

Spirit Horse

I woke with a start and quickly stoked the fire. That howling was getting closer and I was pretty sure I hadn't been dreaming. Maybe it was a mistake to come out here in the first place.

Two days and no sign of the horse. And just think, I did all of this just so my tribe would stop calling my grandfather "Crazy Horse" and believe his story of the horse who rescued him. It was time to head back.

Ooow.

Another one, even closer. I searched the woods and a pair of glowing yellow eyes met mine. I grabbed a stick from the fire and jumped to my feet. A huge gray wolf emerged from the shadows, eyeing me. There was no mistaking the hunger in his eyes. He tossed his head back and let loose another howl. Five more wolves joined him.

They began to slowly circle around me. I waved my torch at them. "Get back!"

The leader snarled at me, his white teeth gleaming in the torchlight. Panic rose in my chest. This couldn't be the end. Not yet!

One of them had the audacity to get closer and I rewarded him with a torch to his muzzle. He ran back, yelping. The leader barked at him and they began closing in. I swung my torch wildly, hoping to keep them at bay a little longer.

A whinny broke through the air and we turned as one.

There, at the top of the hill with the rising sun behind it, was the most magnificent horse I had ever seen. The sunlight made its white and brown coat gleam. He tossed his mane, neck arching proudly. This was him. My grandfather's horse. I had found him.

The wolves snarled and resumed their attack. The horse gave a battle cry and charged down the hill. I backed away and tripped over a rock. One of the wolves pounced but I smacked it in the face with my torch and its jaws missed its mark.

The horse charged through the pack like they were nothing and stood in front of me. It was almost like it was...defending me? That was exactly what he was doing! He held the wolves at bay as I got to my feet. He reared and crushed two wolves with his hooves, making the others retreat. The leader snapped at him and he snapped back, sending the wolf sprawling.

The horse looked at me and it was almost like I heard a voice telling me to get on. I hesitated. Could I really ride this beautiful creature? The horse tossed its head and gave me a reassuring nicker. I ran to it and leaped onto his back.

The horse spun around and galloped back up the hill. One of the wolves, determined not to let its prey get away, sunk his teeth into my leg. I cried out with pain and hit it on the head again and again with my fist. It would not let go! Desperate, I pulled its ear, remembering how angry it made my dog. The wolf yelped and let go. Pain shot up my entire leg and the blood flowed freely.

We descended the hill and I looked back to see the wolves standing at the top, giving up. I turned around just in time to see that we were headed straight towards the creek! "Whoa!" I called out and put all my weight onto his back. But he didn't slow down. I knew no horse could

jump that far and the bank was too steep for him to go down. I closed my eyes as he pushed off.

We were flying through the air, across the creek. I dared to open my eyes just as his hooves touched down on the other side.

I looked back at the creek incredulously and then laughed. We made it! I couldn't believe I was still alive! That was twice I had cheated death in one day. I let out a whoop and leaned into the horse.

We raced over the land, past hills and streams; faster than I thought was possible. We startled a herd of deer that was peacefully grazing and they ran next to us. A huge buck was so close that I could have reached out and touched him. I laughed at a fawn's attempt to keep up.

But we soon left them all behind. We jumped a fallen tree and cleared it by at least three feet! I soon forgot the pain in my leg as we ran. We ran as fast as the eagle flies. As fast as the wind! I closed my eyes and laid my head in his mane, losing myself in the feel of flying. I opened my eyes just as he came to a sliding stop. He reared and I yelled from pure joy! I was sure nothing else could compare to this! Then he came back to earth, both of us panting. I looked around not quite believing it was over. It felt like it lasted forever and such a short time all at once.

A fly buzzed around me and landed on my leg. As I brushed it away, I was reminded of the pain. I slid off the horse and pulled a piece of buckskin from my pouch. I tied it around my wound which, thankfully, was not bleeding anymore. Then I stood back up to find myself face to face with the horse.

I rubbed his neck as I slid the rope from my pouch. I was about to put it around his neck when he pushed his forehead against mine. It was like he wanted to tell me something.

“What is it?” I asked, remembering the legends my father told me of animals talking. “Do you want to tell me something?”

Suddenly, my thoughts weren't mine anymore. His voice filled my head. He told me how he had protected the Plains people for generations, no matter the tribe. He told of how he found my grandfather half dead from a fight with a mountain lion. He took him back to the camp to be healed. He told me how people have tried to capture him many times but he always managed to evade them. He loved his freedom. He loved to be free to go where he wanted and do what he pleased. He wanted to be free to help his people.

As he told me this, I knew I couldn't take him with me. His place was here. I couldn't take his freedom away.

I dropped the rope and put my arms around his neck. “I won't take away your freedom. You of all creatures deserve to be free. Free to race the eagle or eat the sweetest grass. Free to help my people.”

He backed away and I could see the gratitude in his eyes. He whinnied and tossed his head, mane flashing in the sunlight. With that, he turned and galloped away.

As I watched him go, I knew I had made the right decision. So what if people thought my grandfather was crazy. They would think I was crazy, too. But I had nothing left to prove. I knew the truth and that was all that mattered.