

It is strictly believed and understood by the Sioux that a child is the greatest gift from Wakan Tanka.

Robert Higheagle (early 20th century)

Teton Sioux

Hearth Song

By Lois Greiman

Bravura Lambert rushed through the crowd. Cowponies, spectators and contestants flowed past like rushing waves.

“Oh!” she said and smacked into an oncoming cowboy. Their eyes met. His were deep and dark, as gray as a rolling thunderhead, as intense as a bucking bull. His hair was tousled, his grin crooked. He wore his Stetson at a rakish angle, his chaps low on narrow hips. In his capable right hand he held a coiled lariat...every cowgirl’s dream... or he would be...in about twenty years. As of now he had not yet reached the ripe old age of six.

“Excuse me,” Bravura said and hugging her own five year old to her chest, hurried past.

When Hunter Redhawk had invited her to attend the Little Britches rodeo she hadn't quite envisioned *this*. Somehow, she had failed to realize that kids barely out of diapers would be racing amped up thoroughbreds and...

"Coming out of chute number three is our very own Maverick Lawson." The announcer bellowed the words from the crow's nest overhead as a shaggy-legged bay exploded like dynamite from a narrow metal stall.

Bravura Lambert suppressed a shudder as the animal fishtailed and corkscrewing, tossing his diminutive rider into the mud like so much dirty laundry.

"Aww, that'll be a no time for young Maverick. But let's give him a hand, folks. He was all around runner up last year and will be riding a bull named Final Round later in the program."

Squeezing Lily protectively against her chest, Bravura shimmied through the crowd.

It was like a scene from a bygone century...one where dust and mud existed together with symbiotic ease. Where a good horse was as revered as a tidy 401K.

"Wooooow!" Lily breathed and clung tightly to Foo Foo, the much abused plush animal Gamps had given her years before. It might have, at one point, resembled a bunny. "That's amazing." The words whistled like a spring zephyr

through the gap in her incisors.

Bravura could hardly disagree with the sentiment, but shifted her gaze over the mob, searching for Hunter's aluminum trailer.

Another truncated cowboy lurched past in spurs and run down boots. Ahead of him, his teenage sister swatted aside the loop with which he tried to rope her, never pausing the conversation she shared with her freckle faced companion. Cowboy hats swung from stampede strings hooked over scathed saddle horns as their horses followed dutifully in their wake.

"Ooooh," Lily crooned and watched, mesmerized as the geldings ambled past, muscular haunches brushing the dangling toes of her moccasins. These days, it frequently took no more than the *word* horse to send her into bouts of equine euphoria. "Look at that one, Mama. It's a tobiano."

"Is it?" Vura asked and scanned the crowd for a glimpse of Hunter. At six foot four inches of Hunkpapa Indian, he wouldn't be easy to miss. Or so she had assumed. But dozens of trailers packed the grassy knoll that surrounded the arena. She searched more frantically. They were more than a half hour late, which, by motherhood standards, was hardly late at all...still...

"That's its color pattern," Lily added. "They can be black and white or

brown and white or palomino and white...or anything.”

“I see.” Vura didn’t really understand the workings of the Indian Relay Race in which Hunter would be competing, but she did know that if they missed the event, she would remain unforgiven for the next hundred years in her daughter’s adoring eyes. Hunter Redhawk’s status was only slightly beneath that of the equine species and somewhat above the geese that waddled with snooty impunity across their newly purchased farm. Vura shuddered; whatever genius had decided to domesticate the haughty goose should be armed with nothing but a fly swatter and forced to spend a day in their abrasive company.

“The other one’s a...” Lily scrunched her little face in concentration and peered past Bravura’s left ear. “I think it’s black. But maybe it’s really a bay. Blacks aren’t supposed to fade. But it’s not even...” She paused. “What month is it, Mama?” Lily’s unique personality...Vura refused to call it a syndrome no matter what the ‘experts’ said, made it possible for her to cite a thousand details about topics of particular interest while leaving holes the size of moon craters in more commonly understood subjects.

“It’s April, honey.”

Lily bobbed her head, spun caramel hair brushing her mother’s like a

wayward halo. "So it's not even summer yet, right?"

"Right." Where the devil was Hunter? Or Sydney? True, Bravura's half-sister was hardly of behemoth proportions, but she generally stood out in a crowd of home spun South Dakotans Like a thoroughbred in a pony ring. But...

Her thoughts spun to a halt as a horse breezed past, knocking her off balance. She staggered, clutching Lily to her chest, trying to stay upright. But the mud sucked at her boots and she was falling.

"Careful!" Strong hands grabbed her from behind before she hit the ground. She tottered, found her equilibrium and straightened shakily. "You okay?" The voice was little more than a rumble of worry.

"Yeah. Yeah. I think so." Bravura smoothed an unsteady hand down Lily's runaway hair. But her baby seemed, as usual, unimpressed by such inconsequentialities like near death experiences.

"Look Mama! It's a red dun!" she exclaimed and pointed gleefully over Bravura's shoulder at the animal that had nearly plowed them under. Atop the mare's broad back, its miniscule rider seemed as oblivious to the drama as Lily. "See the stripes on its legs and..." She blinked, round eyes widening happily. "Hi, Tonka."

Vura's heart clutched in her chest. She turned suspiciously in her savior's arms, scowl already tugging at her eyebrows.

Tonkiaishawien Redhawk, hands still bracketing her body as if prepared to catch her again should she topple over like a drowsy toddler, raised dark brows and flirtatious lips. "You must be more cautious, Bravura Lambert."

She backed away, but bad luck had her tripping again. His hands jerked out, catching her a second time.

"Unless you were *hoping* to get saved by some handsome Sioux brave."

"What are you doing here?" She didn't like to be unfriendly, but Tonkiaishawien had made it his mission to irritate her since the moment they'd met nearly a year before. And he had accomplished that mission stunningly. Everything about him annoyed her: his unquenchable arrogance, his rugged elegance. Even the precise rhythm of his earthy dialect, so appealing in other Native men, was exasperating.

His chiseled Indian features remained as they were, but his eyes, bright with mischief, shone like dark jasper. "I am about to win a relay race. And what of you, Bravura?"

His long, artist's fingers felt warm and capable against her wrist. Irritation

mixed with less acceptable emotions. They swirled like toxins in Vura's gut. "Of course you are," she said and stepped firmly out of his grasp. "Where's Hunt?" Setting her daughter's feet on a relatively dry patch of earth, she straightened to her full height. Five feet four inches of sturdy Midwestern woman.

Tonk nodded solemnly. A frolicsome breeze teased his hair, brushing the pair of beaded feathers across his cedar-hewn jaw. "I humbly accept your heartfelt gratitude for saving you from certain injury," he said.

"Well, I *am* grateful you didn't break my arms," she said and knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that she was being ridiculous. Bravura Lambert was about as fragile as rebar, but there was something about Tonkiaishawien Redhawk's flirtatious likability that tended to get her dander up.

Men should be sober and dependable and hardworking like her father, or Hunter or...Or her husband, she thought hurriedly and stifled a belated sliver of guilt. It wasn't as though she had forgotten about Dane...it was just that he'd been gone so long.

Tonk's lips, full and bold and despicably mesmerizing, shifted into a canted grin. "Had I known you were such a delicate flower I would have worn my doe skin gloves."

“Had I known you were such a pain in the—”

“Lily!” Hunter rasped and burst through the crowd to swing the girl against his bear-like chest.

“Hunk!” Lily crooned and wrapped her arms around his neck in an embrace that suggested utmost happiness and a fair amount of hero worship. “Where’s Windwalker?”

“Are you all right?” He pushed her away a little, dark brows lowered over troubled eyes.

“Ai, they are both well and good, brother.” Tonk said the words with dramatic flair. “You may thank me later for saving them from certain death.”

Hunter ignored him completely. It was a talent Bravura had hoped to acquire. So far, no such luck. “You’re sure you’re not hurt?” he asked and ran a broad hand down Lily’s purple-clad arm.

“It was a dun horse,” she said.

“What?”

“The mare that almost runned us over. She was a red dun,” Lily said. “It’s like a buckskin but more chestnutty.”

Vura refrained from sighing. Lily Belle Lambert was as smart as a firecracker and Bravura adored her with every fiber in her being, but just once it might be nice if the child could switch mental tracks without prying her off the rail with a wrecking bar.

Hunter, on the other hand, seemed to consider her obsessions nothing out of the ordinary. “The horse that bumped into you? It was a dun?”

“Yeah.” She nodded an affirmation. “And sooo pretty.”

Hunter lifted his gaze, scanning the mob of humans and horses. “Was it the one ridden by the kid in the blue shirt?”

Lily shifted her ever-bright gaze toward the object of his inquiry and sighed. “Oooh. Isn’t she beautiful? Sometimes red duns are called claybanks. And sometimes they’re called fox duns. But they has to have dorset...doral...dor—“

“Dorsal stripes,” Hunter supplied and running a protective hand down her back, set her on her feet before straightening to his imposing height. “Keep an eye on them,” he ordered, and after catching his brother’s gaze in an intimidating glare, strode into the melee toward the miniature cowboy on the dun.

“What’s he doing?” Lily asked and grasped Vura’s hand.

“I think he’s going to reprimand the boy.”

“But he was just ridin’,” Lily said.

Vura squeezed her fingers. “He should be more careful, Lily Belle.”

“As should you,” Tonk said and Vura felt the muscles tighten across her shoulders.

“I was looking for Hunter. He’s usually so easy to spot,” Vura said and managed, with some effort, to squeeze a little sigh in her voice. Womanly wiles, Dane had once said, were as foreign to her as Istanbul. “Being he’s so tall and... you know...manly.”

A tick jerked in Tonk’s lean cheek. “Perhaps if you worried more about your daughter and less about my brother’s...manliness, you wouldn’t endanger Lily’s life.”

A little trill of misbegotten joy shimmied up Bravura’s spine. It was impossible to say why irritating Tonkiaishawien thrilled her to the bone, but it did. She sighed as if it was beyond her shaky self-control to forgo fantasizing about Tonk’s big brother, but the truth was considerably more mundane; even if Sydney Wellesley, her newly discovered half-sister, hadn’t tagged Hunter for her own, Vura would never think of him with anything but brotherly appreciation. He was a

friend, a protector, and the best man she knew next to her father. And Dane! She reminded herself fiercely. Dane Lambert was a wonderful man. Everybody liked him. It wasn't his fault that he couldn't get a job closer to home. Times were hard and the shale oil industry was booming in North Dakota. Lots of families had been broken up when the men left for the fracking fields.

“What would your husband say if he knew you were ogling another?” Tonk said the words as if he could read her mind. Which he couldn't! Vura was positive his mystic Indian act was just that. Still, guilt rushed in like a feverish wind. She forced a smile.

“How nice of you to worry about my handsome husband.” She flipped her hair behind her shoulder as she had seen girls do since pubescence; it never felt quite right when she did it, more like an agitated goose with a neck issue. “Believe me, though, he's not the least bit jealous.” And that was God's honest truth. She gazed toward the nearby arena where a tow-headed boy of twelve seemed intent on sustaining whiplash from a shaggy chestnut that strongly resembled a hirsute tornado.

“Then he is even more of a moron than I thought.”

“What?” she asked and snapped her attention back to Tonk.

“I said...” He lifted a single brow as if startled by her reaction. “... he must be even more of a man than I thought.”

She scowled.

He watched her, eyes as steady as river agates. “Still, I wonder why he is gone so long.”

Anger mixed to feral measures with a couple other volatile emotions. “I’m sorry, I thought it was generally understood that some men have *real* jobs.” Tonk was an artist. She refrained from curling a lip at the idea.

“And is it not his job to care for his wife?”

She canted her head at him. “I’m sorry. What century did you say you were from?”

A muscle bounced in his jaw. “There are some truths that transcend time.”

“Tonk!” someone called.

They turned in unison. The woman who greeted him had big hair and big boobs, both of which were currently displayed above the lacy edge of her cherry-red tank top. Impressive, Vura thought, as the temperature in Hope Springs, South Dakota had yet to reach a long-awaited sixty degrees.

Sashaying toward them, she gripped Tonk's arm with brimming enthusiasm, held her Bud Lite with equal fervor. "Tonkiaishawien..." Her voice, Vura thought, strongly resembled that of a female mouse made famous by Walt Disney, and even from that distance, she smelled vaguely fruity. Up close she must have resembled a peach grove. "How long has it been?"

"Sherri Unger." He smiled into her eyes...or thereabouts. "I thought you'd gone off to the oil fields."

"I did, but I'm back. Staying at the inn for a couple days, in case you're interested," she said and gave his arm playful thwack. Her tittering laughter made her boobs bobble and Vura, for some mysterious reason, want to gag her with a sock. "But hey, I heard you was riding today."

"You heard right."

"Well, I guess it's my lucky day then. You gonna execute your signature salute after you win?"

"If you'll demonstrate your usual display of appreciation," he said.

She giggled, glancing at him through lashes long as palm fronds. "Tonky, you're so bad."

Vura felt her hackles rise and her brows lower. But she kept her thoughts to herself. It was no skin off her nose if certain women liked to act like inebriated field mice. Gripping Lily's hand in a steely grip, she pivoted away.

But Tonk yanked her to a halt.

If Vura hadn't been clutching Lily's fingers in her own, there was a distinct possibility she would have belted him. And what the devil was that about? As it was, she wheeled around, not entirely controlling the growl that curled her lips.

But Tonk merely raised his brows and nodded toward the palomino that was breezing past like a golden bullet.

"If you have a death wish, Bravura, perhaps someone else should see to Lily for the day," he suggested.

Like Mother Teresa there, she wondered, and couldn't help but snap her gaze to the blond bundle of brains who giggled behind him. Still, she was nothing but decorous as she tugged her arm free.

He released her slowly, fingers sliding against her hand for an instant. She stifled a shiver.

He scowled and gritted his teeth. Silence echoed between them.

“You must be more careful,” he said finally and straightening carefully, backed away a half a foot. “Horses can be dangerous.”

“Don’t I know it?” Sherri said from behind. “I swear, every time I see Tonky ride I think I’m going to pass right out.”

No time like the present, Vura thought, and erred, again, on the side of silent diplomacy.

“Relay’s gotta be like...” Sherri shook her bleached head. “...the most dangerous sport in the whole world.”

“Is it?” Bravura scowled.

“You needn’t fret,” Tonk said.

“What?” She glanced at him.

“I sense your worry.”

She caught his gaze. “Well, of course I’m worried.”

Something sparked in his river agate eyes. She stifled a smile and only half wondered why she was so mean.

“It would kill me if Hunter got hurt,” she said.

His jaw bunched. His brows lowered. "Come Sherri," he said and taking the woman's elbow, steered her into the crowd.