with him. He will need it in the afterlife to fight off the evil spirits that will surely come for him. C’mon, Hato. We have a few more hours of daylight. Let’s keep moving.”

Hato flanks her right side as they move along the riverbank of the Ohio River, continuing southward. Thick puffs of white and gray clouds gather, roiling and blanketing the sky. They diffuse the light, leaving an ominous shadow over the land. Wisps of bitter winds whip and groan through the trees. Feathery flakes swirl as they fall, whipped into a frenzy by small eddies and gusts. A thin soft blanket of virgin snow covers the earth. A bad omen that the Great White Storms approach.

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