

THE MAN FROM ELK RIVER

by

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FADE IN:

EXT. FOREST CLEARING - DAY

Mumbled SINGING. Words unintelligible.

CROW WARRIOR, late teens, lies dead in the grass.

ELK RIVER MAN, mid 50s, dressed in a patchwork of animal hides, hair a tangle of long grey locks, staggers weakly across the clearing before sinking to his knees.

ANOTHER WARRIOR, mid 20s, kneels a short distance away. He palms his gut, blood spilling through his fingers. He SINGS softly to himself - a death song.

With a roar of pain, Elk River Man jerks upright. He drops a bone-handled knife and clutches his bloodsoaked forearm.

EXT. PLAINS - CROW ENCAMPMENT - DAWN

Wind scatters the ashes of a campfire through a small cluster of tepees set beside a river.

CHILAHUSH, 11, sits sleeping on the edge of camp. A blanket wraps his thin shoulders.

WOMAN'S VOICE (O.S.)

Chilahush?

He rouses, annoyed with himself at having drifted off.

Beyond him, a figure lingers in the entrance to a tepee before returning inside.

Chilahush draws the blanket tighter. He stares across the open plain. Resolute.

EXT. RIVERBANK - WAKIZA'S LEAN-TO - DAY

WAKIZA (RUNS FROM DEATH), late 40s, dull-eyed, enfeebled with hunger, kneels at the water's edge, sipping water from cupped palms.

Behind him, a crude shelter of hide and brushwood has been set in the lee of the bank. Remnants of a fire smolder.

Chilahush settles on the bank twenty yards away.

Wakiza pretends not to notice.

The boy dips his face in the river and shakes the water free. He glances at Wakiza, trying gain his attention.

Wakiza ignores him.

Chilahush plunges his head underwater and holds it there.

A long moment passes. Wakiza's curiosity gets the better of him. He looks over - the boy surfaces with a gasp, catching Wakiza in the act.

Chilahush grins - it's short lived. Hearing a noise, he turns to see FLAKA, mid-30s, her face and arms covered in fresh scars. His smile vanishes.

The boy jumps to his feet and hurries to her side. She cuts Wakiza an icy glare and leads Chilahush away.

Wakiza lowers his head, chastened.

EXT. FOREST - CROW WARRIOR CAMP - DAY

Two Crow warriors huddle beside a campfire.

LOW WOLF, late teens, brooding, impatient - eager to prove himself.

Beside him, MOJAG, mid-teens, a quiet presence, chews on a piece of roasted meat.

A sound from the forest. They tense, reaching for knives.

GREY OTTER, early 20s, emerges from the trees. He crouches, staring into the flames. He draws a blade and cuts out a lock of his long hair.

Low Wolf and Mojag look on in grim understanding.

EXT. ELK RIVER MAN'S CABIN - DAY

Elk River Man limps towards a rough-hewn cabin set in a clearing above a river. A crude sling wraps his arm.

INT. ELK RIVER MAN'S CABIN - DAY

A cramped single room lit by firelight. Animal skins, strings of beads and carved trinkets decorate the walls. A fur-lined crib stands empty in the corner.

The blade of a hunting knife heats in the coals of a hearth.

Elk River Man bites down on a strip of leather and presses the white-hot blade to the gash in his forearm.

Flesh SIZZLES. He casts his gaze to the heavens, biting back the pain and nausea.

EXT. FOOTHILLS - THE MOURNING TREE - DAY

Mojag, Low Wolf, and Grey Otter stand solemnly before a cottonwood tree.

Two bodies interred in robes rest on platforms lashed to the boughs. Wisps of dark hair stream from the branches.

EXT. RIVERBANK - WAKIZA'S LEAN-TO - DAY

Wakiza sits cross-legged beside a small campfire, head cowed beneath a blanket.

Chilahush crouches a safe distance away. He studies the outcast, noting a walking stick at his side.

WAKIZA

Many nights I hear your mother call
for you.

Wakiza raises his head - the boy is gone. His eyes fall to a chunk of meat set on a cloth beside the fire - a gift.

EXT. FOREST - CROW WARRIOR CAMP - DUSK

Grey Otter stands beside a campfire. He daubs his face in black paint, quietly intoning to himself.

Low Wolf and Mojag watch from the shadows, respecting the privacy of the ritual.

EXT. ELK RIVER MAN'S CABIN - DUSK

Elk River Man, arm bandaged, paces before a rock burial cairn. A wooden double cross has been set at the head. He reads from a bible:

ELK RIVER MAN

...O death, where is thy sting? O
grave, where is thy victory...

EXT. FOREST - CROW WARRIOR CAMP - DUSK

Shadows flicker across Grey Otter's charcoal blackened face. Eyes closed, his lips move in silent invocation.

EXT. PLAINS - CROW ENCAMPMENT - DAWN

Chilahush wakes with a start. He shakes off his blanket and stares at the glowing tip of sun piercing the horizon.

EXT. RIVERBANK - WAKIZA'S LEAN-TO - DAWN

Wakiza kindles his fire. He hears a faint noise -

WAKIZA

You hunt me like a lost shadow.

Chilahush peers over the bank. He glances behind him and clambers down to squat a little way from the fire.

The boy notes numerous scars to Wakiza's exposed forearm. The outcast draws his robe - self-conscious.

CHILAHUSH

I heard him, far away, where the sun rises.

Wakiza pokes at the fire in silence.

CHILAHUSH

Father calls me to make war.

WAKIZA

(dismissive)

A boy, barely ten summers to his name...

CHILAHUSH

I am his blood also!

WAKIZA

He calls his warriors. They have answered.

CHILAHUSH

Who are you to talk of names? The dogs eat while you go hungry.

The old man looks away, ashamed.

Chilahush pulls a cloth wrap from his blanket. He unfolds it to reveal a chunk of meat.

CHILAHUSH
Tell me where, Uncle.

Chilahush tosses him the wrap. Wakiza lifts his eyes to the offering, unable to mask his hunger.

The boy produces a second wrap of meat.

CHILAHUSH
For your pony.

LATER

Wakiza washes his face in the river. He stares into the water, his face a mask of shame.

Footsteps behind him. He closes his eyes in acceptance.

Flaka snatches up his walking stick and rains blows across his back. He suffers the pain and indignity in silence.

EXT. OPEN PLAIN - DAWN

Chilahush heels a pony towards distant foothills. A bow slung across his back. A quiver of arrows at his side.

EXT. FOOTHILLS - BLUFF - DAY

The rise gives way to a river valley below. Scattered scrubland thickens to forest beyond.

Chilahush pauses just long enough to set his course.

EXT. FOOTHILLS - ELK RIVER TRAIL - DAY

Chilahush guides his pony along the bank. He scans the surrounds, wary. He spots something out on the gravel wash edging the river.

Chilahush picks his way towards the water. The pony stands on the bank behind him. He slows. Frowns.

A body lies in the shallows - Grey Otter.

The pony shies.

Chilahush spins -

Mojag bears down on him, war club in hand.

Chilahush freezes in panic. Mojag charges past and continues to Grey Otter's side.

Behind him, Low Wolf inspects the pony's markings. He turns, marches to the startled boy, eyes lit with fury.

LOW WOLF
Where is he?

Chilahush, unable to find his voice.

LOW WOLF
Where is Runs From Death!

CHILAHUSH
I took it from him.

Low Wolf snatches his sibling by the arm and frogmarches him towards the animal.

LOW WOLF
Take it back.

CHILAHUSH
I can hunt for you!

He releases him with a kick to the backside. Chilahush slinks away, hurt. He turns, imploring.

CHILAHUSH
Father called to me! I heard him-

Low Wolf snatches up a handful of stones, driving the tearful youngster away with scattered shots.

Mojag crouches over Grey Otter's body, bowed in grief.

EXT. FOOTHILLS - MOURNING TREE - DAY

Low Wolf and Mojag stand beneath the cottonwood. A third body rests on a platform amid the branches. Fresh locks of hair trail from the limbs.

EXT. FOOTHILLS - TREELINE - SAME

Chilahush lies draped across the pony's back, watching the ceremony from a distance.

ELK RIVER MAN (PRE-LAP)
Prove me, O Lord, test my heart and
my mind...

EXT. ELK RIVER MAN'S CABIN - DAY

Elk River Man circles the grave. Dried blood stains his hands - not his. Four scalps hang from his belt. A fresh one among them slick with blood and yet to wither.

ELK RIVER MAN

...Search me, Lord, know my heart.
Try me and know my thoughts.

EXT. FOREST - CROW WARRIOR CAMP - NIGHT

A fire crackles. Low Wolf holds two sticks in his fist. Mojag plucks one free and holds it out.

BRUSHLINE

Chilahush watches as Mojag tosses his stick to the fire and paces away in a sulk. Low Wolf lets out a howl of victory.

EXT. FOREST - CHILAHUSH'S CAMP - DAWN

Daylight creeps through the canopy. Chilahush lies in a small clearing. He opens his eyes - something wrong.

He spins, clumsily nocking an arrow to his bow. He freezes in surprise -

Low Wolf crouches, his own bow yoked across his shoulders. He plucks the crude arrow from the boy's grasp and studies it a beat before snapping it like a twig.

LOW WOLF

You sleep late for a hunter.

Chilahush stares back, hangdog.

EXT. FOREST - GAME TRAIL - DAWN

Low Wolf and Chilahush make their way through the brush.

CHILAHUSH

You should have woken me.

LOW WOLF

I should have taken your pony.

CHILAHUSH

Where are the others?

LOW WOLF

Gone.

CHILAHUSH

Gone where?

LOW WOLF

Where a warrior must go.

Chilahush looks around, confused.

CHILAHUSH

Is it true he's tall as a bear? And
fast as an antelope?

(no answer)

That he eats the hearts of his
enemies?

LOW WOLF

Who says these things?

CHILAHUSH

Uncle.

Low Wolf flicks him an admonishing look.

The boy halts, exasperated.

CHILAHUSH

Let me help you!

LOW WOLF

Take your toys and go.

Low Wolf slips from view.

Chilahush stares at his small bow, crestfallen.

EXT. CLEARING - FATHER'S MOURNING TREE - DAWN

Chilahush trudges from the treeline. Ahead, Low Wolf stands with his gaze fixed on a lone tree. Chilahush follows his line of sight.

A platform has been lashed to the boughs. Upon it rests a body wrapped in weathered animal hides. Wisps of grey hair stream from the branches.

The boy rests a hand on the trunk. He peers up at the platform with a mixture of sadness and awe.

A sound behind them -

Chilahush turns to see Mojag waiting with Wakiza's pony. He looks to his brother in betrayal.

LOW WOLF

Tell Runs From Death I am the one who
makes war on our enemy. ...I am the
one who brings our father home.

EXT. OPEN PLAIN - DAY

Chilahush rides towards the horizon. Head down. Dejected.

He slows, reins in his pony, looks back at the foothills, struggling with his conscience.

He swings his mount around and rides back the way he came.

EXT. FOOTHILLS - ELK RIVER - DAY

Chilahush guides the pony along a trail. Ahead, a wisp of smoke curls above the trees. His eyes narrow.

EXT. ELK RIVER MAN'S CABIN - DAY

Elk River Man, bible in hand, paces before the grave, quoting scripture MOS. The shotgun leans against the cabin wall beyond. Smoke rises from a chimney.

He pauses, as if sensing the subtlest change in the air. He lowers the bible and stares off towards the treeline.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Low Wolf, face painted for battle, a shell breastplate around his neck, rides tall in the saddle. A proud young warrior set to prove himself.

A distant GUNSHOT -

He reins in his pony, trying to pinpoint the source. Seeing nothing, he heels the animal forward.

EXT. ELK RIVER MAN'S CABIN - DAY

Low Wolf rides into the clearing. He halts, staring in disbelief:

Elk River Man is on his knees, doubled over, one hand pressed to a bloody wound in his side.

A short way behind him, a shocked looking Chilahush sprawls in the grass still gripping the heavy shotgun.

Low Wolf dismounts and edges closer.

Elk River Man watches, leaden.

Low Wolf's look shifts to anger. He looks accusingly to his brother, spikes his lance in the dirt and rushes the boy.

Chilahush scrambles behind a woodpile. A brief back and forth ensues before Low Wolf flushes him free.

The boy runs behind the cabin. Low Wolf follows, both disappearing sight...

Elk River Man finds his feet and staggers towards an axe planted in a chopping block.

...Chilahush hares back into view, Low Wolf at his heel. He leaps the burial cairn - Low Wolf misjudges and trips, crashing through the cross marker to land in a heap. He lets out a cry of fury as Chilahush takes off into the forest.

Low Wolf rips off his breastplate, tearing up handfuls of grass to rub furiously at the warpaint.

Elk River Man frees the axe. He stands there, swaying, breathless, refusing to accede defeat.

Low Wolf looks up. A glimmer of hope -

And with that, Elk River Man pitches backwards into a stack of firewood. Dead.

Low Wolf stares, willing him to get up. ...He sags, pounding the dirt, sobbing. Warrior reduced to scorned teenager.

EXT. CLEARING - FATHER'S MOURNING TREE - DAY

A strip of rawhide flutters over the edge of the burial platform, caught in the breeze.

Chilahush crouches before the tree, downcast.

Hearing a sound, he turns to see Mojag and Low Wolf ride from the forest.

He tightens - about to flee.

Low Wolf raises a hand - truce. He dismounts and crouches nearby. His face has been scrubbed clean.

LOW WOLF
He called to you?

Chilahush nods.

Low Wolf rises and crosses to his brother. He slips a hand around the boy's neck, clamping him in place. He dips his fingers into a pouch and proceeds to smear the boy's face with powdered charcoal.

Finished, he pulls a bloody scalp trailing grey locks from a second pouch and knots it to his brother's belt.

Mojag, already riding away as Low Wolf swings astride his pony. With a last look to his father's remains, he follows.

Chilahush watches them go. Finally, his tear-filled eyes bend to the platform.

He shimmies up the tree, feet scrabbling for purchase. A leather strap drops to the ground. A CRACK of wood - the burial robe lands in a cloud of dust and rattle of bones.

EXT. OPEN PLAIN - DAY

A makeshift travois bumps through the grass. The burial robe lashed to the frame.

EXT. RIVERBANK - WAKIZA'S LEAN-TO - DAWN

Wakiza shivers beside a fire, his blanket pulled about his bruised face. The CLUMP of hooves rouses him.

He peers out to see Chilahush atop the pony, drawing the travois along the bank.

Chilahush, face blackened, passes Wakiza without so much as a glance. He continues towards the camp. The bones of his father rattling in his wake.

FADE OUT