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THE LITTLE ELK-HIDE MOCCASIN

An elderly woman pushed her way into a tepee. The wind and snow howled outside, threatening to blow it down. The woman shuffled along the tulle mats on the ground and sat herself down. Shivering, she pulled a heavy buffalo robe around her thin frame. This winter had been hard; food had been scarcer this year, and it nearly drove her people to starvation.

The tepee entrance opened again as ten children pushed their way inside. Snow covered their thick black braided hair, and left their hides sopping wet. The elderly woman waited patiently as the children shook the snow from their hides and came to sit before her.

The elder's eyes rested on the faces of two children as they sat down near the back of the group. The woman smiled before speaking.

"Today, I shall let one of you choose a story. What story do you wish to hear?"

One little girl shot her hand up.

"Tell us the one of the monster's heart and Coyote!"

Another child spoke up.

"Is that the one about how the Nez Perce people came to this land? We've heard that too many times already! Tell us a different one Story Teller!"

The children argued among themselves until one girl raised her hand. Story Teller smiled at the child.

"What story do you want to hear Singing Wind?"

Singing Wind's eyes glew with excitement.

"Tell us the story of Little Fawn and her elk-hide moccasin!" Story Teller nodded her head as the children began to quiet down.

"Yes, that is the story I shall tell. Now, gather around my children, and listen. This is the story of Little Fawn and her elk-hide moccasin."

Many years ago, there was a man and a woman who loved each other very much. The man was called Stands Tall and the woman was called Raining Cloud. They lived the usual lives of Nimi'ipuu. And when Raining Cloud discovered that she was to have a child, the two couldn't have been happier.

So the months passed and it was time for Raining Cloud to have her child. She gave birth to a daughter they called Little Fawn. But during childbirth, something went wrong, and Raining Cloud died, leaving her only child in the care of Stands Tall.

Stands Tall knew his daughter would die without a mother's care, so he went to the tribe's chief, begging them to let him remarry.

"If I do not, my child will die!" Stands Tall cried.

The chief agreed with him. So a few days later, Stands Tall was remarried to a woman called Jumping Deer. Jumping Deer also had just given birth to two twin girls she called Sparrow Wing and Rabbit. Their father had been taken captive in a raid and was never heard from again.

So the family lived together and Jumping Deer took in Little Fawn as her own. A few years passed and something tragic happened. There was a raid on the village, and Stands Tall died

along with many other of the warriors.

Driven by grief and anger of the loss of her husband, Jumping Deer's heart twisted with hate and anger. She began treating Little Fawn poorly, forcing her to do everything around the tepee. So, Little Fawn, the poor child, lost not only her loving father, but she also lost her freedom.

More years passed until the child discovered herself as a beautiful, caring young woman. Her eyes were large and round, with the softest shade of brown. Her body was smaller than the others; it looked like the smallest gust of wind could blow her away. Though she was small, her arms and legs were strong from all of the hard work she had to do.

Every day Little Fawn would wake up at the crack of dawn. She would gather firewood, cook the salmon, gather the roots and berries, make camas cakes, and skin the hides. Every afternoon Little Fawn would fix her step mother's dresses and moccasins, and decorate them with elk teeth and porcupine quills. When evening came, she would again make the fire and cook the meal. After that, Little Fawn would clear away the fire logs and set out the sleeping mats for her step mother and stepsisters. Little Fawn worked so hard every day, that when she went to bed every night, she would say her nightly prayer to Hanyaw'at, and she would be asleep before her head hit the mat.

One day, after some of the Nimi'ipuu villages gathered together to trade at the base of the Bitterroot Mountains, there was a rumor going around the Indians. Little Fawn's best friend, Bird Riding the Wind, came to her tepee one afternoon. Little Fawn was busy scraping the fat off an elk hide.

"Little Fawn! Little Fawn, guess what I just heard!"

"Not now!" Little Fawn snapped. "I have to get this hide done before Jumping Deer throws a fit again. I swear, that woman was about to shoot me with an arrow because I was late getting the fire ready yesterday."

Bird Riding the Wind ignored her.

"I just heard that one of the other tribe's chief is holding a courtship dance for his son."

Little Fawn looked up from her work.

"A courtship dance? For who?"

"The chief's called Running Fist. His son's called Eagle's Talon." Little Fawn sat back on the ground, leaving her scraper on the hide. *Eagle's Talon*, she thought to herself, *I wonder what he looks like.*

Just then, Jumping Deer emerged from the tepee with her daughters on her heels. All three wore long tan elk hide dresses, with beads decorated on the front. Their hair was pulled back into two long braids that came down to their waists. Sparrow Wing and Rabbit each held a dress in their arms. Jumping Deer turned to Bird Riding the Wind. "I think it's time for you to go help the hunters. I heard they need some assistance with their hunt." Bird Riding the Wind turned and ran off. Jumping Deer looked down at Little Fawn.

"Chief Running Fist has invited our tribe to the courtship dance. The girls will need their dresses decorated. Once you're done helping them get ready, you can go back to your chores. Now get to it!" Sparrow Wing and Rabbit dumped their dresses in Little Fawn's lap and walked away snickering.

Little Fawn sighed. She deeply wished she could go the dance. She picked up the dresses and carried them inside the tepee. She pulled out a parfleche, and set to work. Inside were multiple colored beads, elk teeth, and thread with a bone needle. For the next hour, Little Fawn worked hard, sewing and tying the beads and teeth into a colorful pattern on both the dresses.

Once she was done, she went outside to find Jumping Deer, Rabbit, and Sparrow Wing redoing their hair. Jumping Deer had untied the girls' braids and were re-braiding them while adding feathers in their hair.

"Jumping Deer, I finished the dresses," Little Fawn addressed her stepmother. Jumping

Deer took the dresses from her and held them up to her daughters, nodding her approval.

“Very nice Little Fawn. Now, get back to your chores. The girls and I will need some dinner before we leave tonight. I think you can get some salmon from the fishers, and I think there’s some camas cakes left inside.”

Little Fawn didn’t move. She shuffled her feet in the dirt before asking, “Jumping Deer, you said that the whole tribe was invited to go to the dance. May I go as well?”

Jumping Deer looked at Little Fawn with a strange look in her eyes. She hesitated before nodding.

“You may go only if you hurry up with that hide, make the dinner, and get your dress ready. We will leave when the sun hits the mountains.”

Little Fawn turned and ran back to the unfinished hide. She scraped the hide as quickly as she could while ignoring the pain that was running through her shoulders and arms. Once she was done, she pulled the tacks out of the hide and brought it inside the tepee and set it down by the fire. Then she pulled out a hand full of camas cakes and left them on one of the tule mats. She quickly left again to find a fisher to get salmon.

When she arrived home again, she sliced up the fish and stuck it onto a wooden stake and set it over the fire to cook. While she waited for the fish to finish, she pulled out her best dress from one of her baskets. It was a simple dress with no beads on it. Little Fawn again worked hard sewing beads onto the dress to make it fashionable. By then the fish was done, so she pulled it from the fire, and gently laid it out on a dinner mat.

She carried the fish and the camas cakes outside and set them down by her stepmother and sisters. The three ate quickly as Little Fawn disappeared back inside, pulled off her work dress, and slipped into her beaded dress. She quickly redid her hair and wove a few feathers into her hair.

When Little Fawn was ready, she went back outside to find the sun barely beginning to set. The sky was a bright pink and orange. Little Fawn went to where her stepmother and stepsisters were gathering with other women and girls of the village. Jumping Deer watched as she approached with a small smile on her lips.

“Well, well, you made it after all. It’s just too bad you won’t be able to go.”

Little Fawn froze in shock.

“What do you mean? I finished all of my chores and I have my dress ready.” Jumping Deer suddenly threw something at her. Little Fawn caught it in her arms. She recognized it at once; it was the hide she had finished scraping that day. She opened it up to find several slashes through the hide, making it completely worthless. Little Fawn turned back the Jumping Deer with tears in her eyes.

“I didn’t do this! I scraped everything off of it and put it inside. I didn’t even cut it!”

“I don’t care who sliced it Little Fawn! It was your responsibility to make sure it was fine enough to make into a dress! But you neglected your job so you must be punished. You will not be going to the dance and that’s final!”

Little Fawn stood back as the women slowly began walking away toward the center of the gathering. Only Rabbit and Sparrow Wing stayed behind. Rabbit came over to Little Fawn.

“Poor Little Fawn, did she think she could go to the dance? Not after having someone break into our tepee and cut up the hide.”

“You cut it up, didn’t you? You were furious that I was allowed to go so you ruined my chances!” Little Fawn gasped. Rabbit shrugged her shoulders.

“Maybe I did, maybe I didn’t. But it doesn’t matter though, because you don’t get to go. Come on Sparrow Wing, we’re going to be late.” Rabbit went to her sister and pulled her arm, and followed the others. Sparrow Wing glanced over her shoulder at Little Fawn with a look of sadness burning in her eyes.

Little Fawn waited until the women disappeared from view before turning and running for the forest. She cried as she ran, ignoring the branches that ripped at her dress. She finally came to a small clearing bathed in moonlight and collapsed. She pulled her knees to her chest and sobbed.

It isn't fair! Little Fawn thought miserably to herself. *I do all of the work around here and I don't even get to go to the dance!* *Oh, I wish I could go!* Little Fawn sat there for a few moments, when suddenly Little Fawn heard something moving in the trees behind her. She jumped to her feet and looked around. Little Fawn froze as she saw the creature push its way into the clearing.

It was a massive grizzly bear, with dark brown fur and long sharp claws. Its paws were huge, nearly twice the size of her hands put together. The grizzly shook its gigantic head, its beady black eyes locked on Little Fawn.

Little Fawn stood stiff with fear pounding in her chest. She was too scared to run away, or even scream for help. She stood still as the bear slowly padded forward. And then, it spoke.

"Greetings Little Fawn. I am Grizzly. I have come to help you."

Little Fawn gasped. "Are you my wéeyekin?"

Grizzly nodded. "Yes, I am your guardian spirit. I have to help you. You wish to go to the courtship dance, so I will help you get there." Joy and excitement stirred in Little Fawn's chest. But as she looked down at her torn up dress and mud covered moccasins, those feelings died.

"But Grizzly, I can't go looking like this. And I don't have time to make another dress." Grizzly looked over her dress before nodding his head.

"I can change that." He waved a front paw over Little Fawn's dress. Instantly it changed.

Little Fawn's new dress was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. The dress was made of the finest elk hide ever; the inside was smooth and soft. Yellow, green, and blue beads were sewn onto the front in a bright, colorful pattern. White elk teeth and long porcupine quills were also sewn on. The sleeves came down to Little Fawn's wrists, and the end came down close to her ankles. The ends of the sleeves and the dress were cut into thin long strips. Little Fawn's old moccasins were gone, and were replaced with soft, fur lined moccasins made of elk. There was a swirl pattern sewn on with beads.

Her hair was tied into two long even braids with feathers and beads woven into them. Her face was now clean, with a strip of red face paint covering her eyes. Under her eyes were spots of blue paint in the form of an upside down triangle. As Little Fawn looked down at her new dress, she had never felt this happy before in her life. She ran over to Grizzly and threw her arms around his thick neck.

"Qe'ci'yew'yew! Thank you! Thank you so much Grizzly! The dress is beautiful!" Little Fawn stepped back. Grizzly dipped his head at her.

"You're very welcome Little Fawn. Now, climb onto my back. I shall get you to the courtship dance in a moment's notice." Little Fawn climbed on the back of the great bear. Grizzly took off in a run through the trees, his paws making no sound as they made contact with the ground. At the edge of the circle of tepees, Little Fawn slid off Grizzly's back, and headed for the other people that were gathered around a huge, roaring fire.

Many people were sitting around the fire, talking excitedly to each other. The other women wore long dresses decorated with teeth. Their faces were painted with bright colors. Little Fawn spotted Rabbit and Sparrow Wing sitting beside Jumping Deer. Little Fawn headed to the other side of the fire and took her place by a tall, well-muscled man. The man stared at her in awe as she gracefully sat herself down.

By the look of his face, he was not that much older than Little Fawn. The man wore no shirt, but was wearing long leggings decorated with beads. His skin was darker than others, and his body was long. The man's hair was pulled to the side and braided. Little Fawn gave a small nod and turned back to the fire.

Suddenly, the beats of drums echoed in the air as men and women gathered into a circle. Little Fawn gasped as the man beside her grabbed her hands and pulled her over to the circle. He flashed a bright smile at her and stood opposite of her. The women and girls formed a circle with their backs to the fire, with the men and boys facing opposite of them. Each man held a long willow stick in his hand. Both began dancing, moving and stamping their feet in beat of the drum.

Little Fawn felt excitement as she stepped her feet down to the beat along with the other women, their bodies moving in the same motions, moving perfectly together. Little Fawn watched as the beat suddenly quickened, and the two groups moved closer together. The women beside her stood still as a man moved in front of her, placing his stick on her shoulder. The two stood still for a moment before the woman moved over and the man took his place beside her, the two now moving together as a couple. This happened a few more times with the other women around Little Fawn.

Little Fawn blushed when she noticed that the man kept his eyes on her. He ignored the other smiling girls around him. Then in an instant the man was standing in front of Little Fawn. Their eyes met each other, a smile growing on the man's face.

Little Fawn's insides jumped as the man placed his stick on her shoulder. Little Fawn felt as if no time passed as the two stared at each other. The two said nothing, for nothing needed to be spoken. Little Fawn knew that something was growing between them.

At last she stepped aside, allowing the man to come dance beside her. The man smiled brightly, as he took her hands in his and began to dance with each other. Their bodies moved perfectly together, the two becoming one as their feet stepped together to the drums' beat.

The dance continued long into the night. Before Little Fawn knew it, dawn was approaching. Little Fawn pulled the man over to one of the tepees.

"I have to go," she quickly told him. She tried to leave but the man grabbed her hand.

"You can't leave yet! We haven't even given each other our names. I am Eagle's Talon."

"Eagle's Talon? Running Fist's son?" Little Fawn gasped. Eagle's Talon nodded his head.

"What is your name?"

"My name is—"

"Eagle's Talon, there's someone I want you to meet!" A voice broke Little Fawn off. She peeked around Eagle's Talon and saw another man walking over to them, with his hand wrapped around a girl's hand, pulling her over with him. The girl was Sparrow Wing!

Little Fawn turned and ran toward the trees. She pushed her way through the long hanging branches and tripped in the mud. She fell down to the ground, cold sticky mud splattering all over her face and her dress. Little Fawn pushed herself up and ran when she heard footsteps approaching. As she ran, her right moccasin slipped from her foot and landed behind her.

She kept running, knowing she couldn't go back for her moccasin. She hid among the trees as suddenly Eagle's Talon and the man who was with Sparrow Wing emerged from the trees. Eagle's Talon sighed as he picked up the moccasin.

Little Fawn slipped away and ran back to her tepee. She quickly changed back into her work dress and waited for Jumping Deer and the others to arrive. She didn't have to wait long. Sparrow Wing was bouncing around excitedly, talking about the young man she had danced with. Rabbit pushed her way inside and disappeared. Jumping Deer went over to Little Fawn.

"I can see that the tepee didn't burn down. At least you learned a lesson. Now, go start the fire and cook some breakfast. Eagle's Talon will be coming here soon."

"I'm sorry? Eagle's Talon? Who is he?" Little Fawn played dumbly.

Jumping Deer rolled her eyes. "He is Running Fist's son. Apparently he danced with some mysterious woman last night and is trying to find her with this moccasin he found. Rumor has it that whoever fits the moccasin gets to marry him."

Little Fawn bit her tongue to keep herself from yelling with joy. As Jumping Deer went inside, Little Fawn continued with her chores. She cooked camas cakes for breakfast and gathered a large basket full of berries.

Later that day, a stranger came to the tepee. Little Fawn was carrying back firewood when the stranger approached her. She instantly recognized him as the man who was dancing with Sparrow Wing. The man smiled.

“Hello! I am Light on the Water. I have come to announce that Eagle’s Talon would like to have every woman in this village to try on the moccasin he found.”

Rabbit, Sparrow Wing, and Jumping Deer came running out of the tepee as Eagle’s Talon arrived on horseback. He wore a long sleeved hide shirt with the same pants he wore the night before. In one hand, he held Little Fawn’s moccasin.

Rabbit ran over and snatched the moccasin from his hand, and tried to shove it on her foot. But her foot was too long. Sparrow Wing didn’t try it on, for she was talking quietly with Light on the Water. When Eagle’s Talon saw that the moccasin didn’t fit Rabbit, he turned to Little Fawn.

“Would you like to try it on?”

“She absolutely cannot!” Jumping Deer cried. “She was here the entire night! It was Rabbit you had danced with, not this filthy little slave.”

Little Fawn was angry.

“Why can’t I try it on?” She snatched the moccasin from Rabbit and stepped back. Rabbit and Jumping Deer were furious. Eagle’s Talon jumped down from his horse and came over to Little Fawn.

“Please, try it on. I just have to know.”

Little Fawn smiled as she pulled off her dirty, mud covered moccasin, and slipped on her dancing shoe. The little elk hide moccasin slipped on perfectly. Eagle’s Talon gasped. Suddenly, Grizzly appeared beside the two. He waved his paw over Little Fawn’s head and evaporated into thin air. Her dress morphed into her dancing dress, and on her foot was the other elk hide moccasin.

Eagle’s Talon took Little Fawn in his arms and whisked her onto his horse. The two rode off as cries of anger and protest came from Rabbit and Jumping Deer. The two came to Eagle’s Talon’s tribe, where Running Fist was waiting.

It was less than a day before a marriage ceremony was held for Eagle’s Talon and Little Fawn and the two became husband and wife. They lived a long life together, watching as their son grew and eventually got married and started a family, and the two lived happily for many years, even until this day.

“Wait!” one child cried out. “That can’t be the end! What happened to Jumping Deer and Rabbit? And Sparrow Wing and Light on the Water?”

Story Teller chuckled. “Jumping Deer and Rabbit were so furious; they left their tribe and joined another, hoping to find Rabbit a husband. They were never heard from again. And as for Sparrow Wing and Light on the Water, they too were married, and had many children of their own. Any more questions?”

The same child raised her hand again.

“What happened to Eagle’s Talon and Little Fawn? Did they just grow old and die?”

“Oh no my dear. They are still alive. They still live with Eagle’s Talon’s tribe, so we can only see them when all of the villages gather together.” Story Teller glanced outside the tepee. “And that, my children, is the story of the little elk-hide moccasin. Now, run off, I’m sure you have chores to do.”

The children wrapped themselves in their robes again and pushed their way outside. But Singing Wind and her brother Bucking Horse waited for a moment before two other people pushed their way inside the tepee. One was a man, the other a woman. Both were elders like Story Teller. They patted the children on the head.

“Run along,” the man said to them, “your father is looking for you.” Singing Wind and her brother ran outside. Story Teller turned to the woman.

“Singing Wind looks just like you. I keep forgetting she’s your granddaughter. When I see her, I think of you as a child.” The woman blushed as the man patted her shoulder.

“Story Teller, we have to get back to our tepee. We left some salmon on the fire. Would you like some?”

Story Teller shook her head.

“I’ll come by later to get some. You two go ahead.”

The woman shrugged her shoulders.

“We’ll see you at sun high then,” she said to Story Teller.

Story Teller waved good bye.

“I’ll see you and Eagle’s Talon later. Bye Little Fawn!”

“Bye Sparrow Wing!” Little Fawn called over her shoulder as she walked outside, with Eagle’s Talon right behind her.