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The Celebration of Carvahal

By: Owen Peterson

After the first big snow, when almost nothing is brown or green, the holiday of Carvahal takes place. Each person receives seven items of extreme value from their family. The gifts are practical and useful; ones that a person could use for a long time. This is the story of how Carvahal began and, how two people found happiness and family again.

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Hawthorn, breathing heavily, hid under a stump of a long-rotted spruce. He heard the high gravelly, deep-throated scream of a rarely seen mountain lion. It sounded like a woman screaming in pain and torment. He gripped his bow tighter, a slightly recurve flatbow. A soft leather quiver on his back, belted around his waist and shoulder contained 7 crow-fletched arrows. Both of the objects had served him for many years. Hawthorn had been on his own ever since his small village had burned in a raid from the people of the Far East. He waited in silence for the beast to find him, he knew it was only a matter of time. His blood-soaked pants would make sure of it, not his blood but the blood of the caribou he had just begun to butcher.

Down by the creek he had felt the presence of an animal behind him as he was butchering his kill. He only had seconds to turn around to see the mountain lion, only 50 yards away. He slid down the side of the nearby ravine, grabbing branches of small shrubs, anything to slow his descent. When his feet landed on flat

ground he ran like he never had, and never would again. He saw the spruce log and hid, knowing he could not outrun the cat.

The growl came again this time closer. Then nothing. The stalk, he thought with grim certainty, would be silent, as would the killing strike. He was not disappointed. The beast jumped over the log and turned with the speed of a storm toward him. He knocked an arrow. He let himself see the shot, following the arrow along the shaft to the lion's chest. He felt sure of the shot as his fingers slipped of the waxed string. His arrow's path was true, embedding itself into the hide and muscle of the cat's chest, up to the fletchings. One last scream was torn from the animal. Slowly it came to rest facing East with the sun almost midway in the sky. Hawthorn's heart was still thumping inside his chest but he felt the calm starting to roll over him. The calm that comes when one is safe again. Even when the danger is still there in front of you and yet seemingly gone.

He thought of what he must do next. He would honor the tradition that every animal killed would be used to its full extent no matter its history. Humans had done much worse and it was not right to blame when your kind should be blamed to the same extent. He had just started to skin the lion when he heard the almost imperceptible noise of a small branch cracking. He immediately turned from his work, knife in hand but almost as quickly realized, there was no need to worry. It was a boy of about 13 years. He did not carry much; just a small but well made, powerful bow; a quiver filled with hawk-feather fletched arrows, and a pack slung over his shoulder. One that must have carried all the rest he owned.

“My name is Red Hawk, I mean you no harm,” said the new comer in a hesitant manner as if not sure what to expect.

“Why are you here in the wilderness alone?” replied Hawthorn, wiping off the blade of the knife and sheathing it as he did so.

“The village I lived in is no longer anything but ash and scorched rock. Pillaged by raiders. Set a-flame when almost nothing remained. The raiders have weapons like none I have ever seen; balls of metal shooting from a metal tube. Not as quick to reload as our bows but still able to cause an enormous amount of damage,” Red Hawk answered.

“That too is my story. The men of the East raided my village and left me to fend for myself...until now,” informed Hawthorn, a sad edge to his voice.

“What do you mean *until now*? Will you let me join you?” inquired Red Hawk only daring to hope.

“If you wish but you must pull your weight on this journey, as I will,” answered Hawthorn, laying down the terms of their partnership.

“I accept and hope I will not hinder you” replied Red Hawk eagerly, sure not to miss his chance. The dark, cold winter was fast approaching, he stood a much better chance with a partner.

After many hours of butchering and hanging the meat, the two set up camp. Using spruce boughs and small saplings they built a medium-sized dome shelter against a large spruce. By that time a tinge of pink had come into the sky. Taking out his bow drill, Red Hawk started a fire close to the front of the shelter. He got out the heart of the caribou and placed it on a spruce board so he could season it with some herbs and shantrel.

They gathered for dinner, not saying much as they ate, just the occasional comment on the meal. The sun had gone well below the horizon before they went to sleep in there small shelter. Hawthorn, not a heavy sleeper, woke up early the next morning. Still dark, he could see seven stars not obscured by the large, winter clouds. He woke Red Hawk to see this. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes he slowly looked up to see why his new companion had woken him. Upon seeing the stars, Red Hawk had an inspiration.

“Hawthorn, those clouds are bringing winter, they are also bringing change. Since both our lives have so completely changed we should think of a new tradition... Let us celebrate by the giving of seven gifts, one for each star. What do you think?”

“A holiday for two people. One to recognize that much is changing but to give thanks to another,” Hawthorn agreed. “Seven is a good number. There were seven arrows in my quiver when I killed the lion.” he added almost as an afterthought.

“So let us sleep until the sun rises then gather what we will give and enjoy the new snow if the morning brings it,” suggested Red Hawk.

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In the morning there was the utter silence, as it is when the first snow falls. Reflected light from the snow beamed into their faces. Later, being the thing that woke them up to prepare for the celebration, they gave it the name Carvahal - first snow.