

Johnston, Mary Ann

In the Future Wild Horses

The dark grey-orange night stilled as the thunder of hooves echoed across the cold land. Loud snorts sounded and an odd grumble came from the galloping horned horses. Into the long wide basin they swept. Long manes and tails waved in the air, lightly feathered legs reached for their next step. Graceful necks arched with handsome heads that sported horns on them. The longest one curved upwards slightly below the shorter one, centered between wide intelligent eyes. Their dark eyes were never still as they looked over the countryside around them. Mares growled lowly to their foals to stay close as they galloped across the open area.

The lead mare suddenly roared and turned from her chosen path. With another loud roar she broke into a run, racing off in the new direction. The other mares and foals followed without a pause.

A large, dark red stallion raced beside the herd for several minutes before he veered off and slid to a stop facing the way they had been going before the direction change. With a roar he reared and lashed at the air as the last of his herd ran past. Another horse, coming from the other side of the running mares, halted several yards from the big stallion. The black horse stood silent and stared into the distance. He raised a feathered leg and pawed the dirt as he watched.

The chestnut roared out a challenge again. Blowing loudly through his nose he waited, his head high as he watched. The younger black stepped to his side and Red acknowledged his oldest son with a low growl never taking his eyes off the distance.

For several long minutes the two stallions stood watching, fully alert. Finally they saw something move a mile away. Their heads rose even higher as they watched whatever was moving. A howl sounded in the now quiet night. Both horses wheeled around and raced after the herd, they knew that howl meant danger. They needed to get the mares and foals to safety before the huge wolves attacked.

It took the two horses only minutes to catch up with the herd. The lead mare slowed as Red caught up with her. She turned her red and white head towards him. With a growl the stallion seemed to pass what he'd seen and heard to her, and she grunted in reply and stretched her legs out more. With a flick of her long tail she ran faster and veered a little to the south. The herd followed her lead as Red and the young black took up guard positions on either side of the herd.

Two more young stallions moved to the sides of the running horses, both falling into line several yards behind the two lead stallions.

Within minutes the herd passed out of the basin and into flat deserted land. The pinto mare turned once more and raced towards their distant protected area. She knew there would be plenty of grass and water, something they would need after their long run. With knowledge of the land they were running over, she lead the horses unerringly towards safety.

A half hour later the running horses slowed to a fast running walk. Exhausted, the smaller foals staggered along beside their mothers nudging them, wanting to stop, eat and sleep. The safety of their valley was not much farther away and the mares slowed more, letting the tired foals rest and catch their breath as they walked.

The two stallions halted and turned back towards the danger they'd been outrunning. The two younger horses stood back from the older ones, all of them turned to face the danger that had been behind them.

The stallions stood watching, alert to everything around them. Manes and tails drifted on the cold breeze that had come up, blowing harder as the darkness deepened. It covered the scent of their passing. The mares began to file into a narrow, zigzagging trail that lead through cliffs and into their hidden valley.

For a long time the four stood frozen in place, as their eyes took in everything they could see in the countryside. Though it was dark they could still see images, everything from small rocks around them to the hills and mountains in the distance.

After a long while Red shook his head. There'd been no sight of the wolves they'd heard earlier. They should be safe for the night, and probably for several days. He took one last look around then turned towards the valley. The three younger stallions, one after the other followed him.

Red trotted to the slit in the cliff wall and wound his way through the narrow opening for almost a half mile. It opened into a huge lush valley, where the mares were already grazing and the foals were either nursing or lying in the grass sleeping. He looked over his mares as he walked towards the water. Every one of the twenty two mares, eight yearlings and twelve foals were there, none had gotten lost. Everyone was fine.

Allowing himself to relax a little, Red took a deep drink of the cool water flowing out of the cliff rocks to pool into a deep pond in the corner of the valley. Raising his

head he grabbed several bites of grass as he moved away. The younger stallions drank then spread out along the edges of the herd.

Red headed to an almost invisible trail leading to the top of the cliffs. Cliffs surrounded the valley, with higher ones extending farther out from where he climbed. Once on top, he moved to his vantage point, to stand in front of the cliffs rising behind him. He stood in the dark watching. The cliffs towered above him in a jagged line rising fifty to eighty feet into the air. He blended in with the rocks around him, but could see for miles in three directions. The other direction was hampered by lower cliffs that extended eastward for miles. He and his mares knew of another hidden valley in the cliffs a half day's run from where he stood, he was content they wouldn't have to go there for awhile.

An hour later something brought Red's attention to alert. He tensed and watched the darkness. It wasn't the sound of wolves he heard. Something heavy was coming his way from the west. Blinking his eyes he brought what was coming into focus. A large herd of buffalo. Their heavy bodies moved at a steady walk below him as they came into view.

The buffalo in this time could weigh up to five thousand pounds. Nothing attacked them, the wolves, though almost four feet tall and vicious, wouldn't attack them unless it was a large pack and they found one buffalo alone. Buffalo were not afraid of wolves, whether in a pack or single, they easily killed the predators if they were attacked.

Red watched the herd move slowly past the valley entrance. The smell of the large animals obliterated all scent of the horses and totally eliminated their tracks. The

large animals provided a lot of cover for the hidden horse herd as they passed below him.

Dawn began to break. The sun rose over the eastern cliff, chasing away the orange sheen that the first light brought into the sky. Before long the sun began to warm the chilly land.

Red stretched and shook himself, then with a last look at the countryside he turned and made his way off the cliff. His long mane and tail blew in the wind as he headed down into the valley. His powerful legs followed the trail without missing a step. Below he could see his many multicolored mares and foals. Several colorful foals were running around, bucking and playing in the early morning light. One of the foals spotted him coming down the trail and with a roar of welcome ran towards him, three others followed in the chestnut's wake.

The foals greeted Red with short roars and nudges of their noses. Red stopped and accepted their greetings. His horned head rose high and he looked around for their mothers before he lowered his head and sniffed each foal then nudged them. With little grunts the foals turned and took off running, back to their play.

Red's black son approached and they touched noses before the black headed for the trail to the cliff top. Red strode to the water and after drinking his fill started grazing. Always alert to everything around him he listened to the mares and foals, even the wind seemed to talk to him. He often raised his head and looked around the valley at his family spread out around him.

Eating his fill Red moved to the shade of several stunted trees to one side of the valley. From there he could still look over his family members. Standing in the shade he went to sleep, though his ears twitched at any sound that reached him.

A roar sounded over the valley hours later and Red went from sleep to alert in an instant. He raced to the trail to the top of the cliff, without a pause he ran up to the top. The mares and foals headed for the corner of the valley where they couldn't be seen.

Reaching the top, Red halted beside his son and looked to where the black's eyes were fixed on something in the distance. Red looked and instantly spotted what was heading their way.

Men and horses. He looked back over his shoulder into the valley, not seeing any of his herd he looked again towards the riders a mile away. With a snort he and the black moved back into the shadow of the cliffs that stretched for three hundred feet to the left of them. In moments they'd blended into the cliff wall, looking as if they were part of the rocks. They were out of the direct line of sight of the oncoming horses and riders. Only someone who knew the face of the rocks well would be able to spot them, if someone knew where to look. Only their heads and horns could be seen

The oncoming riders rode closer. Their horned mounts testing the wind. The men on their backs tense and watchful. When they reached the wide swath of cut up ground where the buffalo herd passed earlier they stopped. Two riders dismounted and looked at the tracks. They wandered back and forth for several minutes before they walked back to their horses and mounted, the other five gathered around them. Finally one man

raised his arm and pointed to the east. After a discussion the men turned their horses and headed east.

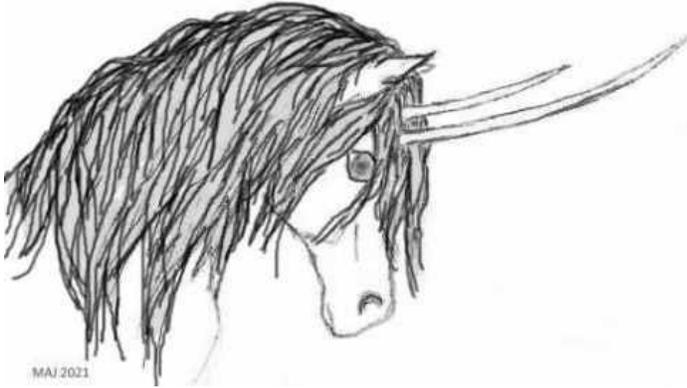
Red and his son watched from their concealed place until they could no longer see the horses and riders. The wind had carried their scent to them for awhile then it faded as the riders left the area. The two stallions stepped out of their hiding place and stood where they could see the direction the riders had gone.

For over an hour they watched. When Red was satisfied they were gone, he returned down the cliffside to the valley floor and gave a roar. Horned mares and foals and young horses came from their hiding place to spread out across the valley and graze once more.

Red looked over his sons and daughters and their mothers. He was content. Everyone was safe. There was plenty of sweet grass and water for them for several weeks. One of his sons came to him and stood beside him for several minutes before with a grumble he moved on to the pool of water. Red watched the young red stallion with the almost white mane and lengthening horns for a minute before turning his gaze to the mares in the valley. With a shake of his head and a snort he cantered across the field to his pretty lead mare's side.

Life was good for the small herd.

Fini



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