It was a hot summer in the foothills of the Absaroka Mountains. A forest of pine trees with its green canopy and soft carpet of dried pine needles surrounded the Crow village, home to Snow Woman and her family. A nearby stream was running low but steady, with small fish hiding beneath fallen trees or among the rocks in pools scattered along its course.

Snow Woman sat in the shade of an old pine tree near one of the pools nursing her daughter, Laughing Waters. The young wolf, Night Walker, was off somewhere with Night Buffalo, her husband.

He wanted to work with the young wolf and see if it can be trained to become a dependable hunting companion. This past winter had been especially severe. A shortage of game in their traditional hunting areas meant several of the elderly tribal members left the village on cold winter nights to journey to the land of the Great Spirit. Scouting for new places farther into the forest and at higher elevations for new hunting grounds was critical. In the event of another hard winter, it would be time to move the village, a significant undertaking.

Snow Woman was daydreaming as she listened to the bubbling stream when she was startled by a sharp pain in her right nipple. Looking at Laughing Waters as she suckled, Snow Woman said, “As your small teeth appear, you become painful to feed. Soon you will be eating other food.”

Laughing Waters responded to her voice by yawning and stretching before releasing a loud belch, followed by a spell of giggling.

“You are a happy child,” Snow Woman said as she held her up and looked her over. “Soon, I must put fresh milkweed to catch your waste.”

Focused upon her child, she did not notice the approach of Small Bear, the village arrow maker. She became aware of his presence when he started yelling and swinging his arms as if attacking them where they sat. Snow Woman placed Laughing Waters to her side and pulled a razor-sharp knife from her belt.

She pointed the knife at Small Bear and stood between him and Laughing Waters. He ignored her and kept approaching, wildly flailing his arms and rapidly turning his head from side to side. Although she told him to stop and threatened him with her knife, he kept approaching in this strange manner. It was almost as if he neither heard nor saw her.

Before she had to use her knife, convulsions shook his body, and he fell to the ground. Thrashing about as he lay there, rigid as a fallen tree, these men talked among themselves and showed some signs of fear. They believed evil spirits possessed him. Not wanting to risk the evil spirits entering their bodies as well, several of them shook their heads and stepped away from him.

Snow Woman watched their actions and shook her head. She had seen this sort of behavior before. It was shown by a man who had been bitten by a sick animal. Taking a closer look at Small Bear, she saw a poorly healed wound on his badly swollen left leg.
Holding Laughing Waters against her breast, Snow Woman chastised the warriors. “Why do you fear this sick man? These evil spirits can only enter your body through an animal bite. Cover his face and take him to the lodge of Gray Fox.”

Two Crows was one of the men who had backed away. He was upset that a woman had said something about it. He was even more upset that it was Snow Woman. She had once thrown him out of her lodge when he had offered to take her as his wife.

“Bah, woman,” he said. “Take your baby. Go and stay with the other women. This matter is for men.”

Just then, Night Buffalo joined the group. He overheard Two Crows as he came near. Taking a position beside Snow Woman, he took Laughing Waters from her arms without saying a word. He did, however, have a wide grin on his face as he looked at Two Crows and shook his head.

Snow Woman immediately walked over to Two Crows and stood toe to toe with him. She was a tall woman, and he was an average size male, so they were eye to eye. As she stood there, she did not look down toward the ground as she spoke.

“What does Two Crows speak to me in that manner so to regain the manhood I took from him two years ago? Does he forget the many scalps that hang on the pole outside my lodge? I may be a woman, but I am also a warrior who has counted coup and fought against the enemies of our tribe. Does Two Crows challenge my place as a warrior in this village?”

Two Crows knew she was a dangerous person and, in no way, a typical woman. He also knew he would win no honor by challenging her. If he lost, the shame would be great. If he won, no one would think it any great accomplishment, and Night Buffalo would become his enemy.

It was a lousy situation for Two Crows, and he looked around, desperately trying to find a solution that would not involve losing face. He was about to say something as a retort when Chief White Owl arrived, taking charge of the situation.

Ignoring the confrontation taking place, he ordered four of the braves to carry Small Bear to Gray Fox’s healing lodge. As the village medicine man, he would know how to drive the evil spirits from Small Bear.

Although this sort of attack by evil spirits was rare, it had happened several times in the history of the tribe. Usually, the victim died a painful death. Still, occasionally the spirits were driven from the body, and a complete recovery ensued.

By now, a crowd had gathered and followed the group to Gray Fox’s lodge. When they arrived, Gray Fox was waiting for them in front of his tepee. When they lay the moaning man upon the ground, Gray Fox spent a few minutes examining him, paying close attention to his swollen leg.

Gray Fox asked the crowd, “Did anyone see Small Bear get bitten by an animal?”

Slow Woman, Small Bear’s wife, pushed through the crowd and knelt by his side. Before she could take his head and cradle it, she was pulled aside by Gray Fox, who said, “Small Bear possessed by evil spirits. He not know you. If he bites you, some of those evil spirits will enter your body as well.”

As Gray Fox sat her on the ground a short distance away from Small Bear, Slow Woman wiped at a tear on her cheek and said, “On the night of the full moon, Small Bear went to harvest
willow branches for his arrow shafts. It is then that the willows produce the finest wood. As he was cutting them, a skunk was hiding beneath one of the trees and bit him on the leg.”

“Then what did Small Bear do?” Gray Fox asked.
“he kill the skunk with his knife and took the rest of the willows he needed,” she replied.
“Skunk is powerful totem. Its spirit is angry at Small Bear and has placed evil spirits inside his body through the bite,” Gray Fox told the crowd. Then he asked Slow Woman another question. “What happen to Small Bear since full moon?”

“Small Bear come back to lodge, and I put moss on the wound. There was little blood, and next day he was fine and started making arrows. Willow branches were no good. Each would bend and could not be made straight. His leg start to bother him, and after several nights, it turn red and got large. He no can sleep. When we decide to come to Gray Fox, his leg get better. Today, it look very bad, and when I prepare breakfast, he run from lodge. He go into forest.”

Gray Fox thought for a moment and went into his tepee. He came back out wearing a distinctive headdress and carrying two gourd rattles. The rattles held small, specially selected pebbles. He slowly walked around Small Bear while shaking the rattles and chanting a sacred song.

After several minutes of chanting, he told the crowd some of what had to be done to eject the evil spirits from Small Bear’s body. Afterward, he went on a search through the village for some particular objects.

While Gray Fox was searching, a group of men laid out a pit. It was ten feet long and two feet deep. After digging it, they placed two large poles in the ground at each end. Each pair of poles had a crossbar. The women and boys gathered wood to fill the pit. Whenever they lit the fire, the flames would reach the height of the crossbars on the poles.

Meanwhile, Gray Wolf was not having any luck finding what he needed. After thoroughly searching the village, he called for Night Buffalo.

When he came, Gray Fox said, “We have maybe a half-moon to drive the evil spirits from the body of Small Bear. We cannot do this without the new skin of a buffalo. There is none in the village. The Sioux and Cheyenne keep us from the buffalo herds. No one from this village has killed a buffalo for many moons. You have strong medicine. You go and kill buffalo and bring back skin. I can make evil spirits leave Small Bear but only with the aid of such a thing.”

Night Buffalo knew he would have to move fast and be very lucky if he was to go into Sioux country, kill a buffalo, and return with the skin in less than two weeks. He must leave the mountains and go out onto the plains where the buffalo lived and find a small herd. Then he would have to avoid any hunting parties of the Sioux and Cheyenne. He was the blood brother of a Cheyenne Dog Soldier and still carried his gift of a beaded belt. Those things would only help if he met with Cheyenne, not Sioux.

He knew he had to make this hunt alone. There wasn’t any pony in the tribal herd that could keep up with Nightshade. Snow Woman would have stayed close, but their second child was starting to show and would slow her down. Besides, a group traveling together was more likely to attract attention than a lone person.
He could only carry a single rifle since traveling light was necessary. He decided to take
the Sharps since its superior range was more important than the repetitive firing of the Henry.
Hopefully, he wouldn’t have to shoot it out with a war party.

As he gathered what he needed, Snow Woman came into their lodge carrying Laughing
Waters. Taking Laughing Waters and hugging her, he said, “I knew you would see me off.”

He set Laughing Waters on a fur and took Snow Woman into his arms. He said, “I wish
you were going with me, but I know I must do this myself. If any of the other braves went with
me, they would be hard-pressed to keep up. Besides, a group will attract more attention than just
one person. I will return as soon as I can.”

He kissed her and playfully squeezed one of her buttocks before picking up his
saddlebags and rifle. As he turned to go out of the tepee, she grabbed his arm and gave him a
hard kiss. Then, stepping back and striking a pose that always got his attention, she said, “I will
have your dinner ready when you come back.”

He almost dropped his gear but caught himself and quickly left. Nightshade was restless.
He hadn’t been on a good ride for some time and was raring to go. It was almost as if he had
some sort of a sixth sense about these things.

They left the village at a steady trot and maintained that pace whenever possible. Some of
the trails were wide and smooth, while others were little more than game trails with snags and
potholes. Nightshade was not intimidated by any surface and never came close to having an
accident.

It was the evening of their third day of travel that he camped at the southern end of the
Bighorn Mountains. The Great Plains were in view, and they would be hunting buffalo
tomorrow. Hopefully, a herd would be nearby. As night descended, he scanned the horizon for
any sign of others upon the plain. It looked clear.

The next morning, he fed a nice portion of grain to Nightshade before moving out onto
the plains. The grain was one reason Nightshade could outrun any pony. He would go to the
nearest trading post from time to time and purchase a sack or two. There he was known as James
Washington, formerly of the Union Army. If the traders knew anything about his life among the
Crow, they never mentioned it.

Ever on the alert for prairie dog colonies, he pushed Nightshade into a canter as they
searched for buffalo. This hunt brought back memories of his days with John Carter. They had
hunted buffalo and hauled freight together in the Nebraska and Dakota Territories for several
years. He had learned a few tricks and would put them to use once again.

The day was ending when he saw a dust cloud off to the east and heading his way. When
he felt the ground tremble, he knew a buffalo stampede was approaching. It appeared to be
trending slightly south of where he sat upon Nightshade.

Locating a high point out of their path, he secured Nightshade on the reverse side of the
slope and crouched behind some scrawny bushes at its top. Then he waited for the buffalo to run
past. It was a large herd and took nearly an hour until the tail end approached.

There were Cheyenne among the buffalo at the end of the herd. They were shooting
arrows to kill individual animals. A trail of dead and injured buffalos marked their passage. It
always amazed Night Buffalo as to how these hunters could control their ponies with their legs
and use both hands to fire arrows into the spines of the buffalos. It was easy to see why a good hunting pony was such a valuable animal.

It was just a short time until dark. The Cheyenne would not be able to clean and butcher very many buffalos during the night. Perhaps he would be able to skin one and get away before they realized he was even in the area. With a good head start, Nightshade would get him back into the mountains before anyone could catch them.

It was a short time before the hunters rode back into view. There were about twenty of them, and they quickly rode out of sight back along the trail of the herd. The herd itself was long gone and appeared as a small patch of dust in the opposite direction. The animals would probably continue running for at least another full day.

Night Buffalo noted the position of a dead buffalo within easy reach. Then he sat back and waited for the night to settle in. A quarter moon would provide some light for his project but not enough to be a danger. Until it was overhead, he planned to be long gone. As he waited, he saw a glow behind a nearby hill and heard drumming and singing. The Cheyenne were celebrating a successful hunt. It was an excellent time to get to work, especially since a few Cheyenne might drift by later to chase off scavengers.

He quickly reached the buffalo. It was an old bull and would provide a full, dark hide. It would be cumbersome when green, but Nightshade could handle it. He often carried Snow Woman when they rode double. It took him about an hour to remove the hide. Rolling it up, he secured it to the back of his saddle. He left his skinning knife lay on the buffalo to serve as a trade for the hide. He tied a bright ribbon to its shaft.

Walking Nightshade along the trail taken by the herd, he hoped to mask his tracks. He had also brought some furs along, and he had secured them over his hooves to help. As the moon climbed higher in the sky, he was able to see well enough to remove the furs and mount Nightshade. He continued following the herd to the south for another hour before turning west and moving in a broad arc back toward the Bighorns.

At sunrise, he stopped to rest among some cottonwoods near a small spring. He had traveled all night, and Nightshade needed a short rest. He gave him a handful of grain and let him drink a little water. When he resumed riding, they would be moving fast and not stop again until near nightfall. That should bring them to the base of the mountains and just a few days from home. He was confident that his tracks would be nearly impossible to follow, and his head start should mean that he is in the clear.

After resting for a little over an hour, he mounted and rode directly toward the distant mountains. The horizon was clear of any signs of life, and he made good time. Nightshade was moving along at a steady pace, showing no signs of any fatigue.

As he approached his campsite of several days ago, a Cheyenne warrior stepped into view from behind some rocks adjacent to the trail. Night Buffalo pulled up and reached for his Sharps as he prepared to dismount and move into cover. He stopped when the warrior raised his hand in greeting. The Cheyenne looked familiar but was too far away to make out any details.

Pushing the Sharps back into its sheath, he raised his hand to return the greeting of the warrior. Then, riding slowly forward, he scanned the surroundings for the possibility of an ambush. As soon as he got close enough to make out some details of the Cheyenne, he recognized him as Laughing Wolf, the dog soldier who was also his blood brother.
Dismounting in front of him, Night Buffalo reached out, and they clasped arms. “Why my blood brother take skin of buffalo?” Laughing Wolf asked.

“It is needed to save the life of a man in my village. I left a good knife in trade and took no meat,” Night Buffalo replied.

“I know it was you who did this when I see the knife. The trade is fair. I come here to see you.”

“How did you know it was me?”

“The knife had the markings of a warrior who is a Crow but was not born a Crow. The tracks of his horse were those of a special horse, not a pony. I knew it must be my blood brother.”

“I suppose you knew how I would return to the mountains, so you came here and waited.”

“I know where you live with your strong woman among the Crow. This is the best trail back to your village, and I found the sign of your camp from three nights ago.”

“Will you spend the night here with me? We can share stories from the last time we were together.”

“I brought fresh buffalo meat for us to feast upon. Then I have many things to share with you, my brother.”

“I will start a fire, and we will share a good meal. In the morning, I will continue home.”

“I will also go back to my hunting party. We have had a good hunt, and there is much meat to prepare for the journey back to my village.”

Neither of them got any sleep as they visited long into the night, their bellies stuffed with buffalo meat. When they parted in the morning, Night Buffalo had regained his skinning knife, and Laughing Wolf held a Sharps rifle across the back of his pony.

Night Buffalo hadn’t fired the Sharps in a year and could always get another. His biggest problem would be explaining to Snow Woman why he gave it away to a Cheyenne Dog Soldier. He knew he did the right thing as he watched Laughing Wolf proudly ride away. They had promised to meet here again before the snows came to the plains. Laughing Wolf would leave a sign for him where he would find it. He’d be sure to bring a bag of cartridges for the Sharps.

Turning Nightshade toward the northwest, Night Buffalo resumed his journey. He was off the plains but had to stay alert since Sioux sometimes roamed through this region. He had given up his long-range weapon but still had his Army Colt revolver. Its .44 caliber lead slug could do a lot of damage, but only at close range.

He was moving fast and covering a lot of ground. He figured another two full days of travel if he had no problems.

It took closer to three days until he rode into the village. Nightshade was a lot less energetic than when they had left about a week ago. Night Buffalo wanted to give the hide to Gray Fox and sleep for a week. As he rode into the village, it seemed as if everyone wanted to see him. The commotion they created alerted Gray Fox, and he was waiting outside his lodge as Night Buffalo rode up to it.

Night Buffalo dismounted and asked Gray Fox, “How is Small Bear? Did I return in time?”
“Gray Fox replied, “He is very bad. The evil spirits are strong and are destroying him from the inside.”

“Here is the fresh buffalo skin,” Night Buffalo said, as he removed it from Nightshade’s back and handed it to Gray Fox.

Taking the skin, Gray Fox went back inside his lodge. In a few moments, he came back outside and said, “The medicine of the buffalo is strong within this skin. Its spirit has not yet left it.”

He signaled four of the men standing outside the tepee to come inside where they would help with the preparations for the ceremony.

Night Buffalo was very tired but also curious. He walked Nightshade to his own lodge where Snow Woman stood, waiting. He removed Nightshade’s bridle and saddle and slapped him lightly on the rump. The stallion took off to find grazing near the rest of the herd. Then he put his arm around Snow Woman, and the fatigue vanished. Night Buffalo decided he did not need to see this part of the ceremony, and they went into their tepee together.

The four braves who entered Gray Fox’s tepee saw Small Bear hallucinating and thrashing around on its floor. There was a white foam at the sides of his mouth. Small Bear’s arms were secured to his sides, and his feet were tied together. He was laying alongside the buffalo skin.

The men placed him onto the skin and then rolled him tightly into it, quickly sewing it shut except for an air hole near his head. They attached two strong cords at each end and carried him out of the tepee to the fire pit that had been prepared a week earlier.

The men tied the cords to the crossbars on the poles. Small Bear hung from those cords over the firewood in the pit. Gray Fox lit the wood, and the whole pile roared into flame. When it started licking at the buffalo skin, the four men began swinging it back and forth until it started smoking. Then they rotated it and kept it turning back and forth through the flames. Other men kept the fire high and hot.

They kept Small Bear swinging and turning in his buffalo skin cocoon until it was severely charred and mostly turned into cinders.

When Gray Fox gave the signal, they took Small Bear from the fire. He was burned and nearly suffocated. There was little of the buffalo skin left to remove, but they got him free of it and immediately threw him into a pool of water.

Small Bear sputtered and made some weak movements. He was still alive. When they pulled him from the water, his eyes were bright, and his body was red from the baking he had just gone through. There were no significant burns from the fire, thanks to the moisture in the fresh buffalo skin. He had just gone through the equivalent of an extreme steam bath.

Gray Fox studied him for a moment and said, “The evil spirits are gone from his body. He must be watched closely for one full moon to be certain they do not return.”

Night Buffalo had watched the end of the ceremony even though he was almost asleep on his feet. Snow Woman had stayed away to be sure the evil spirits did not enter Laughing Waters when they left Small Bear.

Slow Woman stopped Night Buffalo as he headed back toward his tepee. She handed him a quiver of very ornate arrows and said, “Thank you for giving me back my husband. Without
the medicine of the buffalo, I would have lost him. These are special arrows he made for me, and
the signs I have painted upon them will guide them in flight.”

He accepted the gift and continued home where Snow Woman waited with the promised
dinner. Unfortunately, he collapsed upon entering the lodge and fell immediately asleep. “Oh,
well,” she thought. “I will keep it for tomorrow.”

She hung the quiver of arrows on a peg and wondered where the Sharps rifle had gotten
to. Tomorrow he would have his promised meal, and they would talk of his journey. Tonight
they would sleep together, and all is well.