
Chapter 1

“**F**resh tracks,” a scout hollered, seeing the large boot print imbedded in the mud. The small hunting party of Willow Kye natives stopped dead. They had reached the border of the mountain on the west side. It was time to retreat. Kavon, the leader of the group signaled with his hand to move back. If the Border Guards were near, he didn’t want to be accused of entering their territory. Peace and freedom suited him just fine.

“We will head back east along the river. If we don’t have any more kills, we’ll have to make do with the few we have and pray the meat that keeps appearing in the game hut continues. We need to focus on deer hides soon for winter, after sending ours to the King,” Kavon said, still casting his gaze to the woods. He had a sneaking suspicion they were being watched, but there were no obvious eyes to be seen. This was the Wood Lords’ method. They patrolled the border to see if anyone was stupid enough to wander a little too far onto their side of the imaginary line. They were never seen unless they wanted to be. Never came down from the mountain, they called home, except to collect their quarterly peace fee or if a violation occurred.

Zyon, their leader was the largest man most had ever seen. He collected for the King, and no man would dream of defying him. He towered a good head above Kavon and had a finely sculpted black beard encompassing his face. His long thick braid of the same color hair snaked down his back to his belt, with a half-shaved head. He was a devil come to life for all the villagers who set eyes on him, but he rarely spoke a word in their presence. It was he and his men who were watching now in the woods, and if Willow Kye villagers were captured trespassing they forfeited their freedom. The hunting party was well aware of the border laws, and careful not to venture too close. Like scared rabbits gazing into a forest filled with carnivorous bears, they nervously retreated.

The mountainous hills that encircled the village on one side were called The Wall. The base was a definitive line dividing the people of Willow Kye and the Wood Lords. Both tribes on the island of Insula coexisted, with neither desiring friendship. They had a long-standing hatred of one another after war erupted over five generations previous.

The Wood Lords were notoriously more aggressive. The men were bigger, stronger, and better skilled. Rumor had it that all males were forced, even as children, to do long hours of training to become warriors. Women were also trained in defense. No Willow Kye villager had ever come back from the mountain to tell its hideous tales, but there were rumors and folktales that parents told their children, so they wouldn't venture near the border.

Both tribes were primarily an oral culture, and the folklore stories passed down were that of a Wood Lord Princess who had been kidnapped by one of the old Willow Kye Chiefs in a failed attempt to show dominance and which tribe was more powerful. During tribal ceremonies, the storytellers would relay their history to the younger generations, explaining about their island of Insula and how the fighting began. For them it was a lesson of

how one man's selfishness led to such generational heartache, and by highlighting *his* mistakes they encouraged other young people to not act so foolishly. The stories served a couple of purposes, but most importantly they demonized the Wood Lords who they depicted as evil bears waiting for helpless Willow Kye to breach their boundaries and take their people hostage. The well-spoken tale began like many others. A man fell in love with a woman.

HER NAME WAS GEMMA, the daughter of Chief Totus and the jewel of Bear Claw village where the Wood Lords lived. Chief Luits of the Willow Kye, had been misguided and drunk with the idea of power and love, so he launched a rebellion to try and overthrow the Wood Lord Chief Totus and snuck into Bear Claw village. Power can make the most powerful of men crazy. This was the catalyst for this fight. Chief Luits wanted nothing more than to overthrow his neighbor and crown himself King of all Insula.

Chief Totus was so enraged, he declared war on the Willow Kye unleashing his army to take vengeance and rescue his daughter. The Willow Kye had made an erroneous mistake thinking they outnumbered the other tribe, because they didn't know about the secret weapon Bear Claw possessed. The mountain acted as a shelter and when the Willow Kye invaded, the Wood Lords expelled from the mountain in a thousand different directions like an army of red ants entrapping the smaller army and destroying them. Instead of surrendering when Chief Totus arrived to collect his daughter, Chief Luits slaughtered the Princess before committing suicide himself, condemning his people to a long tragic fate.

The Wood Lords declared a triumphant victory, after crushing the weaker army and the Chief's death. Chief Totus

declared himself King of Insula and all her people, allowing a Chief to head the Willow Kye at his appointment. He also consoled his grief by outcasting the village forbidding any interaction between his people and the Willow Kye except when the levies had to be paid.

He executed all remaining warriors in the rebellion that refused to swear him fealty, promising if it ever happened again, he or any of his descendants, would burn the village to the ground with everyone inside. It was a collective death sentence at the time, since the Willow Kye people were largely nomadic. In the spring and summer, they lived along the coast where their village now existed; however, in the late fall and winter, they moved to higher ground along the first level of The Wall. It was always seen as the Wood Lords' land, and when they had been neighbors, Totus had allowed it. It provided them shelter from the harsh weather the island was battered with late Fall into Spring and offered a better food source. Many of the tribe starved or froze to death in the months following the uproar. Only the strongest survived.

After the war, King Totus set up border camps with soldiers to patrol from the east to west and everywhere in between, warning any Willow Kye who dared to step beyond The Wall into the Wood Lords' forest they would never be allowed to return to their village. He deemed the charge to be spying and would never tolerate such insolence. Instead, they would be taken to Bear Claw where the King would decide their fate. Death or slave. He also imposed a land tax to be paid every year arguing now as King of Insula the game, the trees, and natural food sources were all his. If the Willow Kye wanted to remain they had to pay to live from his land. It was set at fifty head of game, fifty pelts or skins, five hundred salted fish and a human slave who didn't necessarily have to be a Willow Kye villager.

The Maceo tribe that traded with the Willow Kye was allowed to come ashore on the southern tip, and the Wood

Lords' port admitted people from the Pacebo tribe to the north. If they could make a trade with their allies for someone who would satisfy the quota, the King was appeased. If not, he was always happy to acquire a new Willow Kye.

Other than their direct trading partners, not many dared to breach the beaches of Insula. The island was massive. A goliath landform rising from the depths of the unknown like a God in the middle of what seemed to be endless sea. Smaller islands existed, but looked like pebbles compared to the wonder of her banks. She was an intimidating site for voyagers since spikes were lined along much of the coast to ward off inquisitive fellows. Some spikes containing the rotten corpses of those willing to trespass and attempt to steal things that were not theirs to take.

The Border Guards showed little mercy.

Zyon was ruthless to enemies, like the leaders before him. If they did not have the proper papers upon disembarking and could not explain their presence most of the men were killed with one left to return and tell of the horrors that had befallen the crew. It kept the island mostly free of unwanted intruders and grew a formidable reputation, among others. The rich vegetation, rolling mountainous forests, and crystal blue lakes were breathtaking and a magnet to poachers. Even with a sixth sense warning of the dangers that lurked within her perfect outward appearance, strangers took the chance sometimes just to say they touched her.

Every three months, the Border Guard warriors would arrive to collect. Usually with Zyon. Women and children were sent to their tipis, and the village looked like it was virtually abandoned. The Chief and his eldest son would deliver the collected payment, although it was mainly others' hands had helped to provide. If they were short, their own supply was raided, and they had to come up with something as interest. Sometimes it was extra furs, farming animals, seasoned wood, or slaves. The hardest part of the interest was that it didn't count toward what

they would still be left owing. So, usually their land tax was much higher than the initial fee.

If they needed time, word would be sent by pigeon to the King who normally was open to a bargain, since it always went in his favor. Payment could not be refused with the constant threat of war. The tribe went hungry or cold but had never sent the collectors away empty handed.

Generation after generation nothing changed. A few times, overzealous family members tried to go after the slaves that were taken, but the moment they crossed the border they were captured. No one knew if they had been reunited with their loved ones or not. There was never any confirmation or aggressive retribution made toward the Willow Kye for violators who crossed the border intentionally. Their sacrifice didn't count toward any debts and in the village, it was as if they just ceased to exist. The mountain was known to just swallow them, so over the years less and less decided to martyr themselves.

All the Wood Lord warriors were huge, lethal, and unforgiving. It was how they became known as the evil bears of the mountain in their tales. Both for their size and temperament. Some songs would describe them as a mythical group who hibernated once the snow fell, waiting for a Willow Kye to dare disturb their slumber before waking in a hungry temper. The only fact debunking the theory was that even in the winter months tracks would be around the mountain to remind them of their looming presence.

"THIS IS NOT ENOUGH to feed the village long, even with the mysterious hunter helping, Kavon, winter is coming. The Wood Lords are coming, and the beasts seem to have all gone farther to The Wall, it might be time to ask the King for leniency. See if a

deal can be made to lessen the burden of the winter,” Kavon’s best friend Merlo said when he had a moment of privacy.

Kavon knew it. He was the tribe’s heir, their prince and lead hunter now that his father’s age was advancing. However, not many were happy that a man who was known to be so cruel was set to be the next Chief. Selfishness was not a trait many of the Willow Kye appreciated in their people since they knew how much others could suffer. However, their Chiefs all followed a monarchy hierarchy with the eldest son becoming leader.

Kavon was married to a woman named Irae when they were only children. They were not allowed to live as man and wife until Irae reached the age of maturity. Irae quickly swelled with child, but Kavon was disappointed when their first was a girl. Needing a male heir, he was quick to make sure Irae was expecting again before the first was weaned, and just shy of their daughter turning one. There were no words to describe everyone’s relief when the second child was a boy. No one was more thankful than Irae since Kavon raged at her about the need of an heir the most.

Her hatred of her husband was of little consequence. Kavon was hated by most of his people for being overly arrogant and violent.

Willow Kye men were the alpha of the family, resorting to physical punishment when necessary but more to correct and teach than hurt.

Kavon was different.

He’d beat Irae in front of everyone like a man and dare those about to question his leadership as her husband. He’d hit his mother, sisters, or anyone really who he felt disrespected him and there was no mercy. The only one he appeared to obey was his father, but the old Chief was spending less time concerning himself with the day to day running of the village as his health decreased.

The more power Kavon attained the worse he became. Even

Merlo, his friend, was wary of Kavon's temperament. There was a cruelty in the prince that surpassed even the hottest tempered warriors, but Merlo was no fool, he kept Kavon close to ensure his own position.

The meat that kept filling up the game hut could not be depended on. No one knew where it was coming from or when it would cease. It had started a few months ago, and consistently when their supplies grew short, like a gift it would appear.

The boars they caught this hunt would be sufficient for his sister's marriage celebration, but it would not see them through the winter or pay their quarterly tax. They had bartered with skins for this pay period knowing it wouldn't be long until the next one rolled around. It was always the looming dread of what if? What if they couldn't pay? What if there wasn't enough food or supplies for winter? What if the King said no, and took more slaves at whim to the mountain? What if? What if? What if? A constant looming question in the life of the Willow Kye people.

"No. Fuck the Wood Lords. We will need to arrange another hunt once Illayda is married. Vicory can then negotiate a barter with his tribe," Kavon replied, quietly. He didn't want to discourage the hunters he had with him or allow Vicory to think they were weak. Although Kavon knew better, he dismissed his friend, "We will be fine."

Truth was, Kavon was getting desperate too, that was why he needed to get Illayda married. His sister was older by a year, but insignificant to the line of succession. It was only her betrothal to the eldest son of a tribe that they shared a small water border with that made her worth anything to her father or brother. It was a tribe they desperately wanted to make a blood alliance with. The Maceo tribe, was a short boat ride away for trade, and could be the Willow Kye's best chance of survival and keeping the Wood Lords at bay this winter.

If they could see the marriage to fruition and Vicory put a baby in her, the union would be successful. Both would help the

other. The Chiefs had reached an agreement that would hopefully better both of their positions. If Illayda failed to provide children, Vicory could take another wife and discard the princess and her family. Whenever he could, Kavon cruelly warned Illayda that if she let the tribe down by not conceiving quickly, he'd make sure she'd suffer. Needless to say, she despised him. Sometimes when another innocent victim of his wrath came to her to heal their wounds, she'd silently pray to one day bear witness to his downfall.

GAME WAS BECOMING MORE ELUSIVE. Their taxes were unwavering. All the pressure was on Kavon. It wasn't their fault there was no game, but the Wood Lords wouldn't care. It was just nature. The weather was turning, and the beasts retreated earlier than normal for the safety of the mountains. That meant a hard winter. They had seen it before and survived it. What the Willow Kye lacked in strength they made up for in resiliency.

Merlo knew his friend. Kavon was seething with hatred for the Wood Lords, who he felt enslaved his people. He would have gone to war over pride a hundred times just to reclaim the dignity they lost in the defeat, but his father and the elders forbade it. They knew the people of the Willow Kye didn't stand a chance next to the Wood Lords. Some hotheaded prince antagonizing them would mean the end of the entire tribe. The village of Bear Claw was all powerful; some even said it was under the power of magic. The Kings who ruled were rumored to have the ability to transform into a bear when the village was in danger. If Kavon lost his cool and declared war, he was signing the death warrant of everyone in the village, including himself. Peace was a necessary evil that must be maintained. It was his father's motto. It had been drilled into his head since he

was a child. Peace was their only chance of co-existence and peace was costly.

AS THE HUNTING party started their trek back to the village, Merlo thought his friend was being stubborn. They needed to get some more meat salted and stored before the weather turned. The King could be a difficult negotiator, but he had shown leniency before. It was when they would receive pigeons demanding more of one thing than another they had prepared for, that things were difficult. Last collection, the pigeon had required nearly double the deer skins depleting their own supply. The Chief obliged of course, after all he wasn't given much choice. If he refused and the supply was there, the warriors would just make up a charge to justify taking them. It had been a more reasonable request since deerskins were tanned and collected all year. They didn't spoil like food. Collection of food was easier to manage in the milder months. More beasts came down to graze upon the lush moorlands near the sea, fish were easier to catch. It meant harder work on behalf of the warriors, but no one starved.

In Merlo's opinion, Kavon needed to put his pride aside and think more about what his people needed, but he knew Kavon was far too selfish to do what was right for anyone besides himself.