

The Mountain or the River

'Mammoth!' The Wiyot hunters pointed at the ground excitedly.

I hurried over to the giant footprints our men were huddling around. They were mammoth footprints indeed.

The chieftain studied the tracks carefully before looking up. 'Algar!'

'I'm right beside you, chief.' I knelt down next to him.

'Good.' My father traced the imprints with his fingers. 'Tell me, son, which way the mammal went.'

I pictured the toes of the beast, treading the soil with their heavy feet, trudging downward to the valleys.

'Downstream, chief.'

'Well done, son.' He looked at me fondly as I grinned awkwardly. 'It takes years and years of hunting experience to track mammoths but you, it's almost like you know what they think. I suppose you know why we're giving up the chase?' The chief stood up.

'The beast has a calf,' I answered respectfully. 'Wiyots do not harm the young.'

'Indeed. Most would have ignored the smaller steps the younger mammoth took and chased them down.' He nodded solemnly. 'But we must follow the rules left by the ancients, or be punished.'

I watched as our chieftain climbed up a nearby rock. True, it was disappointing to be tracking for the whole morning without any game, but it was a terrible crime to kill a calf, much worse to hunt its mother and leave it to starve.

'We're giving up chase. We'll hunt another beast,' the chief bellowed.

There were murmurs of agreement among other hunters. A few started to complain but the chief shut them down.

'Be damned those who still wish to hunt a calf's mother. May the gods rain fire down upon you and burn your cursed souls!'

As we were packing, I felt a looming presence approaching from afar.

'Hide! Tell the others to hide in the bushes!' I frantically warned the others and slipped between the grasses. The others caught on quickly and copied me.

Not long after, the vibrations of footsteps resonated with our heartbeats. I started to sweat in anticipation. The drops fell onto the earth and were absorbed thirstily by the soil beneath me.

A long shadow cast by its tall body; a long trunk armed with two curved tusks - it was another mammoth, alone and weary. The gods had awarded our mercy with a better, meatier beast that we must conquer to fulfill our needs.

The first arrow was released and it bounced off the beast's thick hide. More followed and the mammoth started to flee quickly despite its heavy weight.

'Chase!' the chief roared and we all followed suit, stomping after the beast running away at full speed.

I was given the task of flanking the beast. I clutched my spear tightly as I climbed up a tree, and saw the others chase the beast onto the path beneath me.

The beast was still running at full tilt. I held my spear over my shoulder, and waited for the mammoth to trample into plain sight.

There was some blood on the mammoth, but judging from its agility, our spears and arrows had failed to penetrate any vital organs. It kept dashing forward until a spear from the sky pierced its trunk.

The beast spasmed in pain as blood started to clog its trunk. It stopped struggling as more spears were thrown and stabbed into its body.

I leapt down and gently caressed the tusks of the beast. It was tradition for the hunter that landed the killing blow to perform the ritual.

'Walk free,' I murmured as the mammoth slowly closed its eyes.

'Mammoths are so weak!' one of the younger Wiyots laughed as he sat on one of the mammoth's outstretched legs. 'You hunters always make it a big deal.'

Young, ignorant - most hunters disrespected their prey until they learnt their lesson the hard way. We lived on the flesh of beasts, wore their skin and made tools out of their bones. We respected our prey as much as we depended on them.

Beasts hated humiliation above all. With an injured cry the dying mammoth got up on its feet and charged blindly at the jesting hunters.

There was nothing we could do. The mammoth was too strong in its dying breath and they were too close. The gods had given the mammoth the strength it needed to save its pride.

Its tusk was about to penetrate the shocked hunters as a lightning bolt suddenly clapped in the clear blue sky. The mighty beast lost all its strength and collapsed in front of the fleeing hunters.

There was silence after the thunder. The chief pulled me aside. 'This isn't supposed to happen. Algar, you know the beasts. What's wrong?'

‘Chief, the gods of the beasts are in trouble.’ I had felt something was wrong with the mammoth’s aura during its final moments. It was as though its power had been taken abruptly by force.

‘Wolves!’ We heard the panicked cry of the others.

‘Try to figure out what happened.’ The chief patted me on the shoulder. ‘I’m going to deal with the wolves.’

It was rather unusual, I thought, as I closed my eyes and then concentrated on tracking the beasts around us. Wolves usually sleep during the day and wouldn’t dare to compete with us for the meat we’d hunted.

My eyes jerked open when the hunters started yelling, ‘Algar!’, and I looked straight into the yellow irises of a wolf’s eyes.

There was only one wolf, and it was not after the mammoth meat we had just carved. It tugged me by my loincloth and flung me over the cliff into the valleys below.

It was after me.

My screams echoed around the valleys as I fell onto a branch. It snapped.

I continued falling through tree after tree, causing birds to frantically fly away as I crashed through branches and leaves. With a rib-splitting splash, I landed in water.

The coldness forced me to awaken from the stupor and I struggled. The amount of air left in my chest was pitiful, as I had gasped every time a branch had broken my fall.

I needed air. It was a welcome relief when I finally clawed my way to the surface and gulped lungfuls of moist air. I crawled onto the large rocks along the river bank, curling up like a wounded animal. This was where I cried myself to sleep.

When I woke up, I retched as the pain pulsing through my body intensified. The sun was already setting.

I did a check of myself and my surroundings. I was badly bruised all over, but no bones had been broken. For some reason, the gods had blessed my fall. I had lost my spear, but I still had my bone dagger tied to my waist, given to me by my father when I had come of age. He had told me it was wolf bone, and that it would cut through everything.

The river would provide water and food if I could hunt. Plenty of plants were growing along the bank and I plucked a flower off its stem, sniffing it hopefully for traces of sweetness. I sucked on the flower as I continued scouting the area.

It wasn't much, but the nectar helped me think. Animals would come for their daily drink soon. I needed a weapon to hunt with. Night would follow not long after. I had to make a fire to protect myself from the cold and predators. I started gathering materials for my bow and a fire.

I held my breath as a few deer approached the river for a drink, dipping their muzzles ever so slightly into the water. Ears raised and twitching, they were on high alert as they drank. I only had one chance with my featherless arrows.

One deer was standing sideways from where I was hiding, perfect for a one shot kill. I anchored my arrow and released it as the deer's muzzle dipped once more into the clear stream.

The other deer scattered frantically as they heard the sound of an arrow cutting through air, but the one I was targeting was too slow. The arrow pierced its delicate skin and went right through the heart. It fell after staggering a few steps.

'Walk free.' I knelt down and closed its eyes. I carried the deer back to my little camp set up in a shallow cave, away from the water.

I began to make the fire as the sun started dipping beneath the mountains. It was disheartening having to rub the wood in the damp air, which was getting colder and wetter around me by the minute.

Despite my upset stomach, I nibbled on a few pieces of the cooked meat and I slept deeply by the smoldering fire.

Packing up my few items, I continued moving upstream when the sun was up. I was panting with the exertion of walking uphill and carrying the deer, so I didn't hear the faint noises of a village - the excited screams of children playing and people chattering among each other. My head was still lowered when I bumped into a girl.

'Sorry!' - regretting my mistake, I immediately apologized. What if she tried to kill me?

Luckily for me, she didn't seem too offended. And she seemed to have understood what I had said.

'Wiyot?'

I nodded. 'I fell from the mountain.' I studied her clothing. The ornaments, body paint - she was a Wiyot girl after all.

'I'm trying to find a way back... hey!' I hadn't finished my sentence before she dragged me excitedly back to her people, yelling at the top of her lungs about my arrival.

'Everyone, we have a Wiyot from the mountains! He brought gifts!' She beamed at everyone, introducing me to the others, 'His name is...'

‘Algar,’ I said, before things got awkward.

‘Take him to the fire, Lushka.’ The others seemed to respect the girl who was dragging me.

The Wiyots by the river seemed as nice as those in my own village, I surmised, as I was led to a small gathering place where baskets of fruit were stashed, almost unseen in the mountains.

I was watching the Wiyots cutting up my deer and placing strips of meat on the fire when Lushka asked, ‘So, how’s life on the mountain?’

‘Plenty of dry wind and sunshine. We live mostly on meat.’ I picked up a berry and rolled it in my palm. It felt juicy and ripe.

‘Ooh, meat here is considered a rare delicacy,’ sighed Lushka enviously. ‘We mostly collect fruits and fish.’

‘Fish, what’s that?’

‘You don’t know? Oh here they are, the fishers are back!’ Lushka stood up and waved at half a dozen people, who were carrying baskets between them. I did the same, trying to be friendly.

Lushka picked up a glistening creature by the tail and said proudly, ‘This is a fish!’

I tried picking one up from the basket but they kept slipping from my fingers. I jumped back as a few fish flopped near my hand.

Despite the laughter from the others, I tried again and grabbed one tightly around the gills, just as Lushka instructed. It didn’t look very appetizing, but when I took the first bite of fish after spearing them over the fire, I practically drooled.

The flavor, while not as strong as meat, was rich. The fish was filled with oil, its flesh flaky and delicate. I was determined to have my fill when suddenly Lushka and the others, who found the deer to be equally enjoyable, stopped eating. They stood up respectfully and I followed suit.

The door to a distant cabin was opened and out came an old man with a hawk perched on his forearm. The hawk was immeasurably ancient. I could feel its astuteness and pride as it surveyed the huddle of people and locked its eyes on me.

‘Finally,’ the hawk screeched. I looked up in shock as I could understand the cry perfectly.

The old man tried to stop the hawk, but it ignored him and flew straight at me. I ducked but felt its talons around my shoulders. With a yelp I was grabbed and flown straight into a smoking cabin, where I was dropped onto the carpeted floor along with the fish still in my hand.

‘Look me in the eyes!’ the hawk screeched as I scrambled for the exit. The voice had such an authority that I simply turned and looked into its amber eyes, which guided me into another dimension.

My eyes were beginning to water as I stared at those fierce pupils with such concentration that I didn't notice the environment around me had changed.

I jumped as the hawk spoke again, its voice now magnified and strong. 'Aid us in battle, warrior. The demons have possessed the power of the mammoth and are attacking our nests upon the tower. If we lose our eggs, another pillar of the beasts will fall.'

I looked into the distance and saw the silhouette of altars upon a steep mountain. Beams of light could be seen clearly, shining upon the mountaintop despite the bright daylight. Then I noticed a bow hung on a tree nearby.

'Ah, the others have finished preparing your weapon. Use it against our foes.'

'There are no arrows,' I pointed out. The hawk looked at me with disdain.

I tried pulling at the bowstring, testing its strength, and releasing it. I was shocked to see three sharp quills soaring straight ahead and I heard a few unearthly cries of pain from far away.

So the spirit realm of beasts is under attack, I thought as I squinted at a cliff on the mountainside from afar. Nests of eggs gleamed brightly like beacons of light under the clouded sky. Yet a dull red color was seeping into the pure white clouds, invading their purity. Hundreds of birds were circling around, occasionally diving at enemies that I couldn't make out.

I felt a swipe at my side, and I instinctively rolled away from it. With a furious screech my companion pecked at my original position with its curved beak and I fired the bow at it. The arrows stopped in thin air and I was rewarded with the same strangled cry I heard from before.

'The demons you said... I can't see them? How am I supposed to shoot something that I can't see?'

'All the hawks are here to aid you. See through their eyes...' The hawk's voice grew fainter as it took flight and flew towards the altars on the cliff.

I closed my eyes as I tried to link my mind to the beasts around me - suddenly I saw. Abominations, wooly and long-trunked, were climbing the tower to reach the nests. The bone tooth necklaces they wore stood out distinctively against their blood red pelts as they climbed upon each other, trying to be the first to get their hands on the coveted eggs.

As we hurried towards the tall altars, I saw more and more of the destruction being visited upon this world. Torches lay in splinters on the ground, totems broken apart, and the demons were still clawing their way toward the towers, all wanting the prize for themselves and trampling on each other. Their uncooperative actions would allow the hawks to hold them off for only so long. More hawks were up circling the shrine, desperately fending off the demons that had slipped through their defences. Their

pecks and scratches couldn't nick the thick wooly hides of the demons and yet one swing from a demon's trunk would make the hawks screech in pain, and a shower of feathers fall.

The claws of a demon were about to puncture the first egg when I shot it right between the eyes. A few hawks carried me to the top as I kept firing upon the tower and arrows rained down on the demons. Countless fell down from the tower and slammed hard onto the ground, giving strangled cries and vanishing in a cloud of red mist.

'Allow me handle the rest of them,' I bellowed. The hawks stopped diving and looked quizzically at me. If the demons indeed took the strength from the mammoth, I would capitalize on their weakness.

I leapt down from the altar and a gust of wind caught me mid-air, cushioning my fall. I shot three demons from behind and they all turned their attention to me.

'Fight me!' I taunted, shooting arrows into their ranks. The demons fell for the taunt and charged. Two hawks pulled me out of harm's way as I whistled for them. The wooly monsters charged blindly against the wall and became dazed as they pummeled into each other. The demons stumbled blindly until their leader screamed a bestial spell.

With a mangled cry the demons merged their squashed bodies together and formed one giant mammoth of blood. It was intimidating, casting a huge red shadow upon the world as it readied itself to smash the altars and the eggs with its charge of rage.

I had been aiming for its trunk as it slowly assembled itself, and released the bowstring as soon as it started taking its new form. The creature barely had time to tug its trunk beneath its body before three arrows pierced clean through it.

My arrows had started out weak, as I lacked the muscles to fully draw the bow, my lack of strength being one thing to which my father had turned a blind eye because of my understanding of beasts. A strong gust of wind behind me blew the arrows forward. My avian allies circled the arrows as they travelled through the air, flapping their wings to give more power to the feathered quills.

The demonic beast quivered in pain and tugged its trunk beneath its body, trying to shield it from further harm, but the hawks were merciless.

I kept firing arrows for them to guide through the air. They looped around the demon's legs and pierced the blood red trunk now hidden by my many arrows. With its tail between its hind legs the demon gave a defeated cry and exploded, staining the sky with a red mist before returning to pure white again.

The fight was over, for now. The big hawk was ready to take me back to the Wiyot village when I asked, 'Can I take the bow with me?'

A voice from the sky answered, 'As much as we wish to show our gratitude, our powers would not reach the mortal realm. But every hawk you seek shall obey you, should you find the need.'

'He's awake!' I heard Lushka's voice say joyfully.

I pulled myself up from the carpet of beast skins and winced. My bruises from the fall had not healed and I had brought back the scratches I got from the world of beasts. I felt my side gingerly with one hand and found it bandaged with leaves.

'Lushka was worried sick about you. She couldn't wait until you were back to treat your wounds,' the old shaman said, a little sourly. 'Wish somebody had been caring for me when I went there.'

'Stop being childish,' the hawk snapped. The shaman fell silent and Lushka looked puzzled. Apparently she didn't understand what the hawk had said.

The hawk turned. 'How good are you with beasts? You understand them?'

'I was born... knowing what they say. I know if one's nearby, and its emotions. I can retrace everything they did by looking at their footprints.'

The hawk flapped its giant wings. 'Impressive... I must say, the wolf our gods sent retrieved you well. We're grateful for your timely arrival. We'll need your service as soon as we finish investigating the new influx of demons. Perhaps you noticed something unusual about the demons?'

I recalled my encounters with them. 'They stole the essence of mammoths, so they're protected with thick hides and wield brute strength. And they wore bone tooth necklaces...'

'Did you say bone tooth?' the shaman asked sharply. I nodded.

'Then they are demons summoned by the Utes,' he said darkly. 'Only humans who have great affinity with beasts may enter their world with permission, but the Utes have been using dark voodoo to summon demons, a shadow of their darkest desires, to attack the spirit realm. They want to take the beasts' power for their own.'

'All the more reason we need you, so we can prepare our defences for their next attack. We lost the mammoths already,' the hawk added.

'Wait, I'm not here to stay. If there's a battle then I shouldn't be the one to fight. My father is the chief of the mountain village and a much better fighter. I'll bring him back, I promise,' I stammered.

'Is your father better at beast taming than you? Don't lie, boy.' The hawk gazed at me, and I looked away.

'He's strong, and he leads his people well...'

'People? We're talking about a war here. What good is a village chief if he can't even lead beasts to battle...?'

The shaman stopped our argument. 'Enough! Let this boy go. We have no right to keep him here. Lushka, you've been up the mountain before, right? Lead Algar back to his village.'

Lushka and I walked towards the door, but a wing blocked our way.

'Move aside,' I said coldly to the hawk, who immediately recoiled. I saw, for the first time in my life, fear in a beast's eyes.

'There!' I pointed. 'That's where I fell down into the valley when the wolf attacked.'

Lushka peered down and shivered. 'It's a long way down. The gods must have blessed you.'

We settled down for a rest against the cliff, exchanging stories in the crisp mountain air. I stood up to stretch my legs when I saw smoke coming from direction of home.

'They must be cooking! Hurry, we wouldn't want to miss a meal!' I shouted.

We bounded spiritedly towards the source of the smoke, all tiredness forgotten. But when we got closer, we noticed the smoke was much too thick be cooking fumes, and the shouts of people too fearful to be in celebration.

We ran even faster, our hearts filling with panic as we saw the smoke coming from multiple sources. The moment we got a clear view of my home, Lushka gave a shout of fury and all I could do was pull her back.

The Wiyot village in the mountains, the place I called home, was being destroyed in front of our eyes. The invaders swung their heavy clubs and leveled the shrines we had built to honor the gods of beasts. Our huts were being burnt to the ground, and my people driven to run from their homes. Those who tried to fight with their stone weapons were disarmed with the Utes' bare hands and brutally knocked off their feet, teeth pulled from their skulls, no doubt to be added to the Utes' necklaces.

I could understand Lushka's rage, her urge to join the battle, to punish the Utes for destroying my village. But I saw the same beastly aura around the Utes - the power of the mammoth now residing within their bodies. It was not something we could beat without the enchanted bow.

I pulled her into a bush. 'Stop moving!'

We were struggling in the bush as we heard a lofty voice: 'Well... what we've got here?'

We broke apart and looked up. In front of our eyes was a Ute I would never dare to fight.

I froze in fear as I looked up at the towering figure. He had the distinct necklace the demons had worn, except it was ten times more menacing. Three rows of tightly chained teeth, some freshly pulled from

their jaws - the necklace dripped blood on the man's muscular chest as the Ute advanced. I shook so violently that I didn't notice my dagger being pulled from its sheath.

Clutching my dagger, Lushka dove straight at the Ute. The bigger man just laughed, casually dodging her stabs and swipes. He didn't even bother to pull out his club. He snatched the dagger, blade first, from her hand, widened his eyes in surprise at his dripping blood, and dropped it.

Lushka grabbed the dagger once more and plunged it straight at his waist. Before the dagger nicked his skin she was grabbed painfully by the hair and pulled off her feet. The smile on the Ute's face was gone now, as he aimed to twist her neck in retaliation.

I didn't take more than one step when a grey shadow leapt at the Ute and sank its teeth into his arm, making him drop Lushka. I dashed forward and pulled her back up to the edge of the cliff as the wolf wove around him, scratching and biting. The canine clung onto his body as the Ute tried to pull out his club, and sank her teeth into the back of his neck. I was waiting for the victory howl when another bolt of lightning clapped through the sky.

The wolf tried desperately to finish the Ute off, but the strength in her jaws was lost. With newfound agility the Ute swung his body around and flung the wolf away from him. Club raised, he flared his nostrils trying to find us. He couldn't.

I was watching the battle a fair distance away when the wolf was thrown towards Lushka and me, knocking us off the same cliff. I panicked but grey fur embraced us, hugging us close. I heard the wolf whimper,

'Avenge me...'

I felt bones crushing beneath me as we landed on the river bank. The impact had woken Lushka and she jumped when she found herself lying inside the embrace of the wolf.

'Oh god... we need to help!' Lushka said as she saw blood ebbing from the wolf's muzzle. 'Come on, carry her back to the village!'

I was completely lost for words as we heaved the wolf carcass back to the village. Lushka went straight to work while I sat sobbing alone inside the shaman's hut, losing track of time before Lushka came in with her hands covered in blood.

'She's dead. WHAT HAPPENED?'

I told her with my head hung low. Tears dripped onto the carpets, as I reminded myself of my weakness.

'We could have won if we had all fought! Coward!' She stormed out of the hut.

I couldn't blame her. The only one to blame was myself.

‘Algar...’

I opened my bleary eyes. Lushka was clutching a bowl in her hand.

‘Here... let me remind you what it means to be a man,’ she cooed as she fed me the drink.

The medicine entered my body and I felt heat building and the softness of her lips on mine...

I felt elated when I woke up the next morning. Something stirred within my chest, filling my mind with determination. I sought out the shaman immediately.

‘I wish to see the wolf.’ He led me to it, much to the hawk’s discontent.

‘Are you still letting him do what he wants? We lost the wolves to the demons, just like the mammoths, because of his departure!’

I ignored him. Resting my palm on the wolf’s bloodstained muzzle, I whispered,

‘Walk free.’

With some difficulty I began skinning the wolf. I felt the body gingerly for an intact piece of bone and with surprise I saw the shaman handing me a spear, a piece of the wolf’s pelvic bone already donned on the spear-head and sharpened.

‘You’re going to avenge her.’ It was a statement, not a question. I nodded as I took the spear and wolf pelt and draped it over myself. With the spear in hand, I stood as the shaman blessed me.

‘May the gods watch over you as you strike down the demons, and your life be cursed if you flee from battle!’

I felt the wolf’s spirit lingering in my heart. The Wiyots were raring for battle upon hearing about my village.

I set out alone towards the wolf’s den, tracing her steps until I reached the entrance. I howled and the wolves responded, coming out of their cave to meet me. They wished for vengeance, but they needed help.

Losing their aura had done much harm to them. Their ears were drooping and their tails hung limp between their hind legs. Following my lead, we headed towards the Utes’ village to meet the others.

I whistled for a hawk and sent it over the village, its eyes scouting the whole settlement. Through its eyes I could see the Utes trapping mammoths in wooden cages, forcing them to labour and punishing

them with their clubs if they lay down for a rest. With their auras of rage gone the mammoths submitted mournfully.

We waited until nightfall, when wolves fight best. I sneaked around the fire and opened the door to one of the larger cages.

‘Help me fight.’

My request was met with the sad eyes of a mammoth. We opened the other cages and they simply refused to stand up. I turned when I heard the wolves whimper.

The commotion had wakened the village and I saw the huge Ute again, only this time I was not afraid of him anymore. The thirst for revenge burned ferociously in my heart and I charged straight at him. The wolves assisted the Wiyots the best they could.

‘Little wimp, ready for some more?’ the Ute snickered as he swung his club at me.

I’m done with running away. I didn’t even recoil as I took the hit. All my concentration was on my spear, which I put my whole weight behind and drove straight towards his chest.

The wolf’s spirit, encased in her bone, cut through the beasts’ aura and into the Ute’s heart, drinking its fill of blood. I roared triumphantly as the auras began to leak and return to their owners.

‘My name is Algar. Remember this name as you rot in hell!’

The mammoths rose to their feet upon hearing my battle cry and channeled their pent-up rage, trampling the village and everything in their path. The wolves hunted down every single Ute and tore out their throats. I stood on my enemy’s body, surveying the battlefield as pain throbbed through my shoulder. The club’s blow had hurt, but the pelt had shielded most of the damage. The wolf had protected me, even in death.

‘I’m so proud of you, Algar,’ my father said. ‘So where do you plan to stay?’

I pondered for a moment, the mountain or the river?

‘Wherever he chooses, I’ll be right there with him.’ Lushka leaned on me and smiled.