

MUSIC FOR THE EARTH



SEAN PALFREY

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FOR THE
EARTH

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For Judy

Our Children

Our Grandchildren

All Children

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Preface

This is the story of Wren and Graymartin, children who lived in the canyons of southwestern North America a thousand years ago.



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Chapter 1 - The River Vanishes

Graymartin stood in the warm sand of the riverbed and looked up at his crooked little sister, Wren, limping among the stones in their cave high in the canyon wall above him. The smooth rock was red and gold in the sunlight, and arched straight up a thousand feet to the sky, but Wren played silently, deep in the shadow of the great cave. She seemed so tiny and harmless. Graymartin wondered how she could be the reason there had been no rain.

The evening before, his family had been sitting on the floor of the cave looking out over the tops of the cottonwood trees at the dry grass and the trickle of water in the riverbed below.

Their people had always lived in this canyon, back into a time of myths and legends. The valley had been lush and green, and the river strong and clear as it ran between the massive canyon walls. Thick underbrush had lined the river's banks, filled with birds and impassible to all but the smallest animals, and a rich mat of grass had spread out to the scree at the bottom of the canyon walls.

Each spring, as the snow melted, the river had roared and rattled for a while, sweeping the brush away and leaving new layers of mud and rocks scattered across the canyon floor. As the water drained, it left rich soil, and the families had grown maize and grain to eat and store and feed themselves through the long cold seasons.

Little streams poured down the narrow side canyons, too, and nourished a thick growth of bushes and trees that yielded nuts and roots and berries. Small birds and animals scratched and rustled through the underbrush, and deer, mountain sheep and lion roamed the canyon.

But over the past few years, little snow had fallen in the cold seasons, though the winds had blown bitterly through the canyons and Graymartin and his father, Ka'a, had had to wear their warmest cloths to hunt. The river had frozen hard enough to walk on and an occasional deer had moved along its banks, but when the ice had broken, there was little water left beneath it. No flash floods had torn the canyon floors apart this year and few spring rains had soaked the earth.

Everyone was worried. The searing heat of summer had moved into the canyons early and the river was withering in front of them into a tiny stream winding through the trees. Crops had trouble breaking through the hard earth and their little stalks were thin and dry.

The river had always been the canyon's source of strength, but now it wanted to hide from the sun, as they all did. Beneath their cave, there was still a little stream of water, but further down the canyon, the river had dried up completely, leaving only a twisted band of dark, moist sand to show where it had run.

If he put his hands in the sand, Graymartin could still feel moisture where the water lay, the way the trees and rushes did to stay alive, but the water was too slippery to catch. Butterflies, roaming in little groups, fluttered and stamped on small, dark patches of riverbed as if willing the water to rise, but even they could not call the water up. The parched leaves and grass crackled in complaint whenever a breeze moved them, and the soil was cracking open in its search for water, but nothing came.

Unless it rained within the next few weeks, the river might completely disappear where they lived, too. The canyon was dying of thirst.

Early the day before, Graymartin's father, Ka'a, had gone up the river to look for water, but everything was dry there too. He had picked his way through each side canyon checking for springs. In good years, the long black lines that streaked down the canyon walls hissed with water in the rains, and cracks in the walls glistened with water. Little pools hid here and there among the rocks, and even in dry spells there were places known to every generation where moisture dripped through the walls from tiny streams inside the rock. Nothing now.

"I will be away all day long," he had said that morning. "You must find food and water, and carry it up to your mother and Wren."

Graymartin had muttered to himself. "I should be out hunting. Mother and Wren should grub for roots and pick the berries themselves." But he knew that they could not. Wren had been born six years before, but she had been severely injured and had lived all her life up in the cave. Pale Flower, their mother, had lived there with her, teaching and taking care of her. It had made life very difficult for everyone because they could not gather the food and haul the water, tasks that were usually done by women.

In the cold seasons, there were six who lived in the high cave, safe from predators, protected by the smooth sandstone walls that fell forty feet to the canyon floor. Graymartin, born years before Wren, was a quick, strong boy who had little patience with his broken sister and resented that he had to do her work as well as his own. In the warm seasons, he, their father, Laughing Crow (Cries like a Crow), called "Ka'a" by the family, his mother's sister, Yellow Leaf, and the large, happy man she lived with, Cat who Climbs Trees, whom they all called Maki, lived on the sandy riverbank at the base of the cliffs, farming, gathering food and hunting when they could.

When he returned that evening, Ka'a had asked the family to gather up in their cave. After they had eaten a supper of dry meal, Ka'a had shocked them all. "We have lived in this cave for many good seasons, but the rains no longer fall and the river is running dry before our maize begins to grow. The animals are leaving and we cannot survive here. Tomorrow, we must begin the search for a new spring and a new cave."

"It is all because of the small one that limps," Yellow Leaf had said. Her husband, Maki, had hushed her, but the cut was deep. They had all wondered why the rains came less and less each year, but no one had cast the blame before. Yellow Leaf could be so cruel.

Ka had had many bitter arguments with his wife's sister, but now he had more important things to say. "Whatever the cause, Graymartin, you and I must go up and down the canyon in search of a new source of water. Even though I am sure that the river has dried up everywhere, there may still be good springs hidden away. Your eyes and mind were dull today, you didn't find us much to eat. They must be sharper in the days ahead."

The boy wanted a chance to go off by himself. He was sure he could find springs that no one else could find. His mother said that he could see things that no one else could see, and climb even better than his father. But he knew that his father had been far down the canyon before, and might remember places to look.

"First, we will check the spring where we found the turkey last growing season. It is probably dry, though. All the animals seem to be moving away and their little ones are not surviving. We can hunt, but must be careful not to kill a mother animal with young.

“My greatest hope is that we can find the deep, cold spring along the rocks in the dark canyon down the valley many turns. No one will be looking down stream.

“If the water there still runs, we will look for a cave nearby that is level and safe. You think you are clever, Graymartin, but it is not a simple thing to find a good cave. In hot seasons, the roof must shade us and our food. It must protect us from the rain and snow. In the cold seasons, though, this same cave must let the sunshine in to warm us and the walls around us so that they in turn can warm us just a little through the long, cold nights.”

“You must be alert in other ways as well,” said Pale Flower. “Beware of old buildings in the caves, because their rooms may well have been abandoned for good reason. Unsettled spirits often dwell among the walls and we must not disturb them.” She wanted to make sure that the cave they chose was a place of peace, and Ka did not always think about these things ahead of time.

“Also,” Ka continued to Graymartin, “It will not be enough that you and I can climb up to the cave we choose. We will have to find one your sister can climb into, too, if she manages to get down to the canyon floor from here. There must be good ledges and solid rock to build a pathway up for all of us. We may have to make hand and foot holds, and even ladders, but that is something we will have time to do.”

“What about Maki and Yellow Leaf?” Graymartin asked.

“Of course, you should try to find a good place for them, too,” Pale Flower said. “They have no children and need little space. Perhaps they can build on top of our rooms, if there is not enough space on the floor of the cave you find. But,” she added sadly, “If there is only room for us, that will have to do in these hard times. Maki, you may have to find or build a home to live in somewhere else.”

“If we find a good cave, we will mark it with five stones, like this,” Ka said, as he set five hand-sized stones in a circle. “In the middle, we will place a living branch, after giving thanks for it. If we do not return before its leaves fall off, someone else can use it.”

But the words they all dreaded now had to be said, and Ka looked directly at Wren. “When we come back, you must climb down to the canyon floor, or we will have to leave you here on this ledge to die a lonely death. You are too big for us to carry down the wall, and

we will not be able to bring food and water to you here after we have moved.

“You have been practicing climbing in the cave for several seasons now, and should be ready. We no longer have a choice.”

There was silence. Everyone knew that this had been coming for a long time. Graymartin and Yellow Leaf had both taunted Wren in their own ways, but now that Laughing Crow had spoken it, it struck fear in all of them.

“Graymartin and I will be back in three days. You must be ready then.”

That day was coming much too soon for all of them.



Chapter 2

The Eye of the Canyon

That night Graymartin slept poorly. His dreams were filled with spirits who haunted caves. One of them looked like a wizened old woman who had died, abandoned and hungry, high in a tiny cave. She reached out over the ledge as he climbed up onto it and tried to eat his hand. As he pulled back, he lost his footing and fell towards the rocks at the base of the cliff.

In another dream, he was flying through a maze of canyons. Usually, he loved his flying dreams. But this time he was lost, unable to find water and unable to find a way out. Slimy creatures rustled in the darkness and clutched onto his clothes. He struggled but could never make it off the ground. He woke up screaming.

These dreams kept flickering through his mind as he and his father picked their way down the canyon. The air was misty and canyon walls were cool and brown before the sun rose. Graymartin loved to watch the first rays of light slant brilliantly into the canyon through the soft morning air, changing the walls to red then gold. It looked as if you could slide down from the canyon rim on those first sun beams. The swallows seemed to try this every day, but even they slipped in off the shafts and vanished into shadows now and then.

Many of the walls of the canyon were smooth as ice, but they had cracks and ledges in them that Graymartin thought looked like giant creatures, birds and trees against a sky of rock.

“Those shapes are carved when huge stone slabs shear off the walls and drop into the canyon,” his father said. “The cracks and booms you hear as the snow melts are the rocks falling. I saw one once, and it was frightening to see the wall just pull apart. With a roar, a huge piece of rock just sliced down the cliff and buried itself, and everything beneath it, in the sand. Every boulder here has done that.

But Graymartin imagined these forms on the walls to be spirits fixed in stone. He sometimes dreamed of them tearing loose from their walls at night to roam the canyons, hunting.

There were also dark stains which dropped straight down the canyon walls. Down these tracks the water hissed and sprayed whenever rains came to nourish the living. Perhaps the stone images were the spirits of animals and birds and bushes resting after they had taken their long journeys after death, and perhaps the water stains refreshed these spirits, even in dry times.

Graymartin was very good at reading the walls for signs of water, but today he could find no active springs. There were sparrows and wrens in the scrawny bushes clinging to ledges in the wall. Red squirrels jumped from tree to tree insulting him as he walked along, and marmots whistled at him from the protection of their dens. He loved to hunt and knew that he could hit the little creatures with stones if he crept close enough, but his father would not let him.

"We have more important things to do today than chase squirrels. That will have to wait," his father said.

"But I can get us food."

"So can I, but we have just enough for now."

Graymartin would rather have made this journey by himself.

Most of the side canyons were dry and short, but about midafternoon they rounded a bend and found a canyon heading off to the sun as far as he could see. It was beautiful, wide and grassy, but deep in the middle of this canyon rose two massive red towers as high as the sky.

"It is said that Spider Woman first appeared there, spinning her terrible webs between those spires," his father said. "We will explore that canyon later if we have to. It looks green, but I do not know of any springs. They say that all that live there live off Spider Woman's prey and need no water."

Ka'a tried to say this very casually. He had told Graymartin that he didn't believe in spirits and legends very much, and that gods lived long ago, but Graymartin wasn't sure how true this was. His father always seemed uncomfortable talking about these gods and spirits, and he passed this canyon as quickly as he could.

Graymartin was fascinated, though, because he could see birds of all types circling the spires. Hawks and eagles soared near the top, ravens swooped around the middle, while jays and roadrunners patrolled the base. All predators. Servants of the Spider Woman, he thought to himself.

The spring that Graymartin and Ka'a had hoped to find was a sacred place that held special significance for his family.

"Our families have known about this spring for many generations," his father told him. "But there are strange stories. People may seek it out only in times of greatest need.

"Once I was hunting in this part of the canyon long ago and was weak from lack of food and water. I searched for many hours, and was so exhausted that I thought I would die if I couldn't find something to drink and eat. When I found the spring, not only was it full of dark, clear water, but there was also a large hare nearby that offered me enough food to sustain me for the long trip home.

"The keeper of the spring is said to be a massive snake, as old as the stones she lies on. It was to her I prayed, and it was she who granted me the water and the hare. It is said that if the circumstances are not serious enough, though, this snake will suck the water down with her into chasms deep inside the earth, and she might take the hunter down as well."

Ka was confident that the family's need was great enough, but Graymartin did not want to meet this creature at all. His father had never seen her, and he hoped it would be the same for them this time. He was familiar with most of the snakes in the canyon. There were thick ones that rattled when upset and struck with deadly quickness. Their cousins flew across the sand, swishing sideways. Their writhing movements made no sense, but worked. Others liked the water, and lived there when they could. Perhaps the serpent of the spring was one of these. Graymartin hoped not, because they killed in water, too. He prayed a little, just in case.

The spring was hidden up a steep side canyon, and its water flowed between large rocks for only a short distance before it disappeared again into a hole in the earth. There would be no stream to see or hear.

Graymartin and his father had been splitting up and exploring different side canyons in order to save time. They watched for greener trees and bushes that might be signs of hidden water in this dry time. After many hours searching the area Ka'a thought the spring should be, Graymartin caught a flash of color that glittered, lush and healthy, in among some large smooth rocks a short way up a small side canyon.

He knew he had to climb above these rocks to reach the spring. He moved very cautiously through the few small trees that clutched to

cracks along the steep ridge, and as he did so, he heard a long, harsh hiss, the breath of a snake around her flickering tongue, or the whisper of her scales as she moved across the stones. He stopped, rigid, ready to run. But there was only silence.

He whispered greetings to the unseen guardian of the spring and looked over the top of the boulders. There, deep between wet rocks, was a dark reflective pool, large enough to lower a basket into and draw out water. Around the spring spiraled smooth stones, etched with ridges where the snake had lain. He looked down into it, terrified to find the snake, but he saw only his own reflection, a dark shape in the center of a shining sky. There were no ripples on the surface, and the round pool looked like a bright eye, with his dark face suspended in the middle. He imagined this as the eye of the earth, and shivered. Was there only one, or were there others, watching other people, other skies?

Graymartin climbed back out of the little canyon and found his father. Together they went back to try the water. Once again, the great snake stayed hidden, and they found the water to be just as sweet and cold as his father remembered it.

The sun had dropped behind the canyon edge a while ago, and their job was only partly done, so as they rested on one of the smooth boulders by the side of the riverbed, they scanned the opposite wall of the canyon for caves.

Larger caves tended to arch along the inner curves of the great walls, and Graymartin could make out a few that might be big enough both to live in and store food in for the cold months. Several seemed too high to be reached easily by his family, especially his sister, if she ever made it here at all.

Pale Flower, though, was an excellent climber. She was full of surprises. She rarely went out with him, but on those few occasions that she did, he had been amazed with her balance and strength. She could not see well, and even when he pointed things out to her, she just agreed, assuming they were there. But she seemed to love to climb, explore and even hunt, and did them very well.

The person who would have the greatest trouble climbing to a new cave, besides Wren, was Maki. He was Yellow Leaf's partner of many seasons, and a kind man, but he couldn't move without falling over something. Graymartin and his father refused to hunt with him because he made so much noise, stumbling over things that weren't

even there. He couldn't use a sling and couldn't hit anything smaller than a tree with a spear, so he frightened every living thing away before even Graymartin could see it. Probably because of this, Maki and Yellow Leaf ate mostly roots and berries that couldn't run away. But they were lucky because Yellow Leaf, as unpredictable as she was, could cook the most disgusting root into something wonderful.

Thinking of this made Graymartin hungry, so they opened their pouches to find out what Pale Flower had sent with them. Her food tasted just like the earth and the stalks it came from.

After the dreams of the last night, as little as he believed in harmful spirits in the daytime, Graymartin did not like the idea of climbing into an abandoned cave at dusk. He did not admit this to his father.

"I'm tired," he said apologetically. "Can we eat and rest and look for caves when the light is better tomorrow?"

They looked around for a warm and comfortable spot to sleep at the base of the great wall, far enough from the well of the snake to feel safe. It cooled down at night, but the sand and stone radiated heat for a long time after sunset.

Before settling down, though, they searched the canyon floor for spoor to see which animals were coming to the spring. There were tracks and droppings of small ones, but not of deer or sheep, or even coyote. They found no evidence of the big cats that might hunt them when they got hungry enough. The edges of the pool and narrow stream were very steep, and reaching the water might be so hard for large animals that they had simply moved away when the river dried up. This would make the job of finding larger game to dry and smoke for winter even more difficult.

Graymartin woke up well before the sun rose over the rim of the canyon, because he knew that the early slanting light might help him find the easiest ways to climb up to the caves. He found a good place to greet the sun as its first rays dropped into the canyon, then turned his attention to the light it shone upon the rocks.

In the brighter light of day, he could tell that several of the caves he had seen the night before had carvings or paintings on the walls that arched above them, so he knew they had probably been lived in long ago and abandoned.

“Which ones should we try?” He asked. He had picked out the two he thought most promising, but he wasn’t sure he wanted to enter any that had the “unsettled spirits” his mother spoke about. If he got his father’s reassurance, though, it would probably be safe enough.

“Explore those two,” his father said. “You know what to look for. They should both get the right amount of sun, I think. I will look for other signs of water and good places to grow maize.”

After a few moments of consideration, Graymartin started up. The first one turned out to be too difficult, even for him, though it was one he thought he could see pictures in. The idea that others before him had been able to reach this cave made him angry, and he tried every way he could without success. “Well, if I can’t get up there now, no one can,” he muttered. Perhaps the old ones knew how to fly, or perhaps evil spirits had carved the images there just to tempt us and make us fall, he thought.

The next cave was much easier to reach, but turned out to have a ledge that was too narrow to live on. There were scattered stones of little walls, but they could not have been for anything bigger than granaries for storing food. Graymartin wasn’t sure if grain was dead or could have an angry spirit. Perhaps his mother could tell him. They might be able still to use that ledge for something.

The sun was getting hot now, and the boy knew that if they could not find a good cave near here, his family would have to move much further away. Perhaps the only caves left in the canyon that had good water nearby were already being lived in. He had never heard of one family fighting another over water or a place to live, but the thought of it made him very uneasy. A greater urgency pushed him on.

In the next bend, there was another cave. It was in the sunny wall, flat and empty, and the ruins of very old buildings rested on the sand beneath it near the dry riverbed. The original path up to it was no longer climbable because the wall had sheared off in a number of places. Slivers of rock were strewn around as if thrown there by unruly children.

He looked up. The wall was smooth, but there were ledges and cracks where brush and occasional blades of grass grew all the way up the left side. The cave was well above the tops of the trees, so it would afford good protection, if they could reach it. He tested the rock and found it pretty firm, and picked a route to try.

Graymartin was a superb climber. On the day he was born, his mother had seen a mountain sheep, and this had blessed him with great skills. Ka'a had spent many hours teaching him to plot his climbing lines and find good hand and foot holds that would not crumble, but he had rapidly outstripped his father. Believing he could climb anything, he had taken on walls that were far too steep, and he had fallen many times. But a spirit always seemed to be there to protect him, and he had never been injured seriously. With his sharp eyes, he could read the walls well, and quickly learned the tricks to avoid getting himself trapped, unable to go up or down.

The path up to this cave was not at all difficult for him, and he reached the ledge quickly. He hesitated as he pulled himself up over the top, half expecting to be grasped by a hungry spirit or struck by a snake, but the ledge was quiet and uninhabited, at least by anything visible.

Its floor was flat, deep enough to fit several rooms, and wide enough to add a granary, but there were no structures there. There were faint pictures and eroded carvings on several of the walls, some images he recognized as sheep and water, but others he had never seen before. It was a perfect cave, and he could not understand why there were no ruins there at all.

Graymartin rested in the shade of the high roof and listened. He could hear the dry rustling of the trees on the canyon floor below. These weren't the normal growing season sounds, when the wind made soft whispers through green leaves. It sounded like the harvest season when leaves were about to fall.

There were birds though, flitting through the trees. They would make Wren happy. But there was no water in the riverbed, no sound of water as there was at home. It scared him that they should move from a place where the river could still be heard and seen, as tiny as it was, to one where the water was silent and deep in the earth, if there at all. They would have to rely completely on the spring in the rocks. And what if it dried up? Would that mean the dying of the canyon?

He tried another route down, as a challenge. He had such confidence that he just eased himself over the ledge and let his toes find cracks in the warm rock all by themselves. The holds were there, and as securely as a spider on a wall, he lowered his arms and legs into one hair-thin crack after another until he reached the steep,

curving rock at the base. There he turned around and skipped down the smooth stone face to the sand.

Graymartin rested at the bottom for a moment. He knew that he had done his job well. He had found the spring and found a cave that could house them, but despite this, he was uncomfortable. There was something eerie about the spring, and the cave. It was near water and had paintings in it, but it had no rooms. Could there still be spirits there if they had no rooms to live in? He would have to let his father and mother decide this.

His father had found no other springs, but there was excellent flat land for crops, as long as they had sufficient water to keep them moist. He showed his father the cave, and together they looked for cracks and ledges to cut holes for Wren. The rock seemed firm and the steepest stretches of the path passable. They turned home.

As they worked their way back, Graymartin explored each new turn in the canyon. It looked different going this way. He climbed up through open arches high in some of these walls, windows from one curve of the canyon to the next. They were some of the best places to hide and watch everything going on below.

Sitting on these high perches, Graymartin felt he could almost see beyond the canyon rim. Just more sky. No one ever had ever been up there. Even he could not climb that high. He often wondered what the hawks and eagles saw, circling high above him. How far did the sky go? Where did the clouds come from before they appeared over the canyon rim? Were the clouds water spirits? There seemed to be so few answers.

Graymartin sometimes asked his father these questions, but he seemed uninterested. "Learn the ways of the animals and birds that you can see and hunt," he had said. "Let old women think about the clouds and water spirits. There has been no one in the canyons to answer those questions for generations."

"Perhaps that is why no rain comes," Graymartin said, but got only an irritated glare from his father.

As he was nearing home, Graymartin heard a crashing in the brush to his right. He knew it had to be Maki, hunting.

"Catch anything?" he asked, knowing the answer before the large man stumbled out of the underbrush.

“Berries.” Maki said, “Without you here to chase them, they were getting slow and lazy. I did catch some of them. What did you find?”

“We found the spring and were not eaten by the snake this time. We found a cave, but I am not sure how comfortable it will be for all of us. There are others, but they many had old buildings in them.”

“I am not sure what Yellow Leaf wants to do, or if she even knows herself. We shall see.” Maki was rarely serious, but Graymartin sensed that he was very worried.

That night they met in the small round room in the floor of the cave that was set aside for the most serious discussions. Normally, the children were not allowed in there, and when they were, they were not permitted to talk. Maki and Yellow Leaf were invited, too, since the decisions now involved them as well.

“Although the river no longer flows there, the place we found is more secure than what we have here. The spring is excellent, and our need is great,” Ka’a told them. “I believe our family must move. Each day here it gets harder and harder to supply ourselves with water and food. Even the animals are moving away.”

“Perhaps Maki should go there to look for an empty cave for us,” Yellow Leaf said. “But he might starve on the way, or trip on a snake and die. Perhaps I should go with him to save him from himself.”

Pale Flower was not fond of her sister’s sharp tongue. She often turned it cruelly on others in the family. She was jealous of Pale Flower’s children, perhaps because she was unable to have any of her own, and she was especially unkind to Wren. Pale Flower wondered if Maki would live more happily by himself, but she said nothing.

Now, Ka’a turned and looked at Wren. “Tomorrow you must climb down from here to the canyon floor. We will start soon after first light.” No discussion, just a statement of what she had to do.

Chapter 3

Spirits in the Dark

Wren had lived her whole life in the cave because she wasn't able to climb down. The great rock wall they lived in rose straight to the sky and dropped straight down to rocky scree at the edges of the canyon floor. It was broken here and there by uneven rocks and ledges, and, for generations, people had climbed up to the caves along these cracks, using hand and foot holds carved into them by their ancestors. There were several paths, but none was easy. To cross certain of the steepest parts, people had notched tree trunks to serve as ladders. No hungry wolf or mountain lion could ever reach the cave.

Wren had brought trouble with her, though, from birth it seemed. She had been born under a full moon, and coyotes had howled with her from the moment she emerged. This had been a bad beginning, but she had truly changed their lives the day she fell.

Graymartin had told her the story many times to blame or scare her. He was years older than she was and remembered vividly what had happened.

"You were a noisy little girl and a real troublemaker, quick, and into everything. You went from crawling to running without pausing to walk and didn't realize that with one wrong step you could fall all the way down from the edge of the cave to the canyon floor so far below. And that's what you did.

"One morning you made a dash for the door of the room we slept in, when no one was looking. We had built a little wall in the doorway especially to stop you from getting out, but you climbed up and over it, and ran onto the outer edge. Before anyone could catch you, off you flew.

"I was in the brush near the river and heard Mother cry out. You were bouncing and screaming down the rocks in the scree at the base of the cliff. Father was running toward you, and I did, too. When I got there, Father had you in his arms. Your leg was bent in all directions, and you were covered with cuts and thorns and blood."

Her leg had been horribly broken. The birds, the rocks and the trees were all crying. Ka'a strapped her onto his back and carried her

howling all the way back up the rock face to their cave. A medicine woman came from far up the canyon and performed a ceremony for her in the kiva, the circular room cut deep into the floor of their ledge. Her father made wooden splints for her leg, but she had mended all twisted and bent.

For years after the fall, Wren had been terrified of the edge of the cave, and she stayed far back from it. Even the thought of climbing down gripped her with fear. She played among the little rock and mud buildings her family lived in, protected by the great stone roof that arched above them. The rooms were stacked one on top of the other like rocks by a stream. Most had doors for people and narrow windows to let air in and smoke out. In these, the family slept and ate and cooked and worked during the cold seasons.

In the corners of the cave there were several granaries where they stored maize and other foods for the cold seasons, but these only had one small door which was kept closed all the time to keep the squirrels and birds out.

The walls of the cave were very smooth, but some had signs and figures carved and painted on them. Wren's favorite corner was along the morning wall where the sun shone first. She would sit under the figures of animals and gods carved into the smooth red rock and watch the sun light them up, one by one.

Her best friend on the wall was a shiny circular figure with corn stalk hair and clear, pale eyes that she called "Happiness Woman". To her, the little girl told all sorts of wonderful stories filled with birds and imaginary animals, spirits, and strange creatures, some lonely and frightening, others silly and full of laughter.

"Hello Happiness Woman."

"Good morning, child," she seemed to say as the little girl looked up at her. "Be well today." Swallows swept around the opening of her cave creating shadows like leaves in the wind.

Happiness Woman glittered. "There was some rain in the mountains last night."

Wren looked at the dry sand below her. "There was none here."

"No. Have you ever seen mountains?" she seemed to say.

"No," said Wren. "But I've heard of them – great dark, tall, cold things far away. Where dark spirits live my father said."

“Yes, that’s true,” said the soft voice, “But there are good spirits, too, and our people came up from there long ago.”

“Where did they come from?”

“There’s a world under the mountains, perhaps under here, too.”

“Can we go there? What’s it like? Have you been there?”

“Long ago, but all I remember is that it was very dark. Even my light could not show much. But it’s so bright and beautiful here.”

“Yes. Thank you for telling me things. I get lonely. The others don’t talk to me much.”

“I know. They’re busy. And mostly they just want you to get strong, and big.”

One of the swallows flew by and peeped. Wren turned back to drawing in the sand on the floor of the cave.

She had other friends, too, these swallows who darted through the light and shadows around her cave, and imaginary beings she played with in the dust. There were many things to fear, too, like the spirits who made strange noises in the night and the angry spirits who hid inside the wind and tried to push her off the ledge.

Her mother, Pale Flower, had taught her many useful things. She showed her how to weave reeds into baskets and mix seeds and roots for food. But Wren loved to play, especially with colors and textures, and she was constantly being scolded for making pretty things to eat that tasted awful.

Ka’a was ashamed of his deformed child. Her back was crooked, her leg was badly bent, and she could never walk straight. She made him very uneasy. Her dark, shining eyes searched the corners of his thoughts whenever he spoke to her and seemed to question everything he said. She should have died in the fall he thought. She made every day so difficult.

He was also angry that his wife felt she needed to stay on the ledge with the little girl all the time instead of helping on the canyon floor, growing and gathering food.

"You should leave her, and work with us each day," Graymartin had heard him say so many times. "She has lived six years and is still of no use. She’s at least big enough to stay up here alone."

"She'd be scared and lonely, and I'm teaching her many important things. She's clever, and good with her hands. She needs me."

"Perhaps, but we do too. You could do much more for us down there."

The arguments had continued and became more frequent as water became more scarce and the work more difficult. The fights had often torn the family apart.

One evening, after the last long, dry growing season, Laughing Crow had announced to the family, "Wren must learn to climb out of the cave and live with us down by the river." Turning to her he growled, "You are no longer a baby. Climbing up and down will be hard for you, but you will learn. Your mother says that no matter how broken you are, you are not stupid. We will do what we can to help you, but you must overcome your fear and make yourself useful to the family."

Graymartin had grumbled in agreement. "She'll never do it, though. She'll hide up here for the rest of her life, like some old animal too lame move."

Pale Flower had known that such a time would come for Wren, and had dreaded it. She blamed herself for the child's fall and wanted to keep her safe forever. But she also knew that she could not stay up in the cave all her life with the crippled child.

So that following spring, Wren had practiced climbing. It had been very hard. The rough stone walls were safe places to climb, and she found the wood and thatch roofs wonderful places to rest. She loved to sit and watch the birds that filled the canyon air, and dream about the world beyond the cave, but the fall haunted her, and every time she thought about climbing over edge, she froze and couldn't move or think or breathe.

Fear and pain tormented her and never let her rest. They were cruel things, and she yelled at them. Her body didn't do what other bodies did. Her curved back and twisted leg hurt all the time, and it seemed that every other part of her body hurt in sympathy. As she climbed over the rocks and walls on the ledge, she fell again and again, and she was constantly bruising herself. No one could bear being near her. She cried and complained, but the only ones who seemed to listen were her friends carved and painted on the cave walls like Happiness Woman and the swallows who sang to her as they flashed by. She told them how much her legs hurt, and how thirsty she was, and they whispered to her words of hope and encouragement.

That next spring, Graymartin and Maki had cut new holes into the cliff and into the trees to fit Wren's small and crooked body. They did their best to guess what might help, because she had never dared to look over the lip of the ledge, much less try to climb down.

As Graymartin worked, he wondered about his sister. Could she be the reason there had been so little water every year since she was born?

His mother said that dry times always came and went. There were generations when the sky and the earth gave so much water that the crops rotted in the granaries, and other times when so little water flowed from year to year that nothing grew at all.

But his father said there were always reasons for hard times. "Sometimes the wrongs we do are difficult to find. Perhaps someone didn't give proper thanks to the gods for food, or didn't greet the sun correctly. Perhaps Maki crushed a flower or, you, Graymartin killed a mother turkey thoughtlessly."

Wren seemed so insignificant, though, to be the cause. Still, who could understand the gods and spirits? They were not selective in their punishment. Now the whole canyon was suffering. Everyone was looking for causes, and every family was trying to regain balance in their lives and purity through ceremonies with prayers and songs and dances.

Graymartin had little patience with praying and singing. Perhaps someone needed to do this, but why him? His balance was very good.

"You and she are young, but you are both important to our family as a whole," his mother had said. "If even one of us is out of harmony or balance with the world, the reasons lie within us all. Together we must work to make it well again."

Perhaps Wren had caused the drought, but if so, how was the family supposed to regain harmony? Perhaps, at least, if she were living with them on the canyon floor, their harmony would improve a little. Finally, now, the time had come.

In the night, Wren opened her eyes. It was absolutely dark and silent. All around her, the canyons rested. She searched the darkness for sounds or hints of light, but there were none. The spirits weren't out there, they were all inside her.

She closed her eyes again and in her dreams her friends the swallows swooped and darted in the sun. They lived in caves, as she

did, high up in the canyon walls. The river turned and rustled through the tall green trees below.

But in the dream that night, fear surged in, and Wren went tumbling off the ledge, falling helplessly, as she had years before. The fall went on and on, and screaming echoed from all sides. Bang and crunch and up again into the air, and bang and crunch again. The rocks and trees and thorns and cries were all jumbled in there together, and then silence.

Then the pain, but it was never clear in the dreams whether the pain was then or now, or both. It never really went away, but they said it had been far worse then. There was darkness in the dreams too, and faces she did not know, and music. There was always music.

Wren woke up again and opened her eyes. She could see a little light this time, far up, glistening, gray along the edge of the canyon rim. Still no sounds. The day was coming, though, finally, and the sun would shine.

Light had a spirit, she thought. It moved, and showed you things, and had its own music. But did the dark? Or was there no spirit in the dark until something else showed up to move inside it?

Wren watched the gray sky turn slowly into blue. As the light awoke, the sounds did too, and she imagined mice and sparrows starting to move around. No deer yet. They might come later. The music inside her joined in and mingled with the wind in the leaves and the faint clatter of the river.

"Hello, swallows," she greeted her friends. They seemed happy, flashing through the early morning light and shadows. "Fly with care, and wish me well."

A pang of fear gripped her again, this time about today. Today she had to climb out over the edge of the terrifying drop that froze her heart whenever she looked at it, down the path for the first time, down the wall past which she had fallen all that time ago.

"Hello Happiness Woman. Stay with me."

She glanced anxiously at the trees and rocks, and the glitter of water that curled its way across the canyon floor. That was where she wanted to be, exploring all the wonderful things Graymartin had told her about, whenever he bothered to talk to her. That was where her

family spent most of its days as she watched and played on the ledge.

Wren heard her family start to move about their tiny rooms nearby. Her mother made a meal of mush and berries, and they ate together. Then they went to the morning corner of the cave to greet the sun. As always, they gave thanks for the arrival of the new day. Wren was not so sure. She looked down at the steep path. She had to, fear or no fear. Go away, fear, she yelled silently, but it didn't.

Ka'a went first. It took him only a few minutes to climb all the way down. It seemed so easy. He stood by the bottom ladder near the canyon floor.

Graymartin went next and perched himself at the end of a narrow ledge part way down, ready to help Wren over the most difficult stretch of rock. Pale Flower knelt at the top.

Wren was scared beyond words. She gasped for air, but couldn't find enough to breathe.

"Slowly. Breathe more slowly," her mother said. "You can do it."

Wren turned at last and stretched her good leg over the edge. With one hand she clung to her mother's hand and with the other she clutched the lip of the ledge. She felt around with her foot and found the hole. She put her weight on this good leg, but couldn't let go of her mother's hand. She swung the crooked leg out into the empty air. For an awful moment she thought she would fall again, but she pressed herself close to the wall, and searched for the little notch in the rock her brother had cut there, somewhere. Her foot finally found the hole, and slipped in.

"You're steady, now," her mother said. "You can let go." After an agonizing moment, she did.

She found a lower hold to grip with one hand, and took another step, and then another. She was terrified to change each grip, to take each step, but she knew she had to. She inched her way down, pressed against the wall, her body so tight it almost couldn't move. Her legs didn't know where to go, and she didn't dare look. Her family watched, helpless, fearful of any loose stone or slip.

A crow cried nearby and startled her. She clutched the rock and closed her eyes. Her father's voice. It never laughed.

"Leave me alone," she said out loud. "I will do this myself."

She made it to a ledge and rested. She sat there clutching a scrawny tree, perched as she was on a crack the size of nothing in the great rock face. She tried to look down to study the next steps of

the pathway the way she had been told, but it was still so steep and looked so different every time she looked, she found it hard to think.

Relax. Breathe, her mother had said. So, she tried.

Graymartin was there below her, urging her to keep going. He could be so mean, but she knew he was strong and proud of his climbing, and was trying to help. He came up to help her foot find the next step, but she had to turn around again to do this and that was one of the worst parts.

Graymartin took her leg and tried to pull it toward the foothold, but this made her lose her balance. "Stop! Stop!" she cried. "I'll do it. Wait a moment." He let go of her leg, but steadied her body. "Thank you," she said.

With his help, she moved onto one of the ladders. Even though this was something she could hold onto with her hands, she hugged it so tightly it hurt. The holes were there, made especially for her. They fit and held. No slips, no falls. Step by careful step she inched her way down.

After time that seemed like days, and years of fear and nightmares, Wren finally set her feet for the first time firmly on the canyon floor.



Chapter 4

Drawings in the Sand

Wren's climb down to the canyon floor had made her the center of attention for a while, and her success was the success of the whole family. They were all proud and very relieved.

But once she was down, the day went on for them. She was exhausted, and they all knew that she would be of little help with all they had to do to move to the new cave.

"You should practice walking in the sand. I know you say that that moving hurts and even sitting makes you sore, but you must learn to walk with us in any case. You will always be too slow and clumsy to hunt, but you can learn to plant the maize and squash and gather roots and berries," her father told her.

"But rest for now," her mother said, "and look around. In a while, I'll come and show you things to do.

For Wren, the canyon floor was an amazing new world. For years, she had looked down on the tops of the trees and watched the river shimmer in the sun and shine as ice. Now she could touch the leaves. Dry as they were, they felt soft and made whispering noises when she rubbed them between her fingers. She moved to the edge of the river. It was now only a trickle, but the water glittered in the sun and she watched the little waves weave around the sand bars. Leaves floated with the current, spinning slowly as they touched the banks. She swished her hands through the shallow water. It tickled.

Birds she had never seen before darted through the bushes, flitting from shade to shade. Flies with transparent wings hovered over the river, searching. For what? It wasn't clear. They would land for an instant, look around, and whir off again.

She looked back up at her home. The rooms looked tiny, and the great stone roof curved gracefully up into the bright sky.

"I wonder if I'll ever go up there again," she whispered to herself.

A large, fuzzy creature looked out from between some rocks at the top of the scree. He was yellow and sweet looking with a large nose and two big teeth. He looks at Wren curiously. She did not move.

“Hello” she said. He stared at her. “Do you have a name?” she asked. Still, he just looked at her curiously. He did not look scary or as if he was going to come over and bite her. Rather, he seemed worried that she might bite him.

The creature had some grass sticking out between his teeth, so Wren pulled up some grass from around her and held it out to him, but as soon as she shifted, he squeaked and ran back between the rocks.

“Don’t be afraid,” said Wren to the rocks. Nothing moved. She sat there and watched. In a few moments the creature’s dark nose poked out. Then his whiskers. Then his eyes.

“It’s OK,” said Wren. “I won’t hurt you. Do you like grass?” She paused. “Here’s some.” He just looked at her. He did not seem really scared of her, his eyes sparkled and his nose twitched, but he stayed where he was. Wren looked around her to see if she could see anything that he might like, but the ground was bare. There were a few pine nuts under a little tree within reach of her. She leaned over and picked them up. She tossed them toward the creature. He backed up for a moment behind the rock, but since she did not make any more noise, he looked out at her quickly this time.

“Come out,” Wren said, but he wouldn’t.

Wren sat there in the shade watching him quietly, and soon, he started slowly picking his way around the rocks. He was fat and his fur was a shiny yellow in the sun. His nose was a dark black color and Wren wanted to call him “Fat Nose” or “Too Big Teeth” but did not want to insult him this early in their friendship. She thought perhaps “Squeak” was a nicer name, so she settled on it for now.

Pale Flower called out to her to move over to join her where she was preparing the soil to plant some beans, so Wren stood up stiffly. Squeak squeaked and disappeared into a nearby rock pile.

Things were much too interesting down here for her to worry about this though. Now she had made the climb down, she could go with them to the new cave. She was very excited.

She wanted Graymartin to tell her about everything. As angry as he was sometimes, she thought he was very wise, and magic, too. She had seen him climb the sheer walls and trees along the river, for fun, and get things no one else could get, like eggs and nuts. But he was usually short with her, annoyed with the little girl who asked him so many questions and couldn't do anything worthwhile. He called her names like "Dust", because she was the color of the earth, or "Crooked One".

Sometimes, though, when he was particularly pleased with himself, Graymartin had told her stories about the birds and animals he had hunted, and how the Great Wall changed from day to day. He told her how to watch the light and shadows, and the creatures who lived in the canyons and far above them. He liked animals and birds with speed and power, like mountain sheep, and deer and badger, and he especially loved the eagles and hawks that circled above the canyon rim and cried with piercing sharpness, freezing small animals in their tracks in the sand.

And for a while this day, he walked with her. He showed her a few of his favorite caves, and pointed out holes of mice and marmots. He told her about the wall with animals carved into it, but that was too far away for her to walk. He pointed out the murals of the gods, the carvings etched by time and water into the canyon walls. She did not seem to understand those at all.

Soon she tired, and he lost patience with her slowness. They lay under an old, gnarled cottonwood tree and watched the sky.

Graymartin talked out loud of things he'd seen, more to himself than to his little sister. He described the running birds who chased down snakes and carried them around proudly for everyone to see. He told of foxes who pounced on mice and birds among the rocks, and prickly porcupines who shuffled through the trees. Rock squirrels looked more like rocks than squirrels Wren thought. Graymartin pointed out hawks and eagles far above, describing their pale heads, or red tails, or the white bands on their dark wings. They were just dark dots to her. What were they doing way up there if they were hunting things down here? How could they tell the difference between a rock and something good to eat?

Graymartin wondered out loud if there was a world up there that only these birds could see. Perhaps that was why they flew so high.

I wonder if they have families, too, thought Wren, and bird children who can't fly very well, just as I can't run and climb. Do they

ever fall from the sky and hurt themselves?

“Do you see that eagle?” he asked.

“No, I don’t.”

“No, not a real eagle, Dust, that cloud up there that looks like an eagle.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Pretend you were an eagle way up there. What would you be looking for?”

“I don’t know. “She thought a moment. “A friend to play with?”

“No, stupid. A mouse to eat. Now, you give me one.”

Wren looked at her choice of clouds. “That one - what's its name?” she asked.

“Sitting Turkey. “

“No, stupid. Hungry Coyote.” she said with glee. “And he likes to eat gray martins! Hah!” she laughed.

She thought back a few months to when Graymartin had boasted that he had the powers of an eagle. Ka’a had stopped what he was doing and told the children a story:

“Once there was a young turkey named Flutter. He was a fine, fat bird who waddled through the canyons and under the oak trees looking for acorns. But he really thought he could fly like an eagle, and he would disappear each day to practice. When the other turkeys asked him where he had gone, he would say to them that he had been soaring so high in the sky that no one could see him.

“One day, the turkey family was up in a side canyon when a coyote jumped out from behind the rocks and tried to catch them. Most of the family flapped their ways down a steep dry wash to safety, but Flutter ran out to the edge of the canyon wall. He would have been caught by the coyote if he had not jumped off the ledge.

“An eagle happened to be soaring by and saw this ridiculous ball of feathers leap off the canyon wall. It looked like food for a week. So, he grabbed the turkey by the tail and tried to carry him back to his nest. But Flutter was too heavy and struggled too much, and the eagle finally gave up and let him go.

“Flutter was terrified. He had been carried upside down by an eagle far above the canyon floor and now dropped, but with a thunderous effort he flapped his way to the branch of a large tree. His family hurried to see if he was all right.

“Of course,” he gasped, very much out of breath. “Did you see me escape the coyote and fly with the eagle across the canyon? I’m very well, thank you.”

“However, from then on, to the family’s great surprise, Flutter was perfectly happy to walk, and eat, and behave just like the rest of them. “

Ka’a had said to Graymartin, “Perhaps he decided it was safer not to try to fly like an eagle if he really wasn’t one.”

“But I’m no fat old turkey,” Graymartin grumbled.

“No, but you don’t have wings either.”

Wren had laughed at her brother then, but later wondered if the story meant she shouldn’t dream about running and climbing and being like him.

Graymartin stood up and stretched. He’d had enough of his little sister for the day. He moved away to help his father gather the tools and baskets they had to take on the journey down the canyon.

That was all right with Wren. She’d had enough of him, too. As she watched the birds in the trees around her, she drew pictures in the warm sand with her fingers. This was something she had spent hours doing on the ledges far above, but now she had so many new things to draw.

Wren found herself talking to the furry creature on and off even when he wasn’t there. He listened quietly, which was nice. He did not argue with her.

“Where do you live there in the rocks? Do you have a house? Is it nice? Is it cooler than sitting in the sun? What is it like when it’s cold here. Do you have brothers and sisters? Do they live there too?”

She had to answer the questions herself, but that was fine. She made the conversations up as they went. She imagined that Squeak had two sisters and a brother. His mother was sometimes around but his father was off far away most of the time. He was nice enough, though.

Wren imagined a world of tunnels under the rocks that could go down to the river under the sand and up to many of the caves in the great wall. There were mice in there, and the tunnels connected to the caves up in the walls where the swallows lived. This was a whole community she had never seen. They could talk to each other and tell

each other things. Maybe there were bird and fuzzy animal spirits in there too, but that was a scary thought so perhaps not.

Wren told him stories and he told her some back. His family was funny but noisy down there in the tunnels and caves.

“What do you like to eat?”

“Grass, seeds, nuts. Pretty much anything we can find.”

“Do you eat our maize?”

“That’s a silly question – of course, it’s the best!”

“So that’s where it goes, and we don’t get any!”

“Of course – everybody loves your corn! The birds are at it before you get up. The deer sneak in when you’re off somewhere. We eat it any time we can.”

“Where do you get water when it’s left the riverbed?”

“Rain water often drains into our dens during a storm. We usually have water. But we also burrow down to where the water rests at the bottom of our tunnels. It makes a gurgling sound and we have to play hide and seek with it down there where we can’t see it. My family can smell the water and follow the tunnels to where the smell seemed most. There are cracks and tunnels everywhere in the walls. We run around in there.”

“It’s very nice to meet you,” Wren said. “Do you have a name?”

“What’s a name?”

“What others call you. I don’t know. What does your mother call you? I’m named after a little bird with a sweet song. “Wren.”

“We’ve known you for a long time. You lived up in the cave there by yourself, but we couldn’t get there. Sometimes the swallows called out to you, but you didn’t seem to know they were talking to you. You were very quiet except when you were angry with your brother or your legs. But you seem much happier now down here.”

“Yes, I am.”

“We’re not happy with you, you know. You sometimes eat marmot meat.

“I didn’t know that. I’m sorry. I don’t really know what I’m eating. But my mother and brother are trying to teach me so I can help gather and grow some for them. Mostly I think I eat corn mush. Sometimes beans. It’s always hard to find enough food, but water is much harder now. It doesn’t come when we pray for it anymore. Do you think you could help us find water?”

“Silly child! How would you get it out of the Great Wall as you call it?”

“If you can smell water, perhaps you could help us find it. What does it smell like?”

“Just wet, water. Yes, maybe. But I wouldn’t go with your big people. They might decide to eat me instead.”

“Perhaps Happiness Woman would help us. She’s magic.”

“Who is Happiness Woman, your mother? The other women don’t seem too happy or magic.”

“Oh no. She’s the shining mask on the wall of our cave up there. She doesn’t move and talk like humans, she’s just there sometimes, always really, when I talk to her. She’s very wise and almost always kind. She says she can sometimes call water from the sky. I think she could talk to you, too. You can’t see her talk, you just hear her inside you.”

“That’s scary. I wonder what she eats.”

“Somehow, I don’t think she eats anything, not marmots or people anyway.”

“Could you ask her? I’d like to talk to her maybe.”

“She is probably listening to us now.”

“From all the way up there?”

“She’s really not just there. She’s all over the place. But I will ask her.”

Pale Flower called to Wren. “Are you talking to yourself again?”

“Yes, Mother. There’s no one here to talk to so I talk to me, and sometimes to the rocks or butterflies.”

“Do they talk back to you?”

“Of course. Sometimes.”

“Get up and walk around. You need to get stronger. Come on over here and help me grind this corn.”

“OK.”

Wren whispered to Squeak, “Bye. See you soon. Thanks for being my friend.”

Much of the time, Wren worked with her mother or sat on rocks near the sandy riverbed, made up stories and traced them in a circle all around her in the sand. She had a friend named Swallow who flew with her everywhere she went, and took her all sorts of wonderful places. He was always in her pictures. He lived in a nest which hung upside down under a ledge on the canyon wall opposite her cave. He had a family, and friends who were her friends, and they never made

fun of her, or told her that she had to do something she didn't want to do.

Today Wren didn't just draw, she put new things she found around her into the pictures. She made little flowers into trees, and pebbles into boulders. Little zigzags became water and curving lines became the flight of birds. Here, down on the canyon floor, she found so many things she had never seen before, colored stones and feathers and leaves. She created what she thought were wonderful drawings in the sand.

"Where do my dreams come from?" Wren asked.

Happiness Women glittered a little. "Me, sometimes. Your little marmot. The swallows. The Turtle. The clouds. We all talk to you, but most people can't hear us or don't listen. Dreams are how we stir your imagination. That's why they're so strange sometimes."

"Sometimes they scare me. I wish they wouldn't. I often dream that I am falling and falling and being hit by rocks and crashing into the trees. I can't stop them. I try to dream about things I would love to do, like flying. I've had one or two dreams about flying right off the edge of this cave, waving my wings, swooping everywhere, not falling. But it never works to try to dream something. Can you help me?"

"No, sadly. They start deep inside you. But let's talk about the things that scare you. Maybe I can help you make them better."

Once, when her mother had been sick, the medicine woman had come to help. She had made beautiful pictures in the sand, but Wren could not understand what they meant.

"Spirits of the earth and sky, fire and water," the old woman had said. Still, they weren't very clear. But the drawings, and the songs that went with them, had great healing powers, and her mother had gotten well.

A drawing in the sand had been made for Wren after her terrible fall she was told. At least she had lived, so she was mostly grateful. She wished, though, that her brother and father could love her without the shame and disappointment she always heard in their voices. She was determined to do something to prove to them it was good that she was alive.



Chapter 5

Thunder without Rain

That evening, the family ate together for the first time on the sand at the base of the wall. Yellow Leaf and Maki joined them and talked about the trip down the canyon to the new cave.

For Wren, there was a new sense of belonging, yet they were all worried that she would not be able to make the long journey. Her leg and back were hurting terribly, but she tried not to complain. Yellow Leaf complained though. Something was always hurting her, usually her stomach, and she complained to Maki that it was his fault because he did not bring her meat.

“Why can’t you hunt like Ka’a,” she whined. “Or even like Graymartin? You’re as bad as the little girl.” She managed to insult pretty much everyone. “I don’t know what you’re going to do with her. She can’t even walk.”

“Hush,” said Maki gently. “She did very well today, and now she’s finally down here by the river.”

“And we were not even sure she would make it down the wall at all.” Said Pale Flower. “And perhaps you will find that your partner is helpful carrying things for you, Yellow Leaf. But if you don’t care about that, perhaps he could carry Wren.” Maki was a strong, kind man who had always been kind to Wren. He smiled at the idea, but Yellow Leaf scowled at him.

She was too big to carry far, even for Maki, but they were sure he would try.

“Perhaps she can sit on the poles with some of the baskets and skins,” Pale Flower suggested. “That would be an easier way to pull things than dragging them each separately.”

“What do you mean?” said Laughing Crow.

“Don’t you remember the pulling poles we used when my family moved all that time ago?... I have often wondered why you didn’t use poles when you brought back a deer or a sheep. I just thought it was too hard among the stones and brush. But going down the dry riverbed, pulling poles would be much easier than carrying each thing by itself.”

“No, I don’t remember. What do you do?”

“You’re not such a smart man after all, are you? And I thought you knew everything,” put in Yellow Leaf.

“You take two poles, as long and straight as you can find, like the ones we use to make ladders of,” said Pale Flower. “You bind them together with thongs three or four hands apart, and tie your hides and baskets to them. Then you just pull them behind you down the sand. Wren could sit in one of them, at least when she got tired.”

“She would make them sink to the ground, as big as she is,” said Yellow Leaf.

“You could take short branches and tie them across between the two poles,” said Graymartin, who was clever at making things. “That way they wouldn’t sag in the middle.”

“We could even sew some of the hides between the cross bars to make little ledges so things wouldn’t fall out,” added Pale Flower.

“I can sew,” said Wren. She badly wanted to have a grownup role and seem useful, so she was not always the family’s biggest burden.

But Yellow Leaf was always waiting. “That’s a good idea. Then when you fall through, it won’t be anyone’s fault but your own.”

“Where could we get poles long enough to make these pulls?” asked Ka’a. “There are no tall trees left around here.”

“Couldn’t we use Wren’s ladders, now that she’s down? She won’t ever climb up to the cave again,” suggested Graymartin.

“That’s a good idea,” answered his father. “Once we bring everything down, we could use the ladder poles. And, yes, Wren. You can work with your mother to sew those platforms.”

“What can I do?” asked Maki. He wasn’t good with his hands, but he was very strong.

“Tomorrow we can all decide what to take with us, and you can help bring it down from the cave.” Pale Flower had fondness for this big man who had partnered her sister for all these seasons. His sweetness had mellowed her sharpness a little, and her barbs did not seem to irritate his thick skin. She worried sometimes about this though, especially since he had to live with her constant carping and the fact that they had no children.

The idea of Yellow Leaf taking care of her own children was frightening. She had always been so harsh with Wren. Because of her stomach pains, she had often stayed for days in the cave, but she always refused to help, even to watch Wren so Pale Flower could help with foraging and harvesting. She wasn’t so critical of

Graymartin because he sometimes brought her a rabbit or squirrel to cook, but even he avoided her whenever he could.

Maki, on the other hand, would make a wonderful father, patient, happy, always ready to play. You would only have to make sure he didn't squash the children by mistake, or hug them too hard.

"We should plan to leave here in two days," said Ka'a. "Perhaps you, Maki, can move with the women at their own pace, and Graymartin and I will go ahead to prepare the new site. We will have a lot of work to do, building rooms on the cave ledge before the cold weather comes.

"We cannot live in the old ruins near the riverbed, but the walls will give us shade and some protection. Perhaps we can build roofs outside the walls to cook under. There is also a wonderful kiva there. We will have to repair the roof, and we cannot live in it, of course, but it will be of great use and comfort."

The next morning dawned cloudy, and everyone hoped for rain, even though it would make their moving more difficult. The earth needed the rain so badly, and water would fill pools they could drink from all along the route to the new home. That would mean that they would not have to carry baskets filled with water. Also, the rain would feed the springs and make finding them very much easier.

There was so much to do, and they were all irritable. Wren felt it would be best to stay out of the way. She had slept badly, even on the soft, sandy earth of the riverbank. Her back and leg hurt a lot after the climb, and she couldn't find a comfortable position to sleep in.

She was fascinated by the river, though, what little there was left of it, so she sat in the sand and watched the water glitter. Swallow darted and swooped above her, but he never landed anywhere. He was never still. She made a new friend though, a lizard who watched her from a rock on the other side of the stream. He didn't talk very much, but he watched and listened well. She called him Little Stick that Doesn't Move, and hummed songs to him about Swallow and the wind.

She threw dry leaves and pebbles into the water. She was puzzled that some things floated and others didn't. A big piece of bark would float, but a little rock wouldn't.

Every so often Graymartin would come over to her and lie in the sand. He told her about the spring he had found that looked like

an eye shining from the underworld, and the hiss of the great snake that guarded it. "She will swallow you up in one slimy gulp if you go too near," he said. Wren shuddered and curled her little body up.

He described the steep trails he climbed, and the skill of the birds and animals he hunted. She imagined him scaling walls like the mountain sheep that moved silently across the pale rock faces near the sky. Sure, and fearless as a spider. They seemed to float on air.

"Could you walk along that crack?" she asked, pointing to a shadow crossing the rock. He laughed. "That crack is as narrow as this," he said, and drew a line in the sand. "You could barely see it, even if you could climb up there to look."

She had learned that flattery kept his attention. "Can you teach me to throw the way you do?" she asked. She had seen him hit squirrels with deadly accuracy.

He laughed. "First you must find a stone that fits your hand," he told her. "Hold it this way, with your fingers. Bring your arm and shoulder back, then throw them forward like this. When you get to here, let go."

She threw stones much better than he expected, and after a little while, he showed her one of his favorite games. He tossed a piece of bark into the river, and threw rocks at it as it bobbed and swirled its way down stream. Throw after throw, he would try to break the bark into little pieces.

Wren tried. At first the rocks went everywhere but in the water. She almost hit herself by mistake. Soon, though, she got better, and even when her rocks fell nowhere near the bark, she loved their splashes in the water or clacking on the stones.

Wren was bored. And tired. Doing nothing was tiring sometimes. She wished she could explore or even hunt with Graymartin so badly, but she didn't want to kill anything even when she was hungry. What if he shot and skinned a marmot when she was with him. That was an awful thought.

She looked around for Squeak, but he didn't seem to be around. She didn't really want to talk to Happiness Woman right now, she was so serious and wise. Who else was there? Her father? He was too tough and stern and always seemed angry with her because she was so useless and took up her mother's time and attention. But still, he was there sitting on a rock across the dry stream bed sharpening a throwing stick. Wren got up and went over to him.

“Hello, Wren,” he said in a pretty friendly way. “What are you up to”.

“Trying to talk to you,” she said. “You once said you knew where there were some pictures of animals on the walls. Could you show them to me?”

“Hum,” he said. “Yes, there are some, but they’re too far for you to walk the way you are.”

“No. I want to see them. Where are they?”

“They’re down the long canyon that way, down the park and up a steep draw. Too hard for you. Why do you want to see them, anyway?”

“I like animals, and I want to walk with you.”

“Well, I’m busy now. Some other time.”

“Will there be another time? There never seems to be. You go with Graymartin a lot, but not with me.”

“Quiet, child. I’ll go with you when I want to go. Go help your mother. Or your aunt. You don’t talk to her and she’s not that far away. I can even see her from here – there around the curve in the canyon. Go on.”

“She’s not nice to me. She calls me names that aren’t mine and goes away when I even look at her.”

“Well go talk to yourself then. Or sing, you like to sing.”

“I don’t know how to sing.”

“Sometimes we’ll have to teach you. You’ll have to learn to sing the songs we use for our celebrations. Maybe that’s what you can do. Go see if your mother can teach you a song. You can’t dance, but perhaps you can sing or drum.”

“Enough,” thought Wren. “Something else I can’t do.” And she got up carefully and didn’t fall. At least that was something. Crow often sneered or laughed at her when she fell. She walked back over to her mother.

That afternoon, the wind picked up, and they could hear thunder. Wren had always been protected from rain in the cave, so she glanced around to find an overhang to sit under. She asked Swallow to help. Caves were things he knew all about. She followed his imaginary, swooping flight and soon found a suitable one along the curve of the great wall. She moved stiffly over to it and sat there quietly, waiting. Soon a few drops of rain splattered on the dry sand. She reached her hand out, and the cool water tickled, so she stepped

out onto the riverbed and stood there feeling and hearing the drops splatter off her head.

The storm was distant, and the reflections of the lightning flashed off the walls long before the thunder rumbled through. The roaring god often traveled with the flashing god, but not always. And the rain. The rain god was the most independent, the most kind, and the most cruel. Sometimes she came with the others, and sometimes she came alone among her grey and silent clouds. Like a stern parent, she wouldn't give you what you wanted, no matter how sweetly or loudly or angrily you asked. You never knew. The rain god could even make her parents cry.

"Don't just stand there. Get a water basket from that pile," her mother called out to her. "Put it under that lip of rock where the dark track ends. If enough rain comes, the water will run down there and drip off into the basket. We need to catch every drop we can before it vanishes into the sand."

Wren chose one of the smaller baskets lined with mud and pitch that they used as water jugs, and carried it over to the place her mother had pointed to. There was a little hole in the sand there, just the right size for the basket. It was smooth and quite like the scooped-out bowls in the rocks they ground grain in.

Wren wondered whether they would find grinding stones at the new home, or whether they would try to take their old ones with them. These were heavy stones, and would be hard to carry, even on a pull. If the family had to choose whether to take her or the stones they needed to grind maize, she wondered, which would they choose. She knew that Yellow Leaf would demand the stone, and Maki would laugh and gently argue for her. She wasn't sure how her father would feel, even if he did decide that she should come.

The thunder passed by without bringing rain. The hot sun came out again, and work continued. Wren moved out to the river again, and sat in the shade of the huge cottonwood she had looked down upon so often from her ledge. She was amazed at the size of the yellow-gray pieces of bark that flaked off its trunk. There were tiny bugs crawling in and out of the crevices inside the bark. It seemed as though there were whole little worlds inside each piece of bark. No one had ever brought one up for her to look at.

Maki made many trips up and down from the cave, and looked exhausted. He came over to Wren and sat down with a thump. She

always loved it when he sat with her. He didn't say much, but he was happy and kind.

"What have you been doing?" he asked. If his partner had asked that, Wren would have cringed. But with Maki, he just wanted to know.

"Watching the water. Singing. Looking at little animals in dark places. I was throwing rocks. Graymartin showed me a game he likes to play sometimes. Want me to show you?"

"Yes, as long as it doesn't involve climbing."

"Here, you take this yellow leaf and throw it in the water. There. And then you take a stone like this and throw it at the leaf to see if you can sink it."

"Sometimes I want to do that a lot." Maki said mostly to himself. "Sure, but I'm not very good at throwing," he said to Wren. They each threw a couple of stones, none of them coming very close.

"You are better at this than I am," he said. "But look what I can do," and he picked up a huge rock and heaved it after the leaf. It hit nearby and made a huge splash. They both laughed.

"That's not fair," Wren said.

"Oh, yes, it is," said Maki. "Sometimes you just have to use whatever you have to get what you want," he said with a grin. "I'm strong, and sometimes I have to use it. You, you're clever like your brother. You can think your way through things. And you've got good little hands." He held out his massive hand and she put hers in it. It was amazing how his rough hands could be so gentle.



Chapter 6

Down the Dry River

The next morning it was obvious that Ka'a and Graymartin were eager to leave. There was enough water for everyone, and enough food. All the grain had been transferred into baskets from the granary storerooms in the high cave and had been brought down to the river bed. Now they had to be careful that the mice and squirrels down there didn't get into them, so the tops were put on tightly.

The poles had been lashed together and cross pieces were made for three pulls. Ka'a and Graymartin would pull one each, carrying things that could be easily attached. They tied on bags of hides and clothing, with pots tucked in among them, and tools and even several of the small mashing stones, and tested them out. They found that they were too hard to pull evenly just using their hands, so they made holes in the ends of the poles and tied them to their clothing. This made the dragging much easier and more stable.

Pale Flower, Yellow Leaf, Wren and Maki would move more slowly, and still had more things to pack. They watched the man and boy move down the curve of the river a little sadly.

Wren worked with her mother sewing hides across the poles, and these slings seemed to hold very well.

"You have never seen babies carried in slings by their mothers," said Pale Flower to Wren, "but it is very comfortable and safe. Perhaps Cat That Climbs in Trees will give you a ride in this some time."

"Of course," said Maki. "I would like that. Before we strap all the other things on, you can hop on and I'll pull you around."

"You will do no such thing," cried Yellow Leaf. "She is the reason there is no rain, she is the reason we are moving. She does not deserve anything but scorn and should be left behind. She should have been left behind up there."

Everyone stood there, stunned.

"You do not know that, and you have no reason to say these bitter things. You are my sister and my family, but you test me terribly. Sometimes I want to leave you behind, though thinking this way makes me as evil as you are, and I am sorry." Pale Flower

turned away. Wren had never seen her mother so angry. Maki looked shocked and embarrassed. Yellow Leaf was shaking with fury.

“You do not know what it is like to watch you and your family! I live with pain instead of children, and with this great lump of a man who is so clumsy he cannot bring me meat, but wants to play with her! Even this one is a child, as crooked as she is, and perhaps I would trade all I have for her. I am sorry. You are my family, and I should not talk this way. I am sorry child, I do not know if this is indeed your fault or not. All I know is that I have so much pain.”

They were all silent. Yellow Leaf looked at Wren, and for the first time Wren saw sadness in her eyes, not anger.

“Alright then, give her a ride if you want to,” Yellow Leaf said to Maki. “Now, though, not when we move. We all need you to pull the things that don’t have legs to move themselves.”

Wren went over to the pull and put her legs between the poles. The sling was long enough for her to fit her crumpled body in, so she wriggled up into it and lay with her feet against the lower wooden wrung. They had fashioned a harness that would fit over Maki’s clothes, so he put it on, lifted up the pull and trotted off.

“Slowly!” yelled Pale Flower after them, “and watch the rocks.” Wren laughed with glee as they went careening down the sand. She had never been played with like this before. It thrilled her all over. Maki was laughing, too, in his great deep voice, and the canyon rang like happy thunder.

“Enough, enough,” cried Wren finally. “I’m all jiggled apart.” So, Maki pulled her to a stop near the bags and baskets he would have to drag down the river bed, too soon for all their liking.

“Time for a rest. I’m too hot,” he said.

“Not very long, though,” said Yellow Leaf, quietly this time.

That afternoon, as the burning sun was beginning to cast long shadows, the little group started off. They planned to stop that evening under one of the overhangs several turns down the canyon. It had a little ruin nearby, and was where the river disappeared into the sand. It would be another day’s journey beyond that tomorrow to reach the new home site.

Pale Flower led the way, surefooted. She knew the signs of quicksand that could suck a person under the earth forever. Since there had been no soaking rain for quite a while, there was little risk, but she wanted to make sure. Also, she could show Maki the easiest

paths through the tangles of brush and boulders that often filled the river bed.

Wren went next behind her mother, because her progress defined their speed, not Maki's. He could walk as well with the pull as most others could walk with only a bag on their back. Also, that way, Pale Flower was sure someone would watch every step Wren took. Yellow Leaf had been very quiet since her outburst earlier in the day, and walked along beside Maki, only complaining to herself.

Walking in the sand was terribly difficult for Wren, but she knew that she held a special position today. She was the one everyone watched. Their progress and success to some degree depended on her, just as it had when she climbed down the wall. She had been given something by the grumpy one today too, permission to try, and show what she could do. She had to prove that she was not the stone that would sink them all, so she limped along painfully and silently.

She was used to walking on the sandy stone of the cliff ledge. It was hard and uncomfortable, but it held firm when you stepped. Walking in sand, especially when one of her legs did not push straight, was awkward and slow, and soon both her leg and her back hurt. Then her other leg started to hurt, too. Maki finally asked to stop when her progress got so slow he had to take one step and stop, one step and stop.

It was painful progress for all of them, each carrying bags and baskets on their back. Even Wren had been asked to carry a small bag with her cloths in it.

Wren was not sad to leave the sandy riverbed beneath their cave, but she was very sad to leave Happiness Woman, knowing that she would never see her shine again in the morning sun, at least not until she was strong and big enough to travel, and climb back up there on her own. That was something she promised herself she would do. Until then, she would have to be satisfied to talk to her in her mind. Perhaps she would sometimes send Swallow back to give her greetings to Happiness Woman. Also, although she would never show it to anyone, she knew that she could draw that image in the sand any time she needed support or companionship.

Pale Flower wanted to push her struggling group all the way to the overhang. She was able to encourage everyone on, each one in a special way. As it got dark, though, she saw that they still had a fair distance to go, so she took one of the bags off the pull, and settled poor, exhausted Wren on there instead.

By the time they reached the shelter of the last curve, they had only enough energy to take a little food and water, and settle down to sleep.

The next morning, it was not just Wren who was sore. They all complained, but this seemed expected, and no one got angry. The river here was barely a dribble, but they were able to replenish their water supply adequately to get through the next day's trip.

The pull had remained remarkably intact, though its ends were worn down by all the dragging. As they looked back, they were amused to see how wobbly were their footsteps and the pull's tracings in the sand as they approached the stopping point. Even Maki had been tired by that time.

The day was a little cloudier, and they were grateful for this, even though they did not expect any rain. It would be cooler. They retied some of the bags, and moved on.

The canyons looked a little different down here than they were up the river. There was a huge side canyon on the left which stretched off as far as they could see. It seemed like an excellent place to hunt, although the animals would see you coming as soon as you saw them. Pale Flower had a habit of watching for spoor. Everything she found was dry and old, but clearly deer, coyote, martin and other animals had frequented the wide mouth of this canyon in the past.

The walls of the main canyon were still smooth and vertical, but they seemed, if anything, slightly less tall. Down the side canyon to the left, it even seemed possible in places to climb to the top, though why anyone would want to do that was not clear. Nothing seemed to grow there, and stories told that evil things lurked and raged up there.

"The waterflow of life is right under you there, did you know that?"

"Yes, when it goes away it leaves the sand wet, but I can't find where it flows. Down, I guess. Nothing goes up.

"Yes, some things do," Happiness Woman said. Have you ever seen steam rising from the water in the morning? That goes up into the clouds.

"But we've got to find water to drink, and wash with, and water our plants. How do we get it?"

“There are many ways to find water in the rocks and canyon floor around you. Graymartin is good at finding it. Ask him.

“I don’t like to ask Graymartin anything. He gets angry with me.”

“Ask him softly. He likes to think he knows things.”

“But it’s not all underground, is it? It comes from the sky when it thunders and rains. But it does not come when we need it most. And sometimes when it comes, it roars down the canyon past us and too far and too fast”

“Yes, it’s a strong force and doesn’t obey anyone.”

“But doesn’t it obey you?”

“Yes, sometimes, if other forces are right. There are so many forces around us, like the sun and moon, the wind, water, fire, anger, love. If all these forces are in the right mood, I can move them to help the People and animals and trees. But I need light from the sun or moon and the strength of a People to work together with us, to change, to respond to the water we give them, to share it with everything that need it, not just any one of them.”

“If I prayed for water, would you give it to me?”

“Perhaps, but you would have to be very generous in the way you accept it.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You’d have to ask for it, or anything, like seeds or salt or sun, not just for you but for whatever needs it, and be willing to give the water, or the sunlight, or the wind, to others who truly need it, perhaps even more than you do. And you’d have to pray for it at the right time and in the right way.

“Is that why rain dances don’t always work to bring rain, or corn dances don’t always help to give a good crop?”

“Yes.”

“Would you teach me how and when to ask?”

“Yes, perhaps.” But Wren’s listening was interrupted by the voice of her brother, and she forgot what Happiness Women had said for a long time.

They stopped frequently as they worked their way down the canyon. Both Wren and Yellow Leaf became whiney in the heat and dust. They saw no signs of water except for the long, dark marks on the great walls, and they followed the tracks of the pulls drawn by

Ka'a and Graymartin. Pale Flower took private pride in choosing better routes for her group than her men had.

There were times now that she considered Graymartin a man, but he wasn't yet. He still liked to play, and was rash and selfish and conceited about his ability to climb and hunt. This worried her a little. It was mostly Ka'a's role to help him learn these things, though she often thought she might do a better job of it. Ka'a acted the same way at times, and still hurt himself or lost prey because of it.

"When are we going to get there?" asked Wren at every turn.

Pale Flower often answered with a question. "Do you hear a sparrow? Can you see a sheep on the wall?" Sometimes this worked, and sometimes it didn't.

Wren hummed in the rhythm of her uneven steps and talked to her friends in her mind, asking unanswerable questions. Graymartin had an odd habit of talking to himself out loud as he walked, and if you answered him, unexpectedly, he got annoyed. He also got annoyed if you weren't listening anymore and didn't answer him when he wanted you too. You couldn't win most of the time.

"We're almost there, now," Pale Flower finally answered. "Listen. Can you hear anything?" This was part of the game, and she didn't expect an answer.

But this time Maki said, "Yes, I do hear voices," and he was right. Sounds can carry far in the canyons, though, and he could not be sure that they were really near the source. Still, as they rounded the next bend, there the cave appeared, just as Graymartin had described it.

It was large and sunny and did not seem to contain any buildings at all. There were tall cottonwoods on the canyon floor and old ruins stood under them. Its walls were crumbling, and it had no roofs at all. They heard Graymartin's sharp, high voice calling out to Ka'a, who was standing in the back of the cave.

Wren called out to him, and Graymartin came running over.

"You made it! Isn't this a wonderful place?"

They had to admit it was. It lacked the river, and the gentle noise and moisture that went with it, but the riverbed still had living trees and reeds, which suggested there was moisture there, under the sand. There were birds, and wonderful, flat fields near the river bank for growing things, if the river ever flowed again. There was grass there now, but it looked very dry.

“How is the spring?” Pale Flower asked Ka’a as he came up to them.

“Deep and sweet. It is remarkable that no one is living here, but the spring is not easy to find. We are blessed that it was in our family’s memory. I’m not sure where else we could have gone and lived in peace.”

“And the cave?”

“Remarkable, too. There are no buildings, and I cannot see any burial sites. You must all see it and decide. There are paintings which tell of time spent and animals hunted. I am not familiar with some of the markings. Water designs are there, too. Obviously the river ran well here in the past.”

“Is Happiness Woman here?” asked Wren.

“No, but there are other shapes you can talk to, if you want. It will be very hard for you to climb up there, though. We will have to make new holds and ladders for you, and you will have to practice often.”

“How did the poles hold up? Did you have to carry Wren, or drag her?”

“She did very well,” said Maki. “It was a long way for a little girl to walk, even without a crooked leg and painful back. She really did very well.”

“Maki gave me a fast ride on it before we started. I almost fell off a lot of times!” Wren told Graymartin gleefully. He seemed just a little envious, but much too grown up to say so. He knew that Maki had the strength to pull him, though, and wondered if he might ask him some time when no one else was around.

“I want to sleep in the pull when it is unloaded. It’s so comfortable. My back is better when I’m in it than even on the sand. Could I, please?”

“That is an interesting idea,” said Pale Flower. “You certainly deserve it. You were wonderful on this trip. You tried very hard and complained little. Perhaps you can, but don’t expect it for long. We will need those hides soon, and probably those poles too, for you to get up to the winter cave.”

Wren was overjoyed, and Pale Flower could see Yellow Leaf thinking. It would not surprise her if she got Cat Who Climbs in Trees to make her one, and it might be worth it to him in the long run.



Chapter 7

Song of Passing

Over the next days, they all worked hard, making shelters to cook and sleep in and storage rooms for grain and meat. Even though the new spring seemed to have an endless supply of water, it was not that easy to draw from. There would not be enough water to grow many crops, and it was too late in this hot season to grow much anyway.

Wren was getting stronger every day, though moving and stooping was always painful. She tried hard to make herself useful, and even tried to be friendly to Yellow Flower. After seeing that look of terrible sadness in her eyes, Wren thought that perhaps it was not her misshapen body that upset Yellow Flower so much after all. Perhaps her mother's sister might feel a little happier if she pretended to be her child, too, just a little, especially if Maki were there. He always made Wren laugh.

Graymartin wanted to explore more than anything else, but his father had many things for him to do. Much of it was hard and boring. They had to build rooms, and to do that, they had to have rocks of just the right size and shape.

There were many small stones at the base of the canyon wall under the cave, and the adults had long discussions among themselves as to whether these stones could be used to build new buildings. There were also perfectly cut stones lying around the old ruins.

"We do not know what any of these stones were used for. Perhaps they fell from the walls of granaries. I do not feel that spirits still hold claim to them, and see no reason not to use them all," said Pale Flower. "We should use the ones around the ruins to build some walls down here, and use the others for our winter rooms up on the ledge."

"I agree," said Ka'a. " But we will still have to cut many stones to build the buildings. We certainly have a lot of work to do."

Graymartin didn't like searching for stones or carrying them back to the cave, but he did like trying to shape them into building

blocks. His father showed him how to choose a good rock to chip with, and how to see the ways a rock might break if you hit it correctly. Not only was this fun, and made a lot of noise, but it took strength and skill to make stones that fit evenly one on top of another and didn't need much clay to fill the holes between them. It was tiring work, but it was satisfying to see a building rise strong and smooth and even, matching the cliffs around them. It was certainly not something Wren could do.

Graymartin also had to explore and climb these new canyons, both to find sources of berries and nuts, and to see which animals were living around them. There were many of the smaller animals he used to hunt for food and pelts, but he found old tracks of a big cat, a mountain lion. He had never seen one alive, but his father had described the power and grace of these animals once while they were hunting. Lions were one of the few animals in the canyons who sometimes hunted and killed people, so he watched the ledges above him carefully as he climbed and checked for fresh spoor and tracks wherever he went.

"Most of the deer seem to have left this part of the canyon, so the lions have probably followed them to places with more water and better grass. Still, we must be watchful. They do feed on smaller animals, too," his father said. "We must always look around the spring, because that would be a favorite place to hide."

Pale Flower helped them gather sticks and stones, but she also spent a lot of time with Wren, showing her how and where to find foods and how to grind maize and nuts in the stones with special bowls carved into them. She learned to add honey and berries, and small amounts of different leaves and barks to change the taste and power of their foods. Wren had good strong arms for a child her age, because she used them all the time to help her legs keep balance, but it was uncomfortable and boring to sit very long over the stones to grind and mix.

Her mother also showed her how to make twine from yucca plants without pricking herself, and weave colored reeds into baskets. They sealed the baskets with pitch and mud so that they would hold water. The pitch was too sticky, but Wren loved the mud, and she loved to pick out different colored reeds. She tried to weave patterns like her drawings in the sand, but her mother scolded her.

“You are not allowed to weave any silly design that enters your head uninvited. Every family has its own patterns, and you must weave ours ”

Always the wrong patterns, always the wrong way. Everyone was hot and tired most of the time now, and she was always being snapped at. Even in her mother’s eyes she could rarely do anything right. So she tended to play along the dry riverbed away from the ruins. People left her alone there, and she could explore the rocks and bushes by herself, talking to her friends and singing to them softly. She made up stories about where the creatures lived, and made them houses. There were wrens and sparrows in the bushes and swallows in the air.

As she was gathering reeds for baskets along the river bed one day, Wren found one with a small hole in the side. Absently putting it in her mouth and sighing through it, she made a little peep. She did it again, harder, and this time it squawked like an irritated squirrel. Holding it this way and that, she blew at it in different ways. She put her fingers where her breath went through, and found that she could change the pitch. This made charming sounds.

She was sure that the noises would annoy her family, as everything else seemed to, so she played with it only when she was alone. She found that she could copy bird sounds and wind sounds and water sounds, and even the ups and downs of people sounds.

She gathered reeds for the baskets now with renewed interest, searching for better pipes, always blowing on them before giving them to her mother for weaving. If they were good for playing, they were usually no good for weaving. Most made no noise at all, but once she found a reed with a piece of grass stuck inside, and it shimmered with all sorts of new sounds. So she tried putting tiny things inside her old pipes, and trilled and warbled until whatever it was blew out.

“Tell me more about music. Please”

“You tell me. What do the swallows sound like? Can you make sounds like the ones they make? Make it for me. Is it always that same peep or churr? Is it sometimes louder or softer? Is it sometimes more squeaky or growly?”

“Peep!”

“That’s right! That’s high, like the wind or your mother’s voice. Now low, like thunder. You’re your father’s voice. Move it around, up and down. There you go. Good.

”You hum all the time but maybe you don’t realize it. Hum me a swallow’s song. Good. Hum me another bird’s song, one of the noisy blue ones, a jay. Squawk. Good. You can’t hum it, you have to squawk it. Now one more, a crow’s song, the loud black ones. It’s not really so much of a song, is it? Why not? Because it doesn’t go up and down gently.

“Your father is named after a crow’s noise. He must have sounded a lot like a crow when he was a baby. Not so much now. More like a bison, but you haven’t heard one of them yet. You will though.

“From now on, listen for music, it’s everywhere. Then you may be able to make it. It could be beautiful from you.”

Wren was very happy down on the canyon floor. She wasn’t scolded too much and had a good deal of time to herself. One day, though, a terrible thing happened. Every morning, before the sun came up, she talked to the swallows who lived in little mud nests under the ledges high in the great wall. She greeted them each day and, often now, piped softly to them. She knew them all and gave them each names and special sounds. This morning, though, as she talked to her friends, one of the dreaded hawks flashed out of the sky and caught one of them, stunning it, then grasping it, and carrying it away for himself.

Wren cried out, overwhelmed. She ran to where Graymartin slept and shook him. These hawks were his birds.

“Leave me alone, Crooked One! Go away. Hawks have to eat, too, you know. That’s just the way it is.”

Wren knew that people died, and knew that death was part of life, but no one she cared about had ever been killed in front of her.

That day, she sat in the shade of the trees and cried, away from everyone. She played to the swallow. For hours, she made long, sad songs which rose and fell just as the swallow had flown.

Where did the swallow’s spirit go, she wondered. She wanted to follow it. If it was in another world, where was that, up or down?

Her mother heard her, and came and sat down next to her. “Spirits pass like water and air through cracks in the land and sky,”

she said. "For days they travel on and on, and change. Through this long journey, they become one with their ancestors and the earth.

"Try hard to understand this. It is very important for us to give thanks for all life and wish all spirits well as they move through this and other worlds."

"Are there many other worlds?"

"Perhaps."

"Do I have to give thanks for hawks?"

"Yes, child. Try to be in harmony with both the swallow and the hawk."

That would not be easy.

Wren sat under the tree and thought. She imagined the swallow's spirit as a sparkle in the water of the river as it trickled by. She watched the water flash, then smooth out and flash again, passing tiny plants and pebbles in the sun. She imagined many worlds of different sizes everywhere.

As the river vanished into the sand, she followed it there. Down under the earth the swallow's sparkle traveled, sometimes as a gurgle in the dark, or a shimmer in the air of an underground passageway. There must be other shimmers, too, she thought, the spirits of old hawks and empty locust shells, crumpled leaves and spilled water. They passed through dark, humming rooms and narrow crevices filled with squeaks and rustlings.

After the cold and darkness, the spirit river suddenly spilled out into a dazzling sky filled with colors and light. Wren had thought of this place as far below her world, but now it looked as bright as her own sky at noon, and there were stars and water and stones, and air that she could see and feel. She felt suddenly confused. Was this place here again, now, or somewhere else, some other time? She couldn't tell. She looked around her. The air shimmered in the heat and leaves rattled softly. She looked at the shapes carved into the canyon walls that Graymartin thought might be the spirits of birds and trees and creatures of other worlds. Could they be?

Wren found a little stick, and with it drew a special picture in the sand. She traced the swallow's life and death, and its spirit's passing. Then with her pipe she played her friend's passage through those other worlds.

"My head sings a lot. Do you send that to me too?"

“No, not directly into your head.” Happiness Women seemed to laugh softly. “But there’s music in everything only you usually can’t hear it. I can, all the time. You make music a lot, but I don’t think you always hear it. You’re too busy doing things, playing, talking to yourself or to your friends.”

“But I don’t have friends! Even Grey Martin’s not a friend, and my mother’s my mother.”

“Of course you do. You talk to your friends all the time. What do you think all that chatter is in your head all the time? Who are you talking to?”

“Me! There’s no one but you and me up here most of the time.” I guess I do talk to my mother a lot, and I get angry with Graymartin, but they can’t hear me and they never bother to talk back.”

“You talk k to the mice and the swallows. Don’t you think the little marmot you talk to is a friend?”

“How do you know about him? He’s not here.”

“Of course he’s here! He’s as real as anyone else who’s not here, and more of a friend.”

“But how do you know about him?”

“I just do. There are things I just know.”



Chapter 8

The Deer Hunt

Wren thought Graymartin was very old, but he was not yet a man. He had hunted many small animals, and was very skilled at this, but he had never been on a long hunt with his father. After several shelters had been built, the meat supply was getting low, and Ka'a decided it was time for Graymartin to learn to hunt for deer. He had not had the time to explore much around the new site, and was eager to go up the wide side canyon they had seen on the way down.

"I do not like the tall rocks guarding the middle of that canyon," said Graymartin. He did not want to admit that they frightened him. "There were birds of prey and scavengers all around it."

“Old legends say that Spider Woman dropped down from the sky and settled there when the world was young,” Ka’a said. “They say she spun huge webs between those towers and fed her young on those who ventured near. Perhaps she did live there once, but that was long ago. It looks like an excellent place to hunt, and I would like to look around.”

“Those rocks were quiet when we passed,” Wren said. “I did not like them either when I first saw them.” She wanted to support Graymartin. “But then... I think they’re safe.”

What an odd thing to say, thought Pale Flower. When do rocks make any noise at all, except when the wind whistles through them?

“Quiet yourself, crooked child. You are not to speak about such things,” said Ka’a to Wren. “I do not want to talk about the Spider’s rocks again.”

For days and nights, Ka’a prepared his son for his first special hunt. It would probably take the two of them far away. A deer could feed the family for months, and provide them with hides for clothing, thongs for binding bags and baskets, and horns for spearheads and other tools.

Ka’a taught Graymartin how to use an atlatl, a throwing stick, so that he could throw his spear with much greater force than he could by hand.

“Long ago,” his father told him, “First Hunter was tracking a mountain sheep, but try as he might, the cautious animal would never let him get close enough to kill him. Finally, in frustration, First Hunter started yelling and throwing sticks and stones at it.

“One of the branches he picked up had been cracked when it fell from an old cottonwood nearby. When he threw this stick, the broken end flew off and went so far it almost hit a hawk who happened to be flying by.

“First Hunter was a clever man, and realized from this that he might be able to use one stick to throw another. The thirsty cottonwood tree offered him another branch with a notch at the end. In this notch First Hunter placed the butt of his spear, and found he could hurl his spear far up the canyon wall.

“Grateful to the cottonwood for such a treasure, he asked the Earth, his mother, to teach the tree how to find moisture even when the land seemed parched and dry. That is how our ancestors learned

to use the atlatl, and that is why you can always find water near the cottonwood tree.”

Ka’a also taught Graymartin about the habits of deer and how they lived from day to day. They had been common in the canyon years ago, but as the number of people increased and summers grew drier, the deer became more scarce, and hunters sometimes had to stalk for many days to find them. It was a sacrifice for any family to have the men go away for such a long time, and often they came back empty-handed.

“Each of the animals we hunt has a special place in the world, even the squeaky squirrels you kill with sticks and rocks. Just as Wren learned to give thanks for the lives and spirits of both the swallow and the hawk, we must respect the life and spirit of the deer we hunt. We must acknowledge their place as well as ours in the balance of life.”

To Graymartin, hunting was a game, a sport, a proof of prowess. He had been punished for killing animals without showing proper respect, without giving thanks for their existence. He could see so many things, and hit so many animals and birds with stones when others couldn’t, that success for him was a matter of pride. He thought his skills should be praised, and felt angry whenever he was reprimanded by his father.

So, for many days before the hunt, Ka’a taught Graymartin all he knew about the deer, his strength, his grace and his importance to the world. They drew what Wren thought were very crude pictures in the sand, and Graymartin learned songs for the deer’s spirit. He muttered to Wren that this was much too much singing and drawing and not enough action, but he did not say it to his father, who would not have let him go on the hunt if he felt he was ill-prepared.

Finally, as the moon grew full, Ka’a said that Graymartin was ready. They packed enough mash and berries and strips of dried meat in the old rabbit skin pouches they carried to last them a number of days. Ka’a asked Maki to look after Pale Flower and her broken daughter during the days he and his son were away hunting. They, in turn, would help Yellow Leaf make meals each day, and all would share meat if the hunt was successful.

Ka’a and Graymartin set off early the next morning. The boy was proud, and confident that he would see the deer before his father

could. He was good enough with the atlatl now to throw his spear well when the time came.

For four days and nights they searched for fresh tracks or spoor of deer without success. They explored the open meadows leading to the two towers, but there were almost no tracks there at all, as beautiful as the grass was. Birds still circled the rocks but seemed to make no noise at all. Perhaps that was what Wren had meant, but Graymartin couldn't understand how she had heard silence so far away.

Graymartin was glad his father skirted the towers quickly and passed several turns of the canyon before they stopped that night. The next day, they climbed into a wide side canyon that had several big caves where old ones had lived and died. Their ancient houses in the cliffs stood silent and empty, abandoned at that point when no more rooms could be built, since once someone had died in a room, no one would live there anymore.

The days were clear and the nights well-lit by the moon. But there were no fresh deer tracks anywhere. Finally, one evening, they spotted some near a pool high up in a side canyon. The tracks were several days old, but showed that one large deer and one smaller, lighter one had taken water there a while ago and passed on through.

This pool was hidden among the brush and rocks, but a shallow stream trickled out below it and there were many old tracks around it. Ka'a found Graymartin a ledge perched above the pool, close enough for a kill and down the usual wind. Quietly they sang a chant for the deer, for themselves and for their world. Graymartin knew all the words he had to say and what he had to do before throwing his spear, and he eagerly settled himself onto his ledge. His father then set off to track the deer. They agreed that he would return in two days if he could not find them.

All that night and the next day, Graymartin sat and waited, and listened. At first it was exciting to imagine the moment when a deer would appear, but as the hours wore on, he became bored and his legs burned from not moving. He was happy, though, to watch and listen to the hawks circling above him and follow the light and shadows as they slanted across the canyon walls. He imagined ways to scale the walls, and thought of the pride he would have as they brought the deer home. He let himself sleep in the heat of the day,

knowing it was unlikely that deer would travel much during those hours, but he tried to sleep lightly and keep his ears alert for sounds.

As he slept, Graymartin dreamed that a coyote stepped out of the brush below him and started talking.

"You are a very clever, boy, I can see that. You are strong, too, and it will be easy for you to surprise the deer and kill him. How is it that you are so good at throwing a spear?"

"My father taught me, and showed me how to use the throwing stick. I am naturally very strong."

The coyote smiled. He turned and melted into the shadows of a bush. Out of the shimmering water, then, a long and powerful snake appeared. He had gray eyes and long white stripes down his back. The boy gripped his spear, but the snake flicked his tongue in and out and said, "Hissssss. Do not be afraid, I am just clearing the air for you. You are as quick as I am, I see. That is very good. Are you ready to strike when the time comes?"

"I am always ready."

The creature disappeared into the sand beneath a great rock. From the sky flashed a hawk.

Here was a friend, and Graymartin greeted him. The hawk said, "You have eyes as sharp as mine. Be alert, watch well, and you will see the air move before the deer appears."

"I often see the air move, but there are no deer. Are those deer spirits?" Graymartin asked.

"The wind is full of spirits, old and new," the hawk said. "Respect them all and learn what they can teach you," he said and flew silently away.

Graymartin felt a light touch on his arm, and there was a spider watching him. He held still as death. "Do not move," she said. "That is the way to be a skillful hunter. Watch and listen, as I do, and do not move until the very last moment."

"Yes," he said, "I know." And she was gone.

Graymartin awoke, full of pride and confidence.

A little after sunset on the second day, there was movement in the air and the gentle click of hooves on rock. Two deer emerged from the bushes on the other side of the pool.

Graymartin knew he couldn't miss at this distance and knew his family would be grateful to him for his great skill. Without pausing to say the prayer he had been taught so many times, he drew back the

spear for one great throw. But the shaft of the atlatl struck the wall of his narrow ledge and made a sharp, ringing clatter. The deer sprang back and crashed through the brush toward the open canyon. Graymartin struggled into position and threw much too late. He cried aloud in frustration and hurled an angry stone after his disappearing prey. He heard the clatter of another spear, missing its mark, and saw his father step out from his own hiding place near the little canyon's mouth.

Graymartin scrambled down and started telling his father the story. In half-truth, he told how a noise had startled the deer just before he could throw. His father just shook his head. He had seen the whole thing, having tracked the deer back to the pool.

"Had you tested out your ledge for the throw?" he asked. "Did you say the prayer?"

Graymartin started to give excuses, but stopped himself, realizing that it would just make things worse. He told his father about the dream, and how confident he had been.

"You are a careless and gullible child. Your pride and the coyote's clever flattery have caused us to lose the deer. Now they are spooked and far away, and will not return to this pool for a long time.

"Well," Ka'a said and paused. "We have a long way to go. But perhaps now you will believe me that there is more to a successful hunt than having the skills to track and throw a spear. We will try again, but today we must return home for a while to rebuild our family's stores somehow, and let what happened here become a part of us."

Chapter 9

The Old Man Comes

Graymartin had let his family down, and his father couldn't help being angry with him. But Ka'a saw something of himself in the boy. He, too, had been that way, and had had a painful growing up because of it.

So Graymartin spent much of his time now gathering pine nuts, and helping the women grind them into mash. He muttered and grumbled at these menial tasks. "This is woman's work," he said.

"Stop, and listen," his mother said. "This is all our work.

"Take an oak, for instance, mighty as it is. It has had many tasks and works for many creatures, as well as for the richness of its own spirit.

"As a little sprout, its job is to survive and grow. It learns to bend in the wind, not break, and stay rooted during strong spring floods. But in its littleness and glistening leaves, it is a joy to see.

"As a young tree, it starts to give, as well as take, from the earth. It gives acorns to the turkeys and the squirrels, and to us for meal. It offers the twists and passageways of its bark to countless bugs and beetles, and the protection of its leaves and branches to us all.

"When old, the oak will fall and rot, but as it does, it feeds new trees and grubs. The grubs feed birds, the birds feed us, and brighten all the sky.

"It is important that you, too, start to give what you can, now that you are young and strong. Take your place in the harmony of the earth. "

Graymartin was not pleased at all with this talk of trees and giving. But he was still allowed to hunt birds and small animals, so he held his tongue.

His little expeditions gave him time alone, and as he hunted, Graymartin studied the great walls. He watched the animals that lived in them and the graceful, deadly birds who soared above. He dreamed of ways to scale the cliffs, and traced the paths of light and shadow, along that ledge, down that crack and up that chimney. He

was a wonderful climber, but knew that within remembered time, no man had made it over the canyon rim. That was one of his goals.

One day, as he was waiting for a rabbit to appear out of the hole he had just discovered, Graymartin heard the faint echoes of clear notes. It wasn't a bird, he knew all the birds. It wasn't Wren. He knew all her little chirps and twitters. The noises seemed to come and go, so he focused on his hunt. Since his failure with the deer, he concentrated in a way he never had before. Still, he was very curious.

He missed the rabbit once, and, knowing that the cautious creature would not reappear from that hole for a while, Graymartin decided to search out the source of the music. He could tell that the notes were echoing up the canyon with the wind, but he had no way of telling how far away it was they started.

He climbed up to a favorite perch in one of the immense curves of the canyon. He had been told by his father that this had been a look-out in the ancient times, and there were little, worn pictures on the walls around the ledge, telling unknown stories. From here, far above the river, he could see farther down the canyon than from anywhere else he knew. He loved the place. It was warm in the afternoon sun, and he could see birds and animals as he thought the hawks might see them.

Far down the canyon he found movement, and slowly a curious figure approached. It was small, hunched over, with a shuffling but steady step. It was an old man, with something on his back, holding a stick which he would put into his mouth now and then when the ground was even enough. This person had to be the source of the music, but he couldn't tell how.

Graymartin watched the old man's progress with interest for a while, but before he got too close, he climbed down and set off to tell his family about the stranger. He doubted that anyone that old or that noisy would represent a threat, but strangers were extremely rare, and he knew he would have to alert everyone so that an appropriate and honorable welcome could be prepared.

When Graymartin first described the figure to his father, his face showed amazement. Then a hint of fear crept in. "If he is as you describe, I know this old man, as many others do. Legends go with him. He is as old as the stone around us, and has done both great and terrible things. Hurry, we must be ready. He will expect it."

Soon everyone could hear occasional notes, and Wren, who was least helpful in the rapid preparations, listened with amazement to the variety and clarity of the sounds. Because he was so old, food and bedding had to be collected and placed in the most protected spot near the old ruins.

By the time the old man came into sight, the whole kinship was there to greet him.

The old man was indeed ancient, and as wrinkled as the bark of an old tree. He was curved over and carried a hide bag on his back. "He has the eyes of a bird of prey," thought Graymartin. His nose was like a beak of stone and his skin was the color of mud. His clothes, though, seemed in better shape than he was, and were made of materials the children had never seen before. A brightly colored stick, with holes in it, was tucked into the leather thongs of his pack, and Wren guessed, rightly, that this was the wonderful thing that made the music.

Far from being terrifying, this old man seemed tired and cranky. He spoke their language in a funny, halting way that they could barely understand. He did expect reverence, and the family scurried around trying to be polite and to make the old man, who always seemed uncomfortable, as comfortable as possible.

With the bag off his back, he seemed less hunched over. His bones creaked as he moved about, but his eyes watched everything, piercing through a cloudy film. He obviously could not see well, but he made up for it with fierce alertness.

The old man was offered food, which he gratefully accepted. Ka'a filled some hides with reeds for him to sit on. Little was spoken at first, but after the meal the old man asked that they all go down into the round room, the kiva, in the old ruins where the children were not allowed to play. There, under the fading light of evening, he told tales.

The old man's voice was scratchy, as if seldom used, but it moved up and down like bright water. The first story was his own.

"I was born far away, in a rich land. It is even hotter than your canyon and gets more rain. I was born twisted, and my family feared I would bring them bad luck. But I was clever, and learned many things, how to make sharp tools out of our hard, black glass, how to take maize and grow it well, and how to make music from wooden flutes that could charm even angry men and women. But my people

still did not like me, or trust my shrewdness. I was misshapen, and too dark (though attractive to women), and I was driven out.

“So I started my wanderings. With a bag on my back, with maize, and obsidian, and two flutes (one new, one old), I traveled from town to town and clan to clan. What I brought, no one had, so I traded maize and arrows for food and family. I was famous then, and honored, and given wives and gold and feathers and shells. But I never stayed in one place more than a season or two because people were jealous of me, and something inside me needed to move and find new places.

“I was shrewd, though, and made peace between warring clans, and took news, and tools and grain and seeds from place to place. I knew how to find water in parched earth, and draw it out with reeds. Dry seasons meant loss of maize, hunger and thirst, and I could offer help, so people welcomed me. I have families, however broken, scattered, here and there, growing, becoming strong in their own way, so I could always find shelter and food and new clothing whenever I wanted.

“I am old now, and tired. I was here many seasons ago, and found it a place of peace. I would like to stay here for a while, but have little to offer you this time. My pack must be light now, for my back is bent and hurts, like your leg, little one.

“For you, I want to tell your family a story, so they will understand us just a little better.

“Once, years ago, there was a fine young turtle who lived in a canyon like this. He was very energetic and steady as the stars, and carried things for all the other animals, even up the river against its strongest currents. But one cold day, when there was ice on the great walls, a stone fell on him, and broke his leg. He was no longer of use to his friends the martins, the hawks, and the trout, and they stopped spending time with him. A few small birds and mice helped him find food and laughed with him as his leg lay protected in its hard shell home.

“The turtle grew as his leg healed, and his friends took long trips with him to help him gain strength. By the time he had fully mended, he was as big as a boulder and massively strong, but he would only help the birds and mice who had supported him while he was broken. He had great things to offer them, and the martins and hawks and fish could only watch him in wonder as he helped the

birds and mice build prodigious and beautiful places for themselves, tunnels and homes of stones and trees and mud.

“There is a great city in a canyon far away that he helped to build, and his strength and endurance are legendary. His shell now covers that part of the sky, and the small animals and birds live there protected from the predators that lost the turtle’s friendship when they did not offer him help when he needed it most.

“We all have strengths and gifts to offer one another, yet all need support at times. Do not fail to offer help whenever it is in your power.”

Wren was confused by the old man's strange talk, but there was a rhythm to it that relaxed her.

“Who is this old man, Happiness Woman? Should I trust him?”

“Yes and no. Let’s see. He has been around for a very long time and has seen many things, but he is a teller of tales, and as it is always with people like him, some of the stories are true and some not. But often it is not the reality of the story but its broader meaning that is worth listening for.

“I don’t understand.”

If he said to you, ‘You’re a bear today,’ he probably didn’t really mean that you’ve changed shape into a bear, but that perhaps you’re grumpy or growly, you’re acting the way a bear acts. When the old man tells a story, its meaning might be bigger than you or the bear. He may want you to think deeper - about what it could mean to act like a bear, or that just because a person looks ugly, it doesn’t mean they’re bad. He might be trying to tell you that being crooked does not mean you bring bad luck. He’s crooked, too. Perhaps you and he might bring good luck.”

“Why doesn’t he just say what he means?”

“Some teachers want others to think for themselves. If he said it right out, your mother or father or aunt might not believe him. Has he said anything to you?”

“Not yet. He just looks so tired. I like his flute though. It’s beautiful and so is the music he plays.”

“Yes, you can trust that. His music is pure and comes from all the places and people he has been with. Much of the time, he speaks through his music not words. Listen to it and let your thoughts go where the music takes you.”

Chapter 10

The Magic Flute

So it was that Wren sensed something shared between them, far under the old man's weathered mask. Over the next few days, as he rested in the shade of the walls of the old kiva, Wren worked and played nearby. They rarely talked, but she would sometimes take her little reed out of hiding and play it to her birds and trees.

One day as she was doing this, the old man took out his flute and started playing softly with her, up and down, being the wind to her birds and the flowing river to her fish. For a long time, they played songs of sleep and songs of dance to the whole canyon, until one by one the family heard and came to listen, for there were songs for people too.

When Ka'a came, though, he asked Wren if she had ground her grain so well that she had time to play, and she had to admit that, no, she had not. She glanced at the old man, but he said nothing, and she reluctantly hid her reed away and set back to work.

Squeak came over quietly. "I have a strange feeling about that old man. He's different. "

Wren nodded, "Yes, he is."

"That piece of wood is amazing though. It sings! It makes me feel calm and excited at the same time. Can you hear it?"

"Yes, of course. It makes me shiver and tremble inside. I can't play what he plays, but I can play with it and I've never felt so alive."

"Your music is amazing too. Do you know that? How do you do it?"

"I don't know. My fingers just move and the sounds just sing what feels right to me. "

"But you seem to know where he's going."

"Yes, it seems that way."

"What does it mean? You and I talk words, but this has no words."

"It's the way Happiness Woman and I sometimes talk without talking. Even the silences mean something. When I squeak at you with it, does that mean anything to you? That's how you sound."

“No, that’s just noise, and I don’t like it. It is irritating. But you sometimes play like the birds. You told me you are named after a bird. Can you play the way that bird sings?”

“Yes, a little. She picked up her flute and played some wrensong.

The next day, Wren did not dare to take out the reed for fear of angering her father again so soon, but instead, when she rested, she doodled in the sand with her finger, using as always, little leaves and stones that blessed the canyon floor.

“Come here, girl,” said the old man. “I want to ask you something.”

“Are those the travels of a bee?” he asked.

“No, the little gray lizard’s,” she answered. “He is basking in the sun today on that rock. Here he is,” she pointed him out in her picture. “Then he hid under this bush for a while.”

“Yes, I see”, said the old man.

This was the first time anyone had recognized what she was doing. He did not have to say that it was beautiful, which it wasn’t, but she felt deeply happy that someone had begun to understand. As she took a feather to smooth the sand, the old man asked, “Do you always erase your pictures?”

“Yes...No,” she said. “There is one in my secret cave near the bend in the great wall that I like too much to smooth away. But the wind will smooth it away soon,” she added quickly to reassure the old man that she had not done anything wrong by saving her poor drawing, thinking it too precious to return it back to its natural form.

“I see,” he said again. No judgment, just understanding.

Several days later, Wren’s family was scattered in different directions. Only Pale Flower was near enough to hear soft music, and Wren knew that she would not make her stop, at least not right away. So she took out the reed and started again, hoping that the old man would join. For a while, though, he only sat, seemingly dreaming, far away. Wren was almost at the point of stopping, thinking that she might be keeping him awake and that he would snap at her to stop the noise as her family always did, when he moved and took from his sack a little old flute, not so brightly colored as the one she had seen him play before.

“Try this,” he said. “I have never been able to play it well, but it is said to be very beautiful in the right hands. You play differently

than I do, and can make remarkable music with your one-holed reed. Here, hold it this way, put your fingers here and blow there.”

Wren took the small flute carefully and tried. At first she got little noise from it at all, but she found that her small hands could reach and cover the holes. Then she blew a different way and made a high, clear note that startled both of them. She tried again, her breath and fingers experimenting with new ideas, and soon she found that she could make long and wonderful ripples, high to low and high again. The sounds were clear, both soft and bright, and had a range she had never dreamed of creating. She could make butterflies now, and feathers, and footsteps and cries.

“Your songs are like spirits and clouds,” the old man said. “They mix elements of earth and water and fire. They may start as wisps of smoke or mist floating in the sky. Then, perhaps, they join, and form new shapes, like eagles, soaring. Then the wind comes, and merges little clouds with others, just as your music blends thoughts with the trees’ whisperings and the birds’ songs. At first, you can see and hear each shape by itself, but slowly they come together into one connected whole.

“These new forms have great power. They can block out the sun or drown out the sound of a river. Clouds may bring darkness or light, rain or fire. Spirits, too, can move the soul with love or make it burn with fury. Your music soars and nourishes, but in dissonance it can cause distress as well.

“Just as the sky clears after a storm, spirits may vanish into puffs of smoke, leaving what? Memories? Yes, always. But also new beginnings. If you learn to play your music in harmony with the forces around you, you will surely have great power.”

Wren did not understand much of what the old man had said, but she could feel his images. She played along with him as he spoke, following his thoughts. As he finished, they heard footsteps. She looked up and saw her father. But this time Ka’a said nothing and watched her curiously.

“Yes,” the old man said. “You, too, can hear the magic, can’t you?” Her father still said nothing. He turned and went away a little, out of sight. There he sat and listened. Soon his little girl started up again, finding new voices to play with the world.

Chapter 11

The Great Meeting

It was very hot. The sun burned away all moisture, leaving only cracks and wrinkles. Each day someone in the family trudged to get water from the small spring in the great wall. It still watched you darkly as you drew water from it.

“Why won’t you bring water? We need water so badly.”

“It’s needed more in other places I think. Beyond the mountains, to put out fires, to feed dragons, I don’t know. There are said to be places far away where there is nothing but water as far as you can see in every direction.”

“Like you, I’m mostly here. All I can do is ask, to try, the way you tried to climb down the cliff. Even I cannot always succeed. There are spirits more powerful than I am. Your family dances, and sometimes it works. The more others dance with you, the more likely the rain is to come. But remember, when the rain comes, sometimes it causes a flood and destroys everything in its path. Bad often comes with good. Sometimes when rain doesn’t come, you go and find a new and better source of water.”

“What’s a dragon?”

“They’re great and terrible animals, big as mountains sometimes. This world was full of them long ago before I came. They made flames come out of the mountains, and their wings made winds that blew all the trees away or covered everything with sand.”

“Where are they now?”

“No one knows. Perhaps way under the sand. Have you ever felt the earth move?”

“No. Why would it?”

“Perhaps the dragons down there are angry and stomping around the way Graymartin does when he’s angry.”

“I don’t want to meet dragons.”

“Then don’t make them mad.”

“I won’t. But you know some people think I’m the reason the rain stopped coming here. That can’t be true. What did I do?”

“You didn’t do anything little one. That’s what’s called “a superstition.” If you sneeze and then a rock falls and breaks your biggest water jug, someone is sure to blame you for sneezing and tell you never to sneeze again. The rain had been drying up for years before you were born. People just noticed it after your birth and had to blame something, so they blamed you.”

“Why can’t you tell them?”

“They don’t talk to me. They don’t believe I’m here. If you told your father you talk to me, he would just get angry and laugh at you. But you and I may be able to help if you get stronger. I have a feeling. You are special, but I don’t know how yet.”

The old man was clearly restless, better rested and well fed. He had discovered that Yellow Leaf made food that he liked very well. He went with her and showed her new roots and berries that she had never tried to cook with before.

He also gave her a small amount of what he considered his most precious commodity. He called it “salt”, and said that it had come from so far away that he had only been there once. He said that clans not far from here, on the high deserts, sent parties to the sea to trade for salt. These trips took many seasons to accomplish, but the traders brought back many wonderful things.

“What is a sea?” asked Wren.

“A sea is water that goes on forever, and washes on the sand in great waves, sometimes tall as trees.”

“Then people there never want for water,” said Graymartin. “That must be wonderful.”

“No. That water gives both death and life. If you drink it, you become more thirsty, vomit and die. But it is a source of this salt Yellow Leaf will cook with tonight. You will never be the same, and you will want it more than almost anything else, once you have tasted it.

“The sea also holds fish, both large and small, and other animals like giant tortoises. But it kills more men than any other force I know. Like thunder, it can bring both great good and great danger.”

That night, Yellow Leaf did add tiny, clear crystals of salt to their food. It looked like sand, but changed the taste of everything so much they all wanted more. As he warned them, though, they also wanted

more water. Both were precious. Salt gave pleasure, but water gave life.

The old man seemed to want to go, but also to stay in the canyon with them a little longer. Every evening he would climb slowly down into the cool, dark kiva after the meal and talk. It had no roof, and the children sat outside around the top and listened.

The old man told amazing stories, and from comments they overheard, Graymartin and Wren guessed that the adults often thought these tales confabulations, myths, and imaginings.

He certainly had been many places, though, and lived with many different peoples. He had learned many versions of the beginning of life, and presented them all as equal truths. He told stories of heroes and gods, tricksters and villains, wars and famine, and the rise and fall of great towns called cities. But he seemed to jumble them up from night to night, and it was hard to know what to believe, and when.

Squeak came over to Wren as she sat daydreaming quietly. "I have a strange feeling about that old man. He's different. "

Wren nodded, "Yes, he is."

"That piece of wood is amazing though. It sings! It makes me feel calm and excited at the same time. Can you hear it?"

"Yes, of course. It makes me shiver and tremble inside. I can't play what he plays, but I can play with it, and I've never felt so alive."

"Your music is amazing too. Do you know that? How do you do it?"

"I don't know. My fingers just move and the sounds just sing what feels right to me. "

"But you seem to know where he's going."

"Yes, it seems that way."

"What does it mean? You and I talk words, but this has no words."

"It's the way Happiness Woman and I sometimes talk without talking. Even the silences mean something. When I squeak at you with it, does that mean anything to you? That's how you sound."

"No, that's just noise, and I don't like it. It is irritating. But you sometimes play like the birds. You told me you are named after a bird. Can you play the way that bird sings?"

"Yes, a little. She picked up her flute and played some wrensong."

"Come here, girl," said the old man. "I want to say something."

One thing he did keep mentioning was that in the next fall season, after any crops had been harvested and put away in baskets in the little granaries they were building, there would be a "Great Meeting." Every generation or so a great meeting was held, he said, in a town so big that many families could go and be housed, and where there were kivas as big as a riverbed.

At these meetings clans met other clans who had come from many canyons, hills and mountains, far and wide. This was beyond imagining for the children, who did not really believe that there was another world above their canyon's rim where other people lived in other ways.

"These people are often very different from one another, and from you," the old man said. "Some are as dark as I am, and others are very tall. They speak in languages you often cannot understand, but they come in peace, with common concerns and interests."

"Your canyon is beautiful, but what I see now worries me. The grass and reeds are gone from the river's banks, and sand is blowing everywhere. The river has dried up even before the hottest weather has settled in, and the sun bakes the soil to dust. You have had no one to call the rains since Falling Water Woman left the canyon.

"Who is Falling Water Woman?" Wren asked.

"Stay still for a moment and I will tell you the story of Water and the mask.

"When the World began there was just earth. The mountains were tall and the valleys were wide, but they were bare and brown and dry, and nothing moved across them.

"The Sun and the Moon and the Stars stared down at this world and thought that it was quite wonderful, but something was missing. It was a stark and lonely place. So they talked among themselves for a long time.

"Finally, they decided to try Fire, so they threw Fire at the earth for a while. It looked beautiful. The lightning flashed and the Sun shone, and together they made the earth burn. But still something was missing.

"So they rested a while, and while they rested, the Stars came out and the Moon glittered, and the earth was cool and dark. It was so lonely, though, that the Moon became sad, and wept. But as she wept, her tears made Water, and the water nourished the earth with hope. After hope came, life soon followed, and with the life came air

and clouds and color. All of them danced across the face of the earth, and together they brought happiness.

“First Man and First Woman grew out of the earth with the trees and flowers and birds and animals, and the Sun and the Moon took turns watching over them. First Woman made a mask of the sun and the moon with a face of shells from the water, and eyes of mica from the earth, and with this mask, she talked with them. The gods learned the thoughts and needs of man, and First Woman learned the ways of the gods and spirits.

“When First Woman passed on to the spirit world, she gave the mask to her daughter, and through the generations, this mask was handed down from one to another, allowing the people to speak with the gods and the gods to speak with them.

“When the people spread out across the earth, the mask could not go everywhere with them, so some of the ancient ones made masks for their own canyons and towns. Others learned to sing and dance with the gods about the things they needed. In this dry land, calling for water is often most important, but people also seek good crops and health and peace. Many drew images of the mask on their walls to greet the Sun and Moon wherever they lived.

“This canyon’s mask was one of the oldest and most powerful. For generations, your callers and healers held a special place. Falling Water was the last to be given the mask and use it here. When she left this canyon, she took the mask with her, and there has been no way for your people to talk with the gods and spirits, or for the Moon to hear of the drought and cry for you. So that may be why the earth is beginning to burn again. If it continues, famine will come, and wars could break out among your people.”

“It is true that it is harder to find water each year,” said Ka’a. “We have just moved, and might have to move again if our spring dries up, but where we would go, I do not know.”

“I cannot promise that you would be able to find the old healer or the mask if you go to the Great Meeting, or even learn to dance for water. I hope you can, and I will tell you more of her story another time. But there are many amazing things you could learn at this meeting in any case.

“There are others there who don’t have such fertile land as you still do. Their crops don’t grow, and their children are thin and sickly. These clans, though, often have things you may have never seen, like buffalo robes and the right wood to make bows and arrows. They

can hunt buffalo from far enough away to stay alive, and shoot antelope and deer running fast across the open plains.”

“What is a bow?” asked Graymartin.

“It is a curved piece of strong and flexible wood whose two ends are tied tightly with a fine piece of rope. When you place against this rope a notched and feathered arrow like a little spear, with a small, sharp point, like this...”, and he showed them a brilliant black and shiny object like a tiny spearhead, “you can shoot it straight, and faster than the wind,” he said.

“That must be a very wonderful thing,” said Ka’a.

“Yes, and very deadly.”

“I would love to see one of those and try it out,” said Graymartin. “I could hunt the sheep then, those that are high in the canyon walls.”

“But going to the Great Meeting would be too difficult a trip for the whole family,” said Ka’a. “Especially with Wren who can’t climb and doesn’t even walk very well.”

“You may be surprised what the little one can do when she sets her mind to it,” the old man said.

“You must carry goods with you to trade for tools and materials you want. Always take good things, but not the best. For you, baskets that hold water, and reeds to make flutes, and some maize if you can spare some. Remember that you will get new things in trade. If you are clever, you will gain for yourselves, not lose, just as others will gain, each in their own way.

“There will be music there, though yours, Wren, is vanishingly rare and pure. And there is medicine to heal, and magic both to heal and hurt. You must be careful. Do not boast of your home or your goods so that others want them and follow you here to take them away from you. The healers cannot straighten Wren’s leg, but the journey, though hard, will make you very strong. At the Great Meeting you will learn and teach more than you ever imagined.”

Here the old man turned to the two children, Graymartin and Wren. “Such a journey will be of great importance for your elders, but even more so for you. You both have long lives to live, worlds to gain, and things to offer.

“I have watched you both for many days. You, Graymartin, are quick to learn, have keen eyes, good hands, and an extraordinary ability to climb. Often though, you move too fast, and thoughtlessly. If you can learn to look *for* things, and *understand* what you see and

don't see, you could teach many people bigger and stronger than you are how to track, and climb, and read the clues to life that lie around them.

"In turn, if you find a way to get or make a bow and arrows, with patience and practice you could become a wonderful archer. Then, with your father's guidance, the skills and teachings of First Hunter, balance and patience, you might grow to be a master hunter such as few have ever dreamed of. Here is a whole life's work, in the passing of a cloud.

"And you, Wren, have a body bent like mine, and it may limit where you go and what you do. But not as much as you might think. You may never be a graceful dancer, but you can make the spirits dance. You can play the sun to rise and set, and give the darkened heart new light.

"Your drawings in the sand have power, too, and hold understanding well beyond your years. You will find healers and callers at the great meeting who use sand paintings as part of worship, healing and magic. They will not want to ask your help because you are too young, but you can learn from them, and bring songs and rituals back here for your family's use, and build on them and bring to them your special powers.

"There will be hardships, and you should start strengthening yourselves and planning now. But it will open your eyes and change your lives, if you are careful, in wonderful ways. I will show you, Ka'a, and your son, whom you will need, how to get there and get back safely."

"Happiness Woman, do you know about this mask?"

"Of course."

"Do you know where it is now?"

"No. Not exactly, but I can always feel it."

"How does it feel?"

"Like it's a part of me. It is a part of me."

"Have you ever heard of Falling Water Woman?"

"Of course. She's part of me too. We're all part of the same family."

"Where did the mask come from?"

"Beyond the Sacred Mountains. I brought it with me."

"When?"

"Before there were People here. When this land was mostly under water. There were many spirits here, under the land, on the land, above the land. It was very beautiful. There were huge trees on the mountainsides and soon birds came."

"Where did they come from?"

"Inside the mountains with the fire, through the water that came from the sky and settled on the land. And then turtles came, and after them the fish, and then the birds, and finally the animals on the land."

"Were there People then?"

"No child. It was a time of peace. The People came later, and with them came much beauty but also strife, because they wanted what all the other animals had. And they took from the earth and the water and built things only for themselves. They did not understand the Way of the earth."

"What is that?"

"Balance. That for the earth to exist in beauty everything must be in balance. That there is a spirit inside each of us and it is in balance with the forces outside and inside everything else, inside you and between you and with everything else. Some of the People do understand this balance, are grateful for it and give back everything they take and use."

"Is that why my father says we must say thanks when we take berries or kill an animal?"

"Yes. The People knew this when they came, but many have forgotten it."

"Is that why Falling Water Woman's son was sent away?"

"Yes. And why there is less and less water here now. This canyon is out of balance and there is no one to call the water back and show that the People understand."

Chapter 12

Of Gifts and Dreams

The place of the Great Meeting was in the vast world above the canyon rim. The way the old man had entered the canyon this time was long and arduous. He had come from the end where the sun set, and the Great Meeting was toward the sunrise.

Many seasons before, he had entered and left the canyon by a different route, but there was no one alive in the canyon now who knew the way. He remembered a steep pathway, rising out of a certain side canyon, which had twisted through the trees and up the canyon wall, crossing thin ledges and climbing narrow chimneys. Just below the rim, at the steepest part, the ancient makers of the trail had placed ladders cut from trees, and had notched them to allow climbers to reach the top. He remembered it as frightening, but possible.

He was not sure he could make that climb again, but there were places to stop and rest, and good holds for hands and feet, even his. The last canyon dweller to use this route had been killed by a buffalo above a canyon rim a generation or more ago. With him was lost the knowledge of that path. The old man remembered, though, that the path started up a canyon several days journey from this place.

Ka'a could not leave his family for all the days needed to help the old man go his way. After careful thought and long discussions, he decided to let Graymartin go with the old man instead, to be his eyes and arms and legs, and to learn the way out of the canyon and back. This route would save the family many days walking and make the journey to the Great Meeting possible. Finding this path would also open vast new hunting grounds to them and others in the canyon.

"The old man told The Crow, my father, we should go to something called "the Great Meeting". Why should we go so far to see many scary people?"

"Important question. It's about seeing new things. New things, new people are scary, and you do need to be careful. But you should still go. It will be very hard for you, but think of it as building your strength."

Not just your leg and back strength, but your wisdom strength. You will learn how to look at things and people and decide what to do.”

“Do the other people look like us?”

“Yes and no. Some will be very dark, some very tall, some short, some loud, some shy like you.”

“Why?”

“Because being different is important. Your brother is a good hunter, your mother is a good weaver. They take care of each other. You will find what you’re good at soon, and it, too, will be a gift to them. Also, bad. You’ve got to learn how to deal with bad people, bad animals, bad weather. How will you learn without seeing them, watching your parents deal with them, learning when to go away before bad things happen and learning how to prevent bad things from happening at all?”

For Graymartin, this mission was both very important and difficult. Not only would he have to help the old man make his way out of the canyon, but he would have to learn the path, and get safely home by himself. As frail as the old man seemed, he was strong and skilled. He had lived a long life, often completely on his own. He knew many secrets of survival, how to read the sky, rock walls, sand and water, and he had learned, often through harsh lessons, the ways of man. He had many scars from all these lessons.

In the days before he left the family, the old man spent hours teaching Graymartin skills he would need to help them find and climb the path out of the canyon. The boy was impatient to start, and had a hard time learning the lessons, spoken as they were in an old man’s language.

“Open your eyes and listen with care. Accept advice graciously, even from old bones like mine. But judge it, and use it in the ways best suited to you and the problems you face. Important lessons come from unexpected sources.

“I will tell you a story. Like so many others, it may seem irrelevant to you. But common truths are hidden in our tales. As with the lost trail we are seeking up the canyon wall, you will have to use concentration and patience to find them. These are not the skills of fools.

"In the earliest times, there was an old woman who lived far from the spring that was her only source of water. She was wise and gentle, and had helped many of the animals around her over the years. When they saw that she was getting too old to make the trip to the spring several times a day to drink, and was wrinkling away of thirst and exhaustion, the animals decided to teach her secrets they had kept to themselves for years, the arts of weaving, so that she could carry water with her.

"Three animals came to her one day. The first was a thrush, who said, "My nest is woven with such care that it can keep my babies safe through even the most terrible storms. I will teach you to weave with strength and endurance." This she did. The old woman was very grateful, but she said to herself, "This is a wonderful, solid basket, but my water trickles out and will all be gone by the time I get home."

"Next came the beaver. He said, "My dam is special because it is made with trees and sticks and mud, and can hold back whole rivers of water." So the beaver taught the old woman to fill the cracks in her baskets with mud and pitch so that they would hold water."

"These are wonderful secrets," thought the old woman, "but this water-holding basket is so heavy I cannot pick it up and carry it home."

"Third came the spider. She was skillful beyond words and could make a web which caught the morning dew and had patterns which dazzled the eye. "I will teach you to weave in beauty," she said. So she taught the old woman to weave baskets of light and gossamer that were the envy of the world.

"The woman admired this work but said to herself, "These webs are supple and beautiful, but I cannot carry enough water in them to last me a whole day, so I will die of thirst in the midst of beauty."

"But in her wisdom, the old woman adapted what she had been taught to her own needs. She wove the colored reeds of the thrush's nest tightly in patterns of light and shadow like the spider's web, and filled the holes with pitch and a thin layer of mud. In this light, beautiful, water-holding basket she found she could carry enough water for the whole day in one trip to the spring. "

"There is one other lesson in this story. The spider is the most subtle of weavers, but next to that beauty lies death. In her skill, she snares the careless, and eats them. With great skills can come great danger - remember this when you are climbing walls and hunting

powerful animals. If you have been given the skill to climb high, you can fall far. The greater the creature you face on the hunt, the greater its strength to fight against you.”

Together, they watched the light and shadows change the canyon walls. To the boy’s amazement, even though his eyes were clouded, the old man could see patterns, and knew the feel of rock that would hold and rock that would not.

The old man taught him to read the water feathers that streamed down the canyon sides, adding line and color to the rock’s great carvings. Together, the boy’s sharp eyes and the old man’s knowledge found hidden pathways, secrets of pitch, and holds and crevices not otherwise visible from below.

The old man also spent time with Wren. No longer grumpy and irascible, he seemed intent on teaching her all the chants and songs he knew. She always played the old, small flute and he the larger, brightly colored one. Wren found that he did not always play the songs the same way each time, but that seemed all right. She was extremely quick to learn the tunes without watching his hands at all. She often went floating off, embellishing his songs. The old man would scold her gently, though he listened to these descants with wonder.

Wren’s drawings he left alone, except to show her some simple ways to represent the things that had no shape, like sorrow or health or friendship. The rest she would learn if she got to the meeting, or would make up for herself. She had great powers, without question. Even her family was beginning to see them.

One evening, she was playing in the sand as they talked, and she drew the simple face that was carved on the wall of her cave.

“That’s the mask!” said the old man with surprise.

“This is Happiness Woman. She’s my best friend. She lived with us in the cave we used to live in.”

“The mask?”

“Oh, no, a carving on the wall.”

“Well, in any case, you are friends already. That is a very good sign. When I was here for the first time, Falling Water was young, but the mask had already been passed to her, and she could always bring rain. She was this canyon’s greatest treasure. She was a healer and dancer as few had been before, but she would only call for rain when times were desperate and all other means to find water had failed.”

"Where is the mask now, and why did she leave?"

"Many years ago, this woman had a son. He grew up proud and selfish, and angered all who knew him. It was a time when there were many more families here, further up the canyon, and the elders of these families met and banished the young man. His mother was furious with them, and she left the canyon with her son, taking the mask and her great powers away with her."

"Where did they go?"

"They traveled to the towns where the Great Meeting is held. Tales of her skill had gone before her into the chalk canyon, and when the droughts came there and the river turned sour, people pleaded for her help, but she refused. She said that the mask only worked here, and she had hidden it away.

"Her son insulted people in those villages too, and he was banished again or killed. His mother was too old and blind by that time to move, and she turned silent and bitter. She never danced again, and no one has seen the mask since Falling Water Woman left this canyon."

"Could we find her, and bring the mask back here?" asked Wren.

"If she is still alive, she may not even remember that there was such a mask. Still, it would be worth asking people about her if you get to the Great Meeting. It could also be dangerous. Let me think on it, and if you come, find me, and ask again."

As the time came for him to leave, the family gave the old man clothing and provisions for his journey, all that he could carry and more, for Graymartin would carry things for him up the canyon wall.

In turn, he gave his blessings to them all, and to each of them he gave special gifts. To Pale Flower he gave a pure white shell, "to wear, to reflect the sun and catch the water, to rub when you feel afraid. It comes from the sands at the edge of the earth. I went there once to see the endless water and trade for salt. There will be hard times ahead, protect it well or it will shatter into tiny pieces."

To Ka'a, he gave the claw of a bear. On its smooth, curved side was carved a little figure, a bent man, dancing. "If you come to the Great Meeting, show this to an elder. If I am alive, he will know where to find me."

To Yellow Leaf he gave a nut-full of salt. "You prepare food very well and hardly need this, but there will be special times. It

cannot bring you children, but I hope it will bring you and your family other pleasures and good health.”

To Maki, he gave a tiny bag made up of beautiful, brightly colored beads. “I do not have anything large enough to match your strength, but this shines like your good humor, even when there is little light. May it help sustain you.”

And to Wren, he gave the ancient flute. “No one could use this for greater good, or deserves it more,” he said.



Chapter 13

The World above the Canyon Rim

Early the next day, Graymartin and the old man set off up the canyon. Graymartin was still upset that all the other members of his family had been given gifts and he had not.

"Think of what he has taught you," his mother had said.

"I would rather a small claw than all the stories he has told," Graymartin muttered back.

The two made their way along the twisting river bank, slowly, much too slowly for Graymartin, for whom conserving energy was never a consideration. He had enough energy for the whole clan, his father said.

The old man sometimes played his flute as he trudged along. He said it helped him pass the time on long journeys and think deep thoughts, most of which, he admitted, were pretty fuzzy these days.

He said he would recognize the first turn toward the path, to the left and up a little stream, by a massive stone that looked like a bear at the mouth of the canyon.

"What is a bear, whose claw you gave my father?"

"Oh, child, you have a fearsome treat in store for you."

The old man went on to tell Graymartin of bears that roared, and bison as big as boulders, and pigs with tusks as sharp as spears, and other strange creatures, some of which were myths and legends and gods.

After two days, they found the stone, now bristling with bushes in the cracks, aged and scruffy, just like the old man. Next, the stream bed. But there was no stream. Many rocks had fallen, and trees and bushes had been swept by flash floods down the narrow side canyon. Still, it was a narrow canyon, and with struggles to find the simplest path and marks to find it in the future, the two made their way up to a point where the canyon seemed to offer no more place to climb.

"Look about carefully," said the old man. "As I remember, this is one of the hardest parts of the path to see and climb. Beyond these lower trees there lies a series of hidden ledges and sloping chimneys we must use."

In all directions, the walls rose steeply to where the hawks and eagles soared. They were broken by cracks and holes, but Graymartin could see no trail.

“Go back, then, down our little canyon and look up from both sides,” the old man said. “This is where you test your eyes, and my hours of teaching you how to look for ledges which divert water stains, and how the light and shadows fall and change with time. You will find our route if you look carefully enough.”

It was not until almost sunset that the light was just right, and Graymartin recognized high on the canyon wall the pattern that the old man had described. Then, carefully, and with painful concentration, he worked the pathway down the wall, along the very ledges and cuts he had seen before without recognizing their connections. It would be very hard to see in the morning light, perhaps impossible, and Graymartin wanted to try it that evening.

“I could not make it all the way up before the darkness comes,” the old man said. “Also, the very shadows that helped you find the path will change before we get there. Mark the base of the trail and we will try it in the morning.”

They ate well, on mash and berries, and went to sleep at dusk. Graymartin had dreams of lost trails and hopeless cracks and crumbling foot holds. He woke many times, each time just as he was about to fall. And, once, he flew up the canyon wall with eagle’s wings, leaving the old man gobbling like a jealous turkey in the bushes far below.

With first light, though, they were both up. The old man was right, the first walls were the some of the hardest. Graymartin put the old man’s bags of food and clothing on his back, and with his hands and the help of knotted thongs, helped him over the smooth rock face onto a narrow ledge. Then, indeed, they could see a series of gently angled, shallow cuts and chimneys in the wall above them. These they had to inch their way along. They rested many times, for there were solid places to rest, and some of these bore marks of ancient people’s passing.

“Hold on, relax, and look down,” the old man said. “You will have to memorize your route. It looks very different going down than going up, and is often harder, as you know. But then, you will not have a bag to carry and an old man to help along. Mark your path clearly enough that rain and falling sand will not hide your signs.”

Graymartin was amazed at how perfect the hand and foot holds were that had been cut into the rock face by the people long ago. The old man told him about his ancestors, those who had built the buildings, now crumbling on the canyon floor near his home. They had been expert climbers and had made and used this path for generations. It had been with the death of Swimming Snake at the horns of a buffalo that knowledge of this route had been lost.

At last, the two reached the canyon rim. The old man slumped, exhausted, under a twisted tree and rested his head in his hands.

Graymartin, though, stood dumbfounded, his head spinning with the enormity of the sky and the world which opened up around him.

The earth went on and on, first flat, then lifted toward the sky by hills and mountains far away. His sharp eyes found forms on distant slopes. He thought they must be animals, but couldn't guess their size or shape. His mind was filled with all the fantastic creatures the old man had described, and he studied this new world with amazement and curiosity.



It was the middle of the day, cloudless and very hot. After a brief rest, the old man knew he needed to get to better shade, and it was time for Graymartin to start back down the trail in the canyon wall. He had clearly marked the turns, but would need good light to find the hand and foot holds. He was excited to start, and to get back to his family to tell them about everything he had seen. But he knew it would not be easy, even without an old man to help along. The last few days had taught him the importance of completing one step at a time. He felt grown up, eager, and yet a little sad.

Just as he began to shuffle off, the old man paused, and fished out of his bag the brilliant black arrowhead he had shown the family days before.

"This," he said, "comes from the mountains near where I was born, far away. It is very rare here. Guard it well. Let it serve as a dream and a goal. May you grow to have its sharpness, its depth and its clarity.

"Is there a martin fetish in the bag around your neck? Yes? Is there anything yet bound to it? No? Good. Here, tie this obsidian arrowhead with a little thread to the martin's back. Together they will hold great power for you. Never use the arrowhead unless your life depends upon it. Give it the honor it deserves, as the mixture of earth and fire from which it comes, and let it be part of your soul."

Graymartin looked at the facets of the beautifully worked stone. He could almost see through it, and light reflected off it in all directions. He gave the old man a bow of heartfelt gratitude such as he had never felt before.

And so they set out on their separate ways. As the old man had said, the climb back down was indeed more difficult, even though he had only to fend for himself. Parts were very steep, and the canyon floor was very far below. He had little trouble finding his trail markings, but some of the old holds were hard to feel as he groped his way downwards and around blind corners in the rock. At one point he felt trapped on a narrow ledge until he remembered that he had to climb up a little to find the pathway down.

Each time he stopped to rest, he marveled at the view, and envied his friends the hawks and eagles. But now he had been above the canyon rim, and realized that even up there his birds wheeled far above. They could see not only the life in the canyon he had always thought so vast, but everything else in that endless world above. He

found that there were new dimensions to the way he thought of things.

When at last he reached the canyon floor, it was getting dark. Rather than setting off immediately, he settled himself into a nice warm spot, ate a little and fell asleep.

The journey home from there was easy. He was used to life along the riverbed, and all he had to do was follow the water marks in their twisting course between the canyon walls. The valley was lush compared to the harsh and sandy land above the rim. The walking gave him time to think and dream.

When he reached his home, each member of his family came to greet him. He felt from them a new respect for the responsibility he had assumed and the success of his mission. He told them of the path and the climb and especially of the immense expanse of sky and earth above the canyon rim. Only his father had ever been out of the canyon. That had been the other way, down the flat path along the river, and it had been a long time ago.

With what he felt was new authority, Graymartin told his family that he thought they should go to the Great Meeting. Wren was very eager to go, too, but their parents, seeing the difficulties and sacrifices that this would entail, made no promises. Even the adults, though, had heard the old man's message and could see what such a trip and such a meeting might mean for all of them.

"I'm scared"

"As you should be. That's part of your wisdom. It's also wise to think more deeply and see if the risks are real, what the gains could be, and who's with you."

"I want to go."

"I know. Good girl."

"Would you go with me?"

"I'd need your help."

"I could help you? Yes, of course, someone would have to bring you back!"

"Yes. Though you know I'm not just in the mask."

"Where are you really?"

"Inside you, outside you. Don't you ever talk to me when you're not near the shield? You used to be always on the ledge and therefore near the shield, but since you've come down to the

riverbed, you still talk to me don't you? The shield's just a symbol of me, like your memory, a good reminder that I'm around. You know the sun's there even when it's far away behind a cloud, right?"

It was exciting and frightening at the same time. Preparations would have to start now. Less play, no rest. They would have to save and store every possible scrap of food. Each moment would have to be filled making baskets and other special items for the trip and to trade for all the unimaginable things the meeting held.

It would be especially hard for Wren to climb the Great Wall, and limp the treacherous miles to the towns where the meeting would be held. But she had blossomed from dust to flower in her family's eyes since that moment when she had taken her first, terrified step down the wall to the canyon floor.

For each of them, the coming of the old man had created new beginnings, and now they had to decide which paths to climb.

Chapter 14

Preparations and Practice

Wren grew stronger every day. She practiced by climbing the walls under the cave. Her father worked with her to find holds that she could use, and together they identified places where they would need to place ladders because her crooked little body simply couldn't reach the next ledge or hold. She took each step seriously, just as the turtle had, a long time ago in the old man's story. This was a low wall compared to the great ones all around her, but she was determined to make it up the great wall when the time came.

Her hands were good at climbing. As she reached for holds along the steep path, she talked to the rock. Some holds were good friends, and she greeted them warmly when they met. Others were troublemakers, and she would scold them for being difficult or sandy or uncooperative, whatever they were that day.

Her leg was a different issue. It never went where she told it to, and she had to twist her body around in awkward ways to get her foot into the right position. She was pretty annoyed with it most of the time.

"You really are a bad leg. BAD LEG! You never do what I tell you to. You're like the leg of that old badger who used to limp around his hole growling and complaining all the time. You really are useless!" she would yell.

"You have to be more patient," her mother told her. "It's not a naughty leg, it just needs help and understanding. You can teach it.

"Think of everything it has learned over the last season. It never did anything you asked it to before. Now it has helped you climb off the ledge, and will help you climb the great wall if you work with it. Don't yell at it too much. It might get grumpy and go away somewhere."

"Don't be silly, mother, it can't go anywhere without me. "

"Then I guess you're stuck with it. We're all stuck with parts that don't behave, and we sometimes wish they would go away. Some you can't do anything about. My eyes don't see very well, but I still want them, poor as they are. At least you, Wren, seem able to help your leg and back learn some things some of the time. Have patience with them."

Pale Flower stared off at the blurry walls around her. They seemed to rise forever. She had dreamed, ever since she was a small child, of exploring the world above them, and now the old man had offered her that opportunity. But she had to help Wren gain enough strength and skill to make it up that wall, or else she would never get out herself.

"Walls," she thought to herself. "So many different walls."

"Squeak, we're going away for a long trip, far away, to another canyon. I will miss you."

"Why are you going away?"

"To find out how to bring water back here. To see if others know things we need to know."

"Will there be marmots there?"

"I sure hope so. I'll tell them about you. I hope I can talk with them the way I talk to you."

"Be careful. Do you know about wolves? And snakes?"

"Of course I know about snakes. There are lots of them down here. What are wolves?"

"You once told me about dragons. Wolves are like dragons. They kill and eat marmots the way you eat pine nuts. If you listen at night, you hear coyotes, right? Sometimes, though, there are deeper, scarier howls, too. Those are wolves. I've never seen one, but I'm told they're huge and run around above the canyon rim killing everything. I hope your father and Graymartin can keep them away from you. The way you move, you wouldn't stand any more of a chance than I would."

"That's terrible. Maybe I shouldn't go. But I want to go! And perhaps there are other creatures up there that want to eat me."

"I'm sure there are, tasty morsel that you are. When are you leaving? Is that why your family is suddenly gathering things up in bags?"

"Yes. Soon. I've got to go help or I'll get in trouble."

There had been an ill wind all summer, filled with dry, unfriendly spirits in the dust. It was too hot, there was too little water, and everyone was irritable with each other. Wren overheard disturbing talk. Her brother and her father wanted to go to the Great Meeting alone, leaving her with her mother, her mother's sister, and Maki.

“You are too small and weak to go,” Graymartin said one day when he was particularly angry about carrying water. “You won’t be able to get up the great wall. And, even if we got you up there, the place of the Great Meeting is so far away, even I can’t see it. Besides, perhaps you are the reason it hasn’t rained, as Yellow Leaf says. Perhaps you would bring us bad luck up there, too.”

Wren cried back at him, “You horny toad! I can go! I will climb up the path, and I can walk a long way! Watch me!” she yelled, and stomped off down the canyon floor with her determined, crooked gait.

For her, a long way was from the old cave to here. But Graymartin had been above the rim and knew how far a long way was up there.

Still, the journey was months away, and no matter who went, there was much to be done. They needed things to trade as well as strong, new things to wear, shirts and pants and packs and thongs, and everyone had to help make them.

They all worked hard. With her strong hands, Wren made the best things for herself.

“I will need a good pair of moccasins,” Graymartin told her. He had never worn moccasins, and she could not see why he needed such things now. When she would not listen to him, Graymartin went off angrily to his father.

“Father says you must make moccasins for me. Now!” Graymartin told her.

“Make them yourself, you dried up mud cake.”

Then her father came himself. “Make yourself useful,” he said. “You have to do these things, even for your brother. This trip is important for all of us, and you have to work for the whole family, not just yourself.”

Hurt and small and furious, Wren stamped her good leg and limped away, crying down the sandy path to her secret cave at the bend in the river.

There she sat and fumed, thinking nasty thoughts. She scratched out the faint vestiges of her favorite drawing in the sand and replaced them with angry, jagged lines and darkness.

As she fussed, a shadow crossed the sand, and Wren looked up to find her mother standing there. She had never intruded here before, and Wren didn’t want her to see the place. But Pale Flower had the old flute in her hand.

“You dropped this,” she said. “I thought you might miss it.” She waited, but when Wren said nothing, she started talking as if in the middle of the child’s thoughts. “I know it was mean of Graymartin to speak that way to you, but you must help. There is still time before the Great Meeting, and if you work hard and show yourself to be important to us all, perhaps we can all go. But you must work *with* us. Be a strong part of the thongs and weaving of our family, not a thorn. If you seem a burden, like ill-fitting clothes, you will be better left at home.

“Stay now a while and play, and when you come back, I will show you special ways to shape the hides for moccasins. And I promise we will make a fine pair for you, too.”



Chapter 15

The High Trail

Graymartin now spent most of his time thinking and dreaming of the world above the canyon rim. It seemed endless, in all directions. And more amazing, despite all the stories the old man had told, there was nothing to see up there except hard sand, dry stream beds, and a few twisted trees and rocks. There were no animals, no people, no homes, no walls. Just earth, forever. Was that what their canyon would look like without water? Was that where spirits lived? He always shivered when he thought of them swirling and creeping around, like spirals of dust in the wind.

“In that direction,” the old man had said, “there are paths as straight as the rays of the sun at dawn, and they lead to a shallow canyon with towns winding up a river, like rocks along a shore. Each town has homes, built one on top of the other, three and four homes high. There are many doors and passageways. Even the most able

men can lose themselves.” He had pointed, but Graymartin saw nothing there but scrub.

The other way, toward the edge of the world where the sun sets, there were faint blue mountains. “Those are sacred places,” the old man had said. “The people who live there say that eagles were the earth’s first creatures. They came down through little holes in the night sky, down along the cold, high mountain ridges long ago. Perhaps they did, who knows.

“But there are others who say that First Man and First Women were born from the earth through cracks that opened with thunder and groans and trembling. They came and were lonely, so they called birds and animals and fish from over the sky and under the earth to join them.

“But my people thought that turtles and snakes came first, crawling out of the endless waters far beyond where I was born. They still return to water to cool themselves and regain their strength. Where I came from, the clouds and stones are made by mountains spewing fire into the sky.”

“At the Great Meeting, you will find that the elders argue these things for days on end, but they never agree. It gives them something to do.”

The old man’s stories filled Graymartin’s dreams with wonderful creatures and gods, fantastic and magical. They changed shapes as they came and went from holes in the earth and sky. Some threw thunder and lightning. Others blew water from the clouds, or poured rivers over canyon rims, flooding the dry river beds below. They roared and hissed and whispered. Yet for years the clouds here had been mostly empty, and lightning brought nothing but strange smells and crackle in the air.

If there was a whole world below the earth, and another above the sky, why did these beings come here at all? To hunt or play? It was said that certain people could see them and call them. Graymartin, with his sharp eyes, sometimes thought he could see spirits moving among the shadows and in the air in the heat of the day, moving, coming and going. He could never see them well enough, though, to be quite sure.

For all his dreaming, Graymartin had many things to do. While Wren and Pale Flower sewed and wove things for the journey, his job was to bring them animal skins, and bones to sew them with. This

was not easy, for only small creatures lived along the canyon floor. He and his father had to range far and wide in search of animals to provide the family with hides and meat and tools.

The old man had told them of woolly giants so huge that just one of them would feed a family for months, and grant them such a massive skin that a whole family could wrap themselves up in it. How would you catch such a beast? The old man had said that hunters sometimes hid under these skins and moved up close to kill them with long spears. Graymartin was not sure that that was right to do, and it certainly didn't sound safe.

By the time the cold weather came, and the wind blew all the time, Graymartin, Ka'a and Maki had made enough rooms on the cliff ledge for all of them to live in. They had stored what grain and the dried meat they had in little granaries, and the time came to see if Wren could climb up the trail.

It was really different this time. Wren found it much easier to climb up than down, largely because she could see the ledges and holds and did not have to rely on her unruly leg to find them. She had made it up the simpler parts many times, and no longer tired easily. Ka'a and Graymartin set the poles in place that would serve as ladders and helped her learn to use them. The last time, everyone was afraid that she might fall and die. This time, they knew she had a good chance of succeeding.

Now that Wren had lived with the family on the river bed, she knew that she would find living on the ledge confining. It was not clear whether she should simply stay in the cave for the whole cold season, cooking and weaving, or climb back and forth when the family did. She would still be slow and hold them up.

But she had one reason she did not discuss with her family for looking forward to exploring to the ledge; she wanted to see the paintings and carvings on the wall. No one else seemed interested in them, but Wren hoped to find special images there that might become her friends, as Happiness Woman had.

The day they chose to have her try to scale the wall was cool and dry. She took each step with great care, but had a great deal of trouble on one of the pole ladders. She finally got so scared that she could not move.

Her father climbed up behind her to help. He held her shaking body for a few moments, then helped her set her bad foot in the next hold.

“Steady, now,” he said. “You can do it.” She could, and did, and to everyone’s pleasure, made it up easily the rest of the way.

Her father had never held her like that before, and she could not remember him ever giving her gentle encouragement. It made her want to hold him, but she did not dare, afraid that he would scold her. Pale Flower saw it too, and said to her, “Go. It’s all right. The worst he can do is pull away.” So Wren went to him and touched him with her hands.

“Thank you, father,” she said. He looked at her in surprise, but did not move.

“You did well, Crooked One. Going down will be harder, but we can help you then, too. It will get easier and easier each time.”

She knew it would, too.

That winter was long and cold, but the snow never lasted long in the canyon. Graymartin and his father took advantage of its soft brilliance to hunt the bigger creatures who sought winter food along the canyon floor. They killed a deer and honored it for its grace and strength. It offered them many opportunities.

One day they watched a sheep on the sheer rock face high up the Great Wall. Too far away to hear, it seemed to float, without a sound. Graymartin could not keep his eyes off the creature. Many times he had dreamed of doing this himself. Half flying, half running, he could move across ledges thin as leaves. “That’s magic,” he whispered.

“Every animal has his own,” his father said.

“Where? Could I find it and keep it if I killed that sheep?” Graymartin asked.

“His magic lives in him while he lives, and protects him on the long journey after he dies. No, you cannot harvest magic like so much maize. Great hunters would then be great magicians, but they are more often great, proud fools. “

The old man had warned Graymartin about magic. In the river towns where the Great Meeting was held, there were people and places that held strong magic, good and evil. “Beware of these tangled webs and warrens of the mind,” the old man had said. “Until you have far greater strength and understanding, avoid them if you

can. But remember, even though some magicians say they can enter another's soul, even they cannot take your strength away unless you let them do it."

Wren did not recognize the paintings and carvings on the walls of the new cave, and could not understand what they meant. Where the sun first touched the walls there was a small, round shape, with a jagged line through it. It was certainly not a happy figure. She pushed aside the thought that it might be Happiness Women broken in half by a bolt of lightning.

On cold mornings, though, she sat in the pale sun along that wall, closed her eyes, and listened. A few birds scratched in the hard earth, but few sang. She waited for the sun and rocks and trees to sing softly to her. There were never any words, but sometimes she became unsettled as she listened, or peaceful, or happy. Were these her own moods or the moods of the canyons around her?

She rarely cried out loud anymore, but she often played the little flute with the sounds and feelings she heard around her and inside her, the cold, the dry, the pain, the happiness. It did not seem to bother anyone, most of the time, but Yellow Leaf was still the one most likely to yell at her to stop the noise. Ka'a was rarely in the cave anyway.

When the days began to lengthen and the spring came, Graymartin and his father went to inspect the path out of the canyon for winter damage. Melting ice and spring thunderstorms cracked the canyon walls like thunder, bringing down huge slabs of rock. A few spring rains poured water down the canyons, rolling rocks and dragging trees, changing the riverbed beyond recognition. Last year's paths had become impassable, and new ones had been torn and wrenched into existence.

Graymartin was filled with importance as he led his father up the noisy, winding river toward the little canyon where the pathway began. He was happy in the warmth of the spring, but it was much harder now than his trip with the old man had been in the parched fall of the year before. Winter rubble and new spring growth blocked their path at every turn.

They scrambled and fought their way along the cluttered riverbank, and Graymartin proudly pointed out landmarks as they went. But with every twist of the river his landmarks became more difficult to find. The light was different, the river had changed, and the

bear-shaped rock was not where it should have been. He could not tell one canyon from the next.

For hours they struggled along the canyon floor. Graymartin began to feel cold twinges of panic that they might never find the pathway the old man had shown him again. They would be stuck in the canyon and never get to the Great Meeting, and it would be his fault. This had happened before, and it had kept his clan in the canyon for generations.

They turned and started down again, but this way, everything looked different. Ka'a was losing patience. Tired and increasingly miserable, Graymartin became desperate to recognize some sign of the path. Perhaps, like doors to the spirit world, this path was only there at certain times, for certain people. With the old man, he was able to see it, alone he could not.

"What did the old man say to look for?" Ka'a said.

"The bear rock, a twist in the little canyon."

"Did you find it right away?"

"No."

"Did he teach you how to find it?"

"Step back and look again," the old man had said. "Look for patterns in the great walls, they don't change much from year to year. Paths and openings between the trees where water runs may vary, though. Look straight, but open your mind to the very edges of your sight. Sometimes that is where the most important things hide, and only those who know how to look that way can find them."

The sun was down near the canyon rim now. Graymartin stood at the edge of the river and looked up and down the canyon. He let his eyes wander, but as he had been taught, he made himself look at shapes in every corner, where things were only light and shadow. "Much will change, but there will always be some marks that have stayed the same".

This was like a puzzle of patterns and shapes, and as Graymartin blurred the pieces in his mind, suddenly he realized that the bear was still there. Its head had split in two and now looked more like the mouth of a great fish gasping for water from the dry sky. He laughed in relief.

Once he saw the rock, Graymartin had little difficulty finding signs of the path that wound up the side canyon. He and his father made steady progress to the base of the trail that climbed the Great Wall to the rim.

"We still have light. Without the old man or Wren to help up step by step, we should be able to make it to the top this evening. We can spend the night up there. That way we can explore a while tomorrow before we start for home," said Graymartin. "I want to see that world again."

They started up the path. He was right. Even in the waning light, the two of them had little difficulty. Graymartin's marks were still recognizable, and few of the hand and footholds had been sheared off over the winter.

As he pulled himself over the top of the wall, Ka'a crouched as the endless expanse of the plain spread out before him. "Don't move," he whispered to his son. He felt as if the open sky weighed down upon his back, holding him down. Then, carefully, he stood up.

"I feel the grip of spirits here that want us not to move. They spin the world and hold the sky in place."

Experienced as he was, Graymartin reassured his father. "It is safe to stand and walk here, but watch the wind. It tries to blow you back into the canyon when you least expect it.

"That way, the path runs to the Great Meeting," he said, pointing into the darkening sky. And there, toward the sunset, are the sacred mountains." Far across the flat plain in front of them there was a huge rock spire which rose like a fang from the jaws of the earth, black on one side but burning in the sunset light on the other. The old man had shuddered when he looked at it. Few ventured in that direction.

The old man had told him, "It is said that when this world was bare, just stone and dust, nothing moved across this plain. But where the black spire stands, the earth opened, and fire from the world below burst through, bringing good and evil.

"Those who live there now move between two worlds without knowing where they belong. At times they are men and women, but at others they turn into animals and roam the barren land howling and hissing.

"I have been there," the old man had said to Graymartin, "but would never go back of my own will."

As they watched, all the clouds turned red in the sunset, but the tower loomed dark beneath them. There was a sudden chill in Ka'a's voice. "Stay close to me, and move with care."



Chapter 16

Hunters in the Night

It was windy and harsh on the canyon rim, and it was getting cold as the sun set. Graymartin and his father looked around for trees or rocks to shelter them, but there were few to be seen. They found a small ledge and huddled under its edge. From there, they could see their lush, winding canyon and the river far below.

"This will be too hard a climb for Wren," said Graymartin.

"That may be true. We'll have to see."

"You and I could get to the Great Meeting and back so much faster alone, and Wren and mother could stay behind with Maki and Yellow Leaf."

"But the old man told us they were very important to the success of this trip. Without them, he said, we might not get the mask, though I cannot imagine why."

"But how do we know it's there?" Graymartin asked. "What if the old woman is dead? Perhaps she destroyed the mask. Even if it is there, how do we know it will work for us, not against us?"

"Graymartin, what I know is that we desperately need rain. Every season less and less comes. Fewer beans grow, and stalks crack and dry before they bare the maize. We pray, we call, we dance to no avail. Perhaps the calling needs a woman's touch. Perhaps your mother and sister have skills we don't know about. I do not pretend to understand, except that we must try to make this journey as a family."

Graymartin said nothing. The old man had also told him, when they were talking together in this very place, that his crooked, irritating little sister would somehow be essential on this journey, that they could not get or use the mask without her. He had thought that this was one of the old man's foolish stories, told because he liked the little girl.

As far as he could see, having Wren along would only make things so much harder. Perhaps she would bring bad luck on the trip instead. How could someone who had caused the rains to stop coming be important in bringing them back? He almost said these things to his father now, but decided it was not the time or place.

They watched the sun go down, ate some dried deer meat and mash, and lay down to watch the sky. There were so many stars. The moon started to rise, and dark shapes crossed its orange face.

"Are those shadows spirits?" wondered Graymartin. The flat plain, and the curved sky arching down to it, were so much vaster than they had ever seemed from deep inside the canyon. It was completely silent except for the wind in the branches of the trees. They slept.

Sometime in the night, they were woken by howls, quite far away. As the cries faded off, they seemed to be answered by others.

"Coyotes?" asked Graymartin.

"I don't know," his father said. "Everything sounds so different up here, even the birds." Short, flat sounds. No echoes. None of the richness of the canyon. No trees or water either.

"These seem longer and deeper than the yips and yowls of coyotes."

For a while the cries danced in and out of the wind in the scrub. There was something very eerie about them, and they seemed to be

moving closer. The coyotes they knew avoided people, so Laughing Crow and Graymartin just lay there and listened.

The half-moon cast a pale light on the flat earth around them, but the dark spire loomed black in the distance. They thought of the half-human creatures who roamed there, and shivered.

Suddenly, barks burst out much closer to them. Graymartin searched the darkness. He thought he could see shapes moving rapidly along the moonlit edge of the canyon, above the blackness where the wall dropped off into the depths below. Were these creatures patrolling the edges of their world for intruders from below?

Scared now, the two moved further back towards the edge of the cliff, instinctively feeling that that was home and safer than the naked roof which offered them no places to hide or climb. Ka'a had left his spear at the bottom of the canyon wall, so they took sharpened hand axes from their packs and waited. Creatures now moved through the bushes. These were not spirits. They breathed, and broke branches as they ran through the dry bushes.

With a crash, dark forms burst out into the open a short distance from Graymartin, their howls changing to low growls.

They were huge animals, menacing and powerful. They had eyes that shone in the moonlight. They were obviously intent on killing. They inched forward, snarling.

Without turning, Ka'a shouted, "Get back to the cliff and find a way over the edge." Graymartin obeyed, but as he did, one of the animals lunged after him. Ka'a jumped at the animal knocking him away, but several others charged him, white teeth glinting. These were living, fearsome creatures, and he, too, ran for his life.

The edge of the cliff was absolutely black, so Ka'a could see no features of the wall. He leapt for the point where Graymartin had disappeared, but as he reached the edge, one of the animals hurled itself onto his back, sinking his teeth into his pack. The man scrambled the last couple of feet to the rim of the canyon, grabbed the trunk of a small bush, and slid over the edge of the precipice.

His legs smashed against the canyon wall, and he flailed with his toes to find cracks that might bear his weight. On his back, the creature struggled to get a new hold, growling, biting and clawing furiously, but as the man threw himself over the edge of the cliff, the animal slid howling off his back into the darkness.

Ka'a found a small ledge for his feet and clung there frantically. Above him several more of the creatures snarled and scratched at

the ground of the cliff edge, angrily searching this way and that for a way to get at the man. They seemed to fear the edge. Growling, they backed to surer ground. They ran back and forth in frustration.

Then, almost as suddenly as they had attacked, they vanished.

After a few moments of silence, Ka'a caught his breath and called out for his son.

"Graymartin?"

A short distance away, on a narrow outcrop of rock, lay Graymartin, terrified.

"I'm here," he whispered. "Are you all, right?"

"Yes," answered his father, and he shifted his weight around to look for his son.

"Who were they? Guardians of the rim, patrolling, angry that we had tried to climb into their world? Spirits? Why didn't they attack me and the old man?"

"These were not spirits. Not everything that is fearful is a spirit. One of the beasts knocked me over and ripped my pack apart."

"What happened? Where is he?"

"He fell off the cliff when I jumped over the edge."

"Can you come here?"

"Yes", his father said, and struggled cautiously to where his son lay huddled on a ledge.

"I don't want to move," said Graymartin.

"I think we should stay here for now." His father agreed.

They heard nothing vengeful from above, so there they stayed, cold and wary, until the sun rose the next morning.

The dawn light showed them the familiar landscape of the canyon, but they were sore and still a little shaky as they climbed down the rock face. They stopped to eat some meal on a large, protected ledge about half way down.

"Those beasts are more terrible than anything in my dreams," Graymartin said. "I hope that the old man made it past them. It seemed so peaceful when we came last time."

"We can only hope. We should try to find the one that attacked me and fell. If he was truly a spirit, he could have passed into another world as he dropped and will have vanished. But I think I heard him howl and cry as he fell. I hope he is not roaming our canyons now."

"Could he be waiting for us at the bottom?" asked Graymartin.

“We will watch carefully, but he will be less secure in our land,” said Laughing Crow.

Before sliding over the big rock slab to the sand at the base of the cliff, Graymartin and Ka’a looked and listened for any signs of breathing or motion. There was a bloody, gray mass in the bushes a short distance from the foot of the cliff. Laughing Crow took his spear from the ledge where he had left it and cautiously approached the animal. It was very real, and very dead. It was hard for them to give thanks for its existence, but they did, and then pulled it out and inspected it.

It was like a huge coyote, but darker in color, with a powerful body and heavier legs.

“I think this is a wolf,” Ka’a said, “ferocious, cunning, and willing to attack people, as we found out. I’m very glad they do not live in the canyon. But the hide and fur are beautiful, and will make a wonderful coat. Small though, perhaps enough for Wren.”

Graymartin wanted it for himself, but saw it would be too small when cut, so he held his tongue. Together they set about skinning the wolf, taking whatever they felt they could use and leaving the rest for other creatures in the canyon who would take their shares. The claws and biggest teeth they took and set aside especially. Perhaps they held some special powers.

Chapter 17

Joining Those Who Went Before

When the story was told to Pale Flower and Wren, it was suffused with all the fear and spirits and darkness the man and boy could muster to show what terrors existed in the world beyond the canyon. It was a fearful journey that they would have to take to the Great Meeting. "Be grateful that you do not have to go," said Graymartin.

"But I still want to go," Wren told them. "You are strong and can protect us." Graymartin was silent, not wanting to dispute this flattery, but Laughing Crow was truly worried for his family, and plans went on for the man and boy to go alone.

"Happiness Woman."

"Yes, child."

"What were those creatures that attacked my father and brother? They would they kill me, wouldn't they?"

"Yes, child. But they don't sit there waiting for you. They roam far across the plains. They're far away now. They hunt everything, rabbits, deer, even bison."

"What's a bison?"

"It's a big, shaggy animal that lives up there too. They move around together in large herds, but they don't eat people, just the grasses at live up there too."

"Like a marmot or a bird?"

"Oh, no! The size of one of the huge rocks that fall off the walls in the winter."

"I'm scared of going up there. Do you have anything to protect us?"

"I'm sure you will be safe. Your father and brother will be better prepared this time, now that they know what might be waiting for you."

Wren made it down the wall from her cave without falling and with little help, and soon was climbing up and down on her own. She noticed Maki always watching though, as her mother did.

The summer came, dry, hot, relentless. It burned on without rain. The river dried to dark spots here and there, but the spring remained full. On trips to the spring, Wren often thought of the story the old man had told them about the woman who had been taught by birds and animals to make baskets that held water. She was grateful for the lesson, though the baskets were very heavy when filled with water.

They had plenty of water to drink and to make mash, but even with some watering, the few maize stalks they had planted died before the kernels could grow, and there were very few seeds of any kind. Every pinon pine was checked and every nut was harvested.

In the hottest part of the summer, Maki fell from a tree and slashed his leg. The wound turned red and swollen, and festered. He tried to cool it in the mud of the river, but that just made it worse. Soon he could not walk, and he lay in the old ruins at the base of the cliff beneath their homes, groaning and unable to find comfort. Wren and Yellow Leaf sat with him and placed salves and compresses on his wounds, changing them as soon as they dried out.

Yellow Leaf often sent Wren away angrily. "We need more than you can offer, Crooked One."

After several days, it was clear that Maki's leg would not heal without help, so Graymartin went up the canyon to ask if the healer would come. She was now very old and moved very slowly. She brought her bag of herbs, and another bag with colored sand, stones and berries for paintings.

For three days, she led them in prayers and songs. She made wonderful paintings in the sand, and on Maki as well, calling healing spirits, trying to make them one with him. Each morning, the sun was greeted, and the sick man was placed in its healing light. Water was brought and mixed with clay, and placed on the wounds, but they kept on swelling.

The old woman smelled of earth and herbs. She moved stiffly, but had a very gentle touch. Little she did seemed to help the man's pain, though, and his mind began to drift away as his pain tore on.

One member of the family always stayed with Maki, and one evening, when it was her turn, Wren took out her flute and played for him, hoping that the magic the old man said she had would help him in some way. Nothing else seemed to. She had listened to the songs

the old healer tried to sing in her creaky old voice, and watched her build the sand paintings, grain by grain.

Wren played very softly so that no one other than the sick man could hear her, and scold her. The old woman was asleep in a corner of the room. For a while Maki groaned and shifted from side to side, but then he seemed to find a good position and rested against the wall and watched Wren quietly. She played variations of the healer's songs, weaving in and out like water currents in the river when it was strong.

Once she stopped to rest, and Maki startled her and woke the old woman by moaning for her to continue playing.

When her mother's sister came to be with the sick man, Wren went off to sleep. After a while, she was gently shaken. She looked up to see the healer bending over her. "Come," she said. "He cannot be comfortable without you."

Wren got up and went to him, and found him moving and groaning again. She sat next to him and started playing. She could see that Yellow Leaf was very unhappy with this, but soon Maki settled down and rested quietly, so she continued, on and on.

Late that night, the old woman rose and went over to Maki. She signaled to Wren to bring his heavy robe, and this she placed over him. His spirit had moved away from his body toward the other world. Wren went back to her corner and cried. Yellow Leaf sat next to Maki, shattered, moaning.

After the ceremonies for Maki, the old woman left, but before going, she gave Wren a small pouch of herbs that did not grow in her part of the canyon. "Do not use these unless you absolutely have to, for they heal by burning. Use them to open and drain wounds that hold their poison inside. This I learned from a healer who lived here long ago."

She went on to tell the family how remarkably Wren had been able to ease the man's pain with her music.

"This child can calm the spirits with her playing in ways I have never seen before," she said. "Sometimes music is as powerful a way to speak to people and gods as are words. Wren has a great gift. Perhaps this was the time for Maki to die, but her music certainly brought his spirit peace as it moved on.

"Child," she said to Wren, "learn our songs and practice the healing ways. But listen to your heart as well, and play in harmony

with the people and the earth. You can help people move in grace through this world, but when their spirits pass on into the next world, do not try to bring them back. Play to their souls as they move through the other worlds as well, for in that way they will find peace."

To Ka'a and Pale Flower she said, "Do not quiet this. Let it fly and find new powers. It will help each of you in time."

Wren was grateful to the healer for the herbs she had given her and for her words, but she was still very sad.

"Why did Maki have to die?"

"It was his time."

"What does that mean?"

"Some things happen always the same way, like the sun rising and setting. Some things follow patterns of regular change, like the moon that gets smaller and larger again. Some things we know will happen, but we have to wait to see when, like growing up and rain coming, and some things are surely going to happen, but we cannot predict when, like love and death.

"In between, there are things we each can do to help, like dancing and singing and praying, and those things can slow down or speed up change. Some humans are stronger at changing outcomes than others. You will see. If you learn how, you could have great power."

"What do you mean?"

"Listen for the heart beats of the world. Feel them, and when they get weak, try to make them stronger. Work with me. Together we can do things that are important for your people."

"But we could not save Maki."

"No. Death will happen, but sometimes we can prevent it for a time. If that is who you are, you can learn powerful ways to heal. Keep listening to the music of the earth and learn to make music with the earth."

Now it was clear that if Ka'a and Graymartin were to go to the Great Meeting, Pale Flower and Wren would have to go as well. It was also clear to each of them that Wren was growing stronger. Inside the happy crooked little body, there was lightning, stone and

flowing water. She could make things grow where there was little water, and lift a heart with her laughter and music.

She was still a constant irritation to Graymartin, always asking him to stay with her and talk with her and do things for her. He could not imagine her escaping from wolves, for instance, though the thought had crossed his mind that she might turn them into dancing mice in the moonlight by some magic.

In order to get Wren up and down the canyon wall, they would have to simplify the path. They would have to cut new hand and foot holds, and build new ladders for her out of trees. She was too big to carry. Her weight could tip a man, even as skilled and strong as Ka'a, right off the wall. They decided to make a harness to help her over the long, smooth rock faces.

"Just as I would haul rocks from one ledge to another," Graymartin told her.

She wanted to tell him, "Go jump in the mud!" but there was no mud. That was a problem. She wanted to say, "I'll climb the wall myself!" but she couldn't. That was another problem.

With thongs and pads from the deer and the wolf, they sewed a halter to fit to Wren's body, and made two lengths of thong to pull her with. "I don't like this part at all," she thought.

The family made a trip up the canyon to the path in the Great Wall, to work and practice there, hold by hold and step by step. They took food and clothes and baskets so that they could live there for a while. This was Wren's first long walk, and she knew it would be the first of many tests that she would have to pass, both for herself and for her family, to prove that they could make the journey.

"Happiness Woman, are you here? Can you still talk with me?"

"Yes, I'm here with you. Are you all right?"

"No, I'm very scared and tired. Those wolves seem terrible! Are they waiting to eat us?"

"No, they've gone for now. They don't stay in the open desert much except when there's a bison herd."

"I'm afraid of the spirits up here. Will they help us or harm us? What do they sound like? Do they have shapes? Were the wolves really spirits?"

"No child. The spirits are not against you unless you do something harmful or selfish. I think they are with you in the sky and the desert."

They want you to make it to the Great Meeting. There are good and bad things waiting for you there. It will be very difficult for you.

“The old woman feels your coming. I do not feel hate in her, just uncertainty. She does not know if you are the one for her to help. She, too, has suffered so much. She is waiting.”

“What am I supposed to do? How do I find her? How can I talk to her. From all the stories, I fear her.

“All you can do is be yourself. If you find her, and I think you will, tell her your story in your simplest words and best music.”

‘What is my best music?’

“Wait and see what you learn at the Great Meeting, and what you feel when you are near her. Feel her spirit, calm it, love it if you can. Express the need of your people and your canyon. Most importantly, be ready to learn from her, from the knowledge and wisdom she offers you.”

Helping Wren was now a challenge that each of them wanted to undertake for his or her own reasons. They talked together as a family, planning each step, dividing up the work in ways that used each other’s strengths.

Graymartin was not sure that Wren was good for anything, but there were a number of things he did not want to do, and those seemed perfect things for her. As Graymartin had during his first trip with the old man, Wren felt for the first time that she had a grown-up part to play, and she set about her chores with an eagerness and energy her family had never seen before.

It was hot when they set out up the valley to reshape the cliff’s path. There was almost no water in the river, so Wren could walk along the level riverbed. They had to teach her, though, about the quicksand that could suck her under the earth forever, for the patches lay hidden in silent hunger in the most unexpected places. They had to teach her about deadly snakes she had never seen, some that slithered sideways through the sand, and some that rattled like dry leaves in the wind before they struck.

Wren tired quickly at first, but she knew she could not whine, so she rarely asked to stop. She grew stronger every day.

When the family finally reached the side canyon, they decided to explore all corners, cracks, and caves to find the best and safest site to live in while they prepared the trail.

Just past noon one day, Wren pushed aside some bushes near the base of the trail and found a passageway, over a smooth rock and through a dark and narrow opening. She crawled up to look in, and saw, carved into the smooth stone face, the figure of a sheep with great curved horns and narrow legs. The graceful figure was rough and dark against the smooth stone, and she ran her hand over it. She remembered the story Graymartin had told her of the sheep they had seen, suspended just like this, standing on air against the canyon wall.

She looked further into the cool darkness and found that it opened into a large room that she could easily stand in. She checked carefully for snakes because this seemed a perfect place of shelter from the sun. She saw none, and climbed in to look around.

As her eyes adjusted, she began to see dark patterns covering the walls. On closer look she found them all to be hands. Many, many hands, pale inside, with dark around the edges, big and little, high and low. Who were all these people? There were many more here than she had ever known or even imagined.

It was comfortable, cool and surprisingly moist inside the cave. As she searched the corners, she found a pool of clear, cool water. This pool was fed from a crack in the wall, and water shimmered in the dim light as it fell. Wren put some on her fingers and found it was smooth and very sweet.

They had had little clear water this hot season, so she cupped her hands and drank some more. She felt excited. Her family would be proud of her for finding both the water and the hands. Around their home cave, everyone else knew *things* before she did, but now she had discovered something important for all of them.

She found her father first.

"Father, come see what I have found."

"Yes, later. "

" Are you thirsty?"

"Yes, as always."

"Well, come with me. I have found water."

Ka'a followed her to the hidden cave. He crawled through the bushes and stared in amazement, as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. There were no cliff houses nearby and no ruins on this

canyon floor. These were the hands of many men and women, and children, by the size of them. There had not been this many people here for generations.

"Perhaps each of these people climbed this pathway long ago," he wondered out loud. Had they gone and never returned? Perhaps. Some of the hands were paired; a right hand next to a left hand. There were many more right hands though.

"Perhaps they painted their right hand on the wall as they climbed out, and a left hand when they returned, if they ever did." If that was so, relatively few returned. He wondered why.

He was also very excited by the water, which was fresh and clear and enough for all of them. He took his daughter's hands and held them, looking at her funny shape and proud, happy face.

"Well done, my broken one," he said. This was a name she hated, but he had never said it lovingly before. For the first time he seemed to value something she had done, and she couldn't speak.

Ka'a placed Wren's hands on little ones low on the wall, and several were her size. "Can I paint my hand here?" she asked.

"Not yet," he answered. "But when we go, perhaps. I don't know how to make the dark edges stay."

Ka'a saw the pride in Wren's face, and sent her to find her mother and brother and bring them back.

"My mother taught me how to make the deep red dye to paint on walls," Pale Flower said. "You take dark clay from under the cliffs along the river bends, and grind it into powder. You scrape dark pitch from a pinon tree and mix it with the powder in the water, sweet water like this in the pool. You put the mixture in your mouth and spray it around the edges of your hand against the wall, and let it dry. It's said to stay forever, if it's not rubbed off by sand or rain."

"This is a cool place to get out of the blazing sun," thought Graymartin. It has water and a smooth sand floor. He had proven himself to be a good worker on the wall he loved, but he still found lots of excuses to sit and dream.

For many days, the family practiced. Wren got to know the wall extremely well, and the fear she had of the massive heights faded a little as she concentrated on the things she had to do. They cut special holds for her and placed tree trunks, cut and notched, into cracks and crevices. There were still places she could not climb, and,

using the harness, they practiced pulling and lifting and helping her over the smooth rock walls. Sometimes she bounced like a falling rock and cried out in terror at the drop below, but the thongs always held, and she settled on some ledge. She grew more confident every day.

"Happiness Woman, did you ever put your handprint in the cave of the hands?"

"Silly girl, I don't have hands!"

"But you do have a face don't you, like the picture on the wall in our old cave?"

"My face is in your mind. And also in the minds of the people who drew and carved my picture in the cave, and those who made the shield that was used to call water long ago but was taken from here by Falling Water."

"Do you look like that?"

"Of course, and like so many other things, too, rain, clouds, thunder, rushing water. I'm all a part of the world around you."

Pale Flower spent most of her time foraging for food. This was a place that others had not picked bare. She set the food aside in baskets that they would take with them when the time came. She spent time on the wall as well. She was strong and clever with her hands, and Wren would need her help in certain spots.

After many days and nights, the path was ready. The nights were getting cooler, and the family stored all the things Pale Flower had gathered in a crevasse high in the canyon wall wrapped in skin bags, and traveled back to their home to make the final preparations for the long journey to the Great Meeting.

"Squeak, we're going away for a long trip, far away, to another canyon. I will miss you."

"Why are you going away?"

"To find out how to bring water back here. To see if others know things we need to know."

"Will there be marmots there?"

"I hope so. I'll tell them about you. I hope I can talk with them the way I talk to you."

"Be careful. Do you know about wolves? And snakes?"

“Of course I know about snakes. There are lots of them down here. What are wolves?”

“You once told me about dragons. Wolves are like dragons. They kill and eat marmots the way you eat pine nuts. If you listen at night, you hear coyotes, right? Sometimes, though, there are deeper, scarier howls, too. Those are wolves. I’ve never seen one, but I’m told they’re huge and run around above the canyon rim killing everything. I hope your father and Graymartin can keep them away from you. The way you move, you wouldn’t stand any more of a chance than I would.”

“That’s terrible. Maybe I shouldn’t go. But I want to go! And perhaps there are other creatures up there that want to eat me.”

“I’m sure there are, tasty morsel that you are. When are you leaving? Is that why your family is suddenly gathering things up in bags?”

“Yes. Soon. I’ve got to go help or I’ll get in trouble.”



Chapter 18

Climbing the Great Wall

Despite the cooling air, the drought seared on. There were few crops to harvest. The food and water supplies were so meager that the family was going to have to hunt and scavenge on the journey to stay alive.

Each day dry thunder roared, but no rain came. Graymartin helped Yellow Leaf move her clothes and baskets up the canyon so that she could live with her husband's family.

Wren put her most precious possessions in her pack many times, and took them out again to look at them and make sure they were all right. The baskets they had made to trade were filled with food, leaving little in their granaries in the corners of their cliff home. These they sealed as best they could against the mice and other small animals who would love nothing better than to feast on their food while they were away.

Pale Flower found the dark clay and the pine tar they needed to make the paint, and she and Wren crushed and mixed it. Since Wren had discovered the cave of the hands, she was given the task of carrying the dry paint. She also took the old flute, the little bag of healing herbs, and a small amount of colored sand and stones for pictures. Graymartin pushed his clothes into his pack, and hung the little bag around his neck that held the martin fetish, the shining arrowhead, and a few, precious feathers.

The trip up the dry riverbed was again easy, but as they walked, dark clouds moved across the sky, closing the canyon off from rim to rim. A cool breeze rattled the dry leaves and swirled the sand. The family hurried to reach the little side canyon. The parched earth desperately needed the water, but rain would make their trip much slower and more complicated.

As darkness fell, they had not reached the Canyon of the Hands, as they called it, so they settled down for the night under an overhang in a curve of the great wall where the river used to flow. The next day, they would paint their hands and climb the canyon wall into the upper world.

Just before dawn, thunder and lightning woke them, roaring and flashing through the canyon, echoing from side to side. A cold wind arched over the canyon rim and brought the rain. All the water they had not had that hot season fell in torrents, pouring down the canyon walls in hundreds of shimmering waterfalls.

The family was sheltered from the rain and wind, so they lay there and watched the dark water fall around them. They were used to seeing water drop without touching them across the face of their cave far above the canyon floor. Little rivulets formed and slithered like snakes across the dry riverbed.

As they huddled there, they became dimly aware of a new sound, deep and steady through the thunder, much lower than the rain's hiss down the walls.

Ka'a stood up with a start, and shouted, "Get up, get up! Grab your things and follow me."

They felt around for their bags and baskets in the semi-darkness, not wanting to move, especially not out into the drenching rain. Still, the urgency in his voice sent shivers down their backs, and they obeyed. Out into the rain they struggled after him, dragging their things behind them. Instantly they were soaked from head to foot.

The roaring grew louder by the instant, and they scrambled and fell toward the mouth of the side canyon where their path lay. Laughing Crow led them up and over rocks as high as they could climb.

"What is it? Why are we running?" cried Wren breathlessly. She had never been along the river during a storm.

"A flood."

"Why should we run from a flood?"

"You will see," her father said. Just as he did, the little river swelled into a seething mass of water. Wood and mud came pouring down the main canyon. It tore bushes and trees up by the roots and rolled rocks along with it, filling the dry riverbed with surging water. The family struggled to climb higher. They would have been crushed and drowned and swept along with the trees and rocks if they had waited a moment longer in the river's way.

"This is how the great walls get carved," said Ka'a. "Nothing survives in a flood's path." They could feel the power of the river, deep as Graymartin was tall, roaring past them, carrying trunks and stones unwillingly before it.

The fury of the thunder and lightning chased the water down the canyon, and sheets of rain continued to fall over the canyon rim. It washed the dust from everything, and the glittering lines of water hissed and feathered down the dark rain marks of the canyon wall.

The family struggled up the path along the little canyon floor. "Let's go into my cave," said Wren.

"It's not your cave, child. But yes, that may well be dry," said her father.

It was, and they huddled wet and cold inside its darkness, considering what to do. As the day got lighter, they ate. The spring at the back of the cave was flowing fast now, but the pool was not much larger. It had to be draining out somewhere through cracks in the rock to feed the stream in the canyon.

"Let's make hands," said Wren.

There was little else that they could do, and they had plenty of water, so they mixed Pale Flower's dark red paint in a natural hollow in the rock floor. One at a time, they put the paint into their mouths and, blowing it over the edges of their outspread fingers, painted silhouettes of their right hands near one another in a clean corner of the cave's pale wall. They left spaces for their other hands for when they returned.

"Perhaps the next time we should blow the paint through little reeds, so we don't make such a mess," Pale Flower said looking at the wall. "The other hands are clearer than ours. I hope they will last until we return."

After several hours, the rain let up, and they left the cave to inspect the trail for damage. There was none to see, but water continued to stream over the canyon rim, making the path virtually unclimbable.

By midday, only little lines of water glistened down the walls. "May I go up the trail?" Graymartin asked.

"Yes, but very carefully," his father answered, "test every step."

They watched him glide up the wall, like a spider along a wet strand of web. It seemed secure, but slippery.

"We should let it dry some more tonight, and I can check it again in the morning," he said importantly. They all agreed.

The next morning, clouds still covered the top of the canyon, but the sand was dry. They decided to try the ascent. Wren was tied into her harness.

Ka'a went first and Graymartin next up the path. They settled into a crack above her and, each holding one of the thongs attached to Wren's harness, helped her up the rock face with great care. Pale Flower followed behind her, watching the crooked legs search and miss, search and miss the holds. Luckily, Graymartin couldn't see this because he would have laughed and teased her mercilessly.

They were about halfway up the wall when, without warning, a large sliver of rock under Ka'a's foot gave way. It sliced down the rock face toward Wren and Pale Flower. Ka'a scratched wildly at the wall, but couldn't find a hold, and fell into a narrow crevice a body length below him. The hand that held one of Wren's thongs swung to the side, and she slid off her foothold.

Graymartin flattened himself against the wall and held Wren with all his strength, but she still swung out into the air across the rock face. Pale Flower cried aloud and reached out and caught one of Wren's flailing feet, just as the jagged rock whistled past her.

Ka'a yelled angrily at the wall and the rain. His leg was twisted and caught in a crack, and he couldn't move. Wren clawed at the rock face desperately, and finally stopped swinging, her hands cut and bloody.

Graymartin carefully pulled her up to where he was, but she couldn't stop crying. Her mother came up to hold her, and Graymartin moved up the wall to help his father.

Together Graymartin and his father worked his twisted leg out of the crack, but it was badly bruised and already swollen. He couldn't move without help.

Graymartin was shaking. He had never had to help his father before, and had never heard him cry out that way in pain. But he knew this path well and knew that there was a wide ledge that they had rested on before just above them. Carefully, using Graymartin for strength and balance, Ka'a struggled up the narrow path to the ledge.

Then Graymartin went down for his sister. She was still frantically scared, but unhurt except for scrapes and bruises. At first, she was unwilling to move, but eventually Graymartin and his mother calmed her enough that she did not fight them, and they inched her up the steep rock face to the ledge where Ka'a lay. There they settled themselves to wait and rest as well as they could.

Clearly, they could not continue further that day. Ka'a could hardly put any weight on his twisted foot, and he sat with damaged pride in a corner of the ledge. Wren was calming down now, but was shaken to see her father hurt, and exhausted. They would have to spend the night on the ledge, perched halfway up the Great Wall, cold and exposed.

They ate some mash and huddled together for warmth and safety, and slept as best they could. The last time Graymartin had slept in this cliff, wolves were hovering on the canyon rim above him. In his dreams, the wolves patrolled the rocks and shadows, attacking everything that moved. Anyone too weak or young to flee was taken, carried off and eaten.

He awoke with a start. He saw that his father was awake, too, listening. Long howls broke the stillness. They were faint, but it was no dream. The wolves were up there, roaming. Their calls rolled like the flood. But this time, the echoes slowly faded into whispers in the night. Graymartin sat against the cold wall trying to catch the faintest hint that the wolves were moving their way, but there was nothing more.

Wren dreamed too. Her dreams were of flying and death. She and her friend the swallow swung back and forth high in the air, fixed to thongs and helpless. Dark creatures dropped from the sky, trying to grasp them in their beaks and talons. They struggled and twisted back and forth as the spirits swept around them, howling. Graymartin finally appeared. He flew out and pulled her back into a cave, to safety, just beyond the clutches of these creatures.

But the swallow was caught, and the dark creature settled in the branches of a tree to eat him. Wren cried out and broke away from her brother to save her friend. She beat furiously at the monster's back with her flute until the little bird dropped from its jaws. But the poor swallow was crushed, and no matter how Wren molded him in her hands and played for him, she could not bring him back into his proper shape. She awoke crying, and found herself being held gently by her mother.

"It's all right now, you're safe," Pale Flower whispered.

"My swallow! I can't make my swallow him again. He's something else now."

"Sleep, little one."

Wren slept, and dreamed again. This time her father was limping, the way she did. He cried out in pain and anger and thirst as he stumbled through narrow, endless canyons, searching for water. There were the sounds of water everywhere, but he couldn't find it. Wren kept calling to him, but he wouldn't listen. Finally, she drew a pool in the sand, and pulled him to it. Water formed in the pool and they drank.

They woke to find the dawn cold and gray. They could smell snow, and the clouds were low above the canyon rim. They had to decide whether to go on, now, or return back home. Ka'a was silent; his foot swollen and stiff. Graymartin wanted to go on, but the wolves haunted him. Wren was calm. She did not want to go down again past the ledges where she and her father had fallen, and she was eager to see the world her brother had talked so much about, wolves or no wolves, spirits or no spirits.

It was Pale Flower who found the clearest words. "There is no safety here, no food or water, so we must move.

"It is for you to decide," she said to Ka'a, "but you have said before that it is easier to go up than down, and this is probably even truer with your injured leg. You have also told us that it is better to go forward than to go back, especially when there is little to go back for.

"The old man told us that this journey would be hard, but important for each of us. I think that we should go up, not down."

All her life, Pale Flower had dreamed of exploring other worlds of men and spirits, but, except for hunting trips with her father as a child, she had had to live her life quietly in the canyon. Now she spoke others' words for her ideas.

They decided to go up. Ka'a went first, alone, to see if he could make it. He tied hides around his foot to make it stronger, and slowly climbed the path. Using the simpler holds they had made for Wren, he reached the top without another fall.

Before climbing over the top, though, he listened and watched for several minutes for the wolves who had hunted them. He had never been attacked before, by anything, and this had been a most terrifying lesson. But there were no howls or growls that he could hear.

Graymartin went next, holding Wren's thongs. She had woken up with new determination. The upper path was only hard in one

place near the top, and there was a pole to help her. She found the holds and climbed the tree notches one by one without a slip.

When she reached the top, she laughed with pride. They had made it, together. She jumped and hugged her father and her brother. She had never hugged them before, and they just stood there, not knowing how to respond. Graymartin started to push her away, but seeing his father accept her gratitude and happiness, he let her hold him, just this once.

The wide new world opened out around them. Wren stood there enthralled. She looked for hawks and eagles, and found them soaring in and out of the endless gray clouds above her. Crows and swallows flew below her. She looked for trees, but there were only bushes in the sand, rocks and parched grass.

For Pale Flower, this amazing, flat expanse of nothing was not frightening at all. She could not see it very clearly, but it looked wonderful to her. She was one who dreamed of lands beyond the end of every path and sky beyond the darkness. She had followed the old man's stories with fascination, and dreamed of seeing every corner of the world. It started here, and she could not wait to set out, in any direction.



Chapter 19

Snow, and What They Found In It

It was cold, and there was a constant wind cutting through their hide clothing. The gray sky seemed much high lower and more threatening here than it did in the canyon.

Graymartin pointed out the way the old man had showed him, toward the rising sun, along the rim of the canyon and beyond.

The going was very slow, but not, as they had all expected, because of Wren's limp and pain and crooked body, but because of her father's injured foot. She was eager, and he was furious. The pain would not go away as he told it to. The way was muddy after the heavy rains, but they had plenty of water now from pools in the rocks. They filled their bags and said thanks for it.

Graymartin would not stop talking, asking questions about what they would do at the Great Meeting, how long they would stay. He pointed out spots on distant hills that no one could see, and complained about the weather.

"You are worse than a nagging insect," his mother said to him. "Stop talking and listen. You cannot hear the voices of the world if you are talking all the time.

"Run. Go find us a comfortable place to stop out of this wind," grumbled his father.

Wren just limped along, trying to ignore the cold. She was excited, watching, and listening to the world her mother wanted them to hear. She wanted to play her flute just as the old man had done, but she was afraid her father and mother would consider it noise, and forbid her to play at all.

"Find a better time," she said to herself, so she let the music play inside her mind, beating out each footstep.

They had left the canyon behind now, and as they looked back, they would never have known where their pathway was if they had not marked a stone at the edge of the plain. They would have to find this marker when they came back, and it would be no easy task. Amazing, as it was, there was no way from here to tell that their home, their valley, their whole world even existed. The canyon vanished as soon as they got a little way beyond the very edge.

“Perhaps,” thought Wren, “there are many worlds hidden beneath this flat desert. Perhaps we will come on one after another as we go along. Perhaps there are not just people in them, but creatures and spirits, waiting, as we were, just to make it out over the rim. But why would they want to be up here, flat and endless, with wolves hunting them down and no trees or water to be seen in any direction?”

“Perhaps above these clouds there are other worlds, too, with children like me,” she thought, “not permitted to climb down here. Are there holes in the sky as there are holes in the earth? Is this where Spider Woman came from?”

Words and music filled her mind.

Graymartin had indeed found a good place for them to rest, protected by rocks on three sides from the wind and sand. It was a little grassy and much warmer than it was out in the open. The family settled painfully in for the night under its protection. They ate food, drank sweet water from the cave, huddled together, and slept.

In the night it snowed. But unlike the rain that came with thunder and lightning and floods, this was gentle and almost silent snow, except for the slightest whisper as it settled on the rocks and grass. They wrapped themselves together more tightly and were warm.

Graymartin woke after a dream that the old man was there with them gently wheezing and grunting as he had done night after night. He couldn't see anything beyond the rocks and dense walls of snow around them, but the breathing was real. There was no threat to it, just breathing, as if the very earth up here breathed at night.

Graymartin didn't dare get up to investigate, so he lay there, frightened that the spirits in this part of earth had form, and perhaps were hungry. There were other noises, too, soft grunts and footsteps passing, passing very slowly by.

“What a fearful place,” he thought. “But whoever these spirits are, they haven't yet discovered that we're good to eat,” so he didn't move. Eventually the gentle breathing and the footsteps put him back to sleep.

Slowly a white light shimmered through the snow. It was Wren who woke up first. She, too, heard the sighs. She stared through the dense snow and saw dark shapes moving along outside the edges of

the rocks around them. They breathed smoke and had dense, shaggy fur which glistened with snow.

She shook her mother and father urgently and pointed. They all stared in disbelief.

As the light increased, the snow slackened, and they realized that they were entirely surrounded by huge, hairy beasts with horns and massive humps. The animals seemed not to care that the people were there, but moved silently on in the pale light of the early morning, floating through the snowy world.

They had all heard the old man talk of amazing creatures here above the canyon's rim, but they had never really believed him. The wolves had been real, though, and the sky that covered the earth from edge to edge was real as well.

"These are the animals the old man called 'buffalo'," said Graymartin. "They are terrible, and strong, and killed the hunter who last climbed up the trail generations ago.

"Help us," he whispered to any gods of earth or sky who might be close enough to hear him. All they had was his father's spear and little handheld knives and axes. Nothing that would work against these creatures.

"But they don't seem interested in us at all," said Pale Flower. "They are just quiet and huge and cold, perhaps. Still, I don't think we should move." They all agreed, and sat and watched.

"We could eat at least," she said, and took out pieces of dried meat and meal for each of them.

"Happiness Woman, did you see the huge animals?"

"Yes, they are gentle giants, aren't they. Are you still scared of them?"

"Only because they are so big. But I would not want to see them angry," Wren said.

"No, they can throw a wolf or man way up in the air and then trample them to death. But, like many people, they will not harm you though unless you hurt them or scare them. They knew you were there among the rocks, but didn't want to make you angry either."

After what seemed like the whole morning, the great animals vanished, just as silently as they had come. No more shadows walked by, no more breathing could be heard.

“One of those would make coats for our whole family, and give us meat for the whole cold season,” said Ka’a.

“But I’m very grateful they have gone past,” said Graymartin. “I cannot imagine killing one of them, no matter how much thanks I gave.”

“We must move on now,” said Ka’a. “We will run out of food if we don’t keep walking.”

So they picked up the bags and packs and baskets, and ventured out into the white emptiness, afraid that beyond the last flake of snow the terrifying creatures lay in wait for them. But they had no choice.

“How do we know which way to go, now that we cannot see the hills?” asked Wren.

“That is the way we were walking yesterday,” Pale Flower said pointing into the dim white snow, “That is the way the old man told Graymartin to go.”

She said this with such gentle authority that no one questioned her. Even Ka’a was silent. There seemed to be many things he had never discovered about the woman he had lived with for all these seasons. She had been full of surprises ever since they had started this journey. She was certainly a good walker, and a source of great steadiness.

As they walked, the snow thinned, the light increased, and they began to see the sun, white in the white sky. They walked through snow trampled by countless hooves. Thin yellow stalks of grass poked up through the snow here and there. It was very quiet and no one talked.

Soon the sun shone through. It started to warm the family and melt the snow underneath them. “How do you know which way to go?” Graymartin asked his mother.

“I’m not sure. I can just feel it. Here,” she said and pointed to her head, “can’t you?”

“A little bit,” said Graymartin, “but I’m not as sure as you. When will we find the wide path?” he asked, not sure if his mother had powers to tell that, too.

“That I can’t tell you,” Pale Flower laughed, “but I can keep us going in the right direction.”

Despite many stops to rest, they seemed to have gone a long way. There was almost no snow now, and the hoof prints had disappeared long ago. Wren dropped back behind the rest of the family on purpose, and started to play her flute as she walked along.

There was so much music in her head that needed to be played. Music of wolves and wind and snow and buffalo. Music for her father's anger and vulnerability and pain, her mother's quiet certainty, her brother's self-confidence, her own happiness. Her uneven steps gave rhythm to the quiet music, and it, in turn, made walking easy. Her limping walk was like a dance, syncopated.

The dark hills they had seen ahead of them loomed white now in the new snow, and they grew into mountains. As the family trudged up the first gentle slopes, the grass thickened and bushes appeared. There were birds in the branches, and rabbits, and the big holes of badgers or foxes everywhere. The ground was soft and easy to walk on.

There were huge rock outcroppings with caves in them along the mountainsides, but the going was not too steep or difficult. The family stopped near one of the caves to rest.

"Graymartin, you should go off and hunt for food for us. We will stay here for...," Ka'a stopped short. He was looking down at the ground in astonishment.

"Look at this," he said in an urgent whisper.

He pointed to a huge paw-print in the soft earth. "Look at those claws! They could tear a man in half. This is no wolf or mountain lion. I've seen their prints. They're tiny compared to these." He touched the carved claw hanging around his neck. "It must be a bear. We've got to get away from this cave! Now!"

They scrambled away as fast as they could, not slowing to go quietly.

"Perhaps the claw the old man gave me warned us," said Ka'a. "He told me that it was very powerful and had protected him many times. But I think from people, not from bears. He said that, unlike us, bears walk in the shadows and are rarely seen. I hope this claw does not draw them to us. I don't want to need its protection."

There seemed to be a low pass between the mountain peaks, and the family headed directly for this. The slope became steep, and it was hard going for Ka'a and Wren. They struggled painfully on for some time and finally found a cave without tracks around it.

"This looks like an excellent place to stop and rest. We might stay here for a day or two to stock up on food. These mountains seem rich in life. But be very careful when you hunt, Graymartin. Don't forget that you are as likely to be the hunted as the hunter."

Those two days were cold and clear. Graymartin hunted well and safely, and was grateful for it. Pale Flower and Wren explored the mountainsides and found a rich supply of nuts and roots. The mountainsides were covered with trees. There were stands of trees so dark and silent that almost no light came through them. They smelled wet and sweet. There were other patches filled with pale-barked trees with yellow leaves so brilliant it was hard to see for all the light.

Pale Flower told Wren she thought that these were the trees her sister had been named for. Their leaves fluttered back and forth in the wind like Yellow Leaf's moods, and chattered the way she did when she was happy.

Ka'a rested most of the time with his back against a rock and hoped his foot would heal.

Graymartin found many of the massive prints along the streams, and imagined that every shadow held bears. They haunted every dream. There were great shaggy yellow bears and long, narrow red bears. Some had twisted horns, and others had powerful beaks and wings. They took on every possible and impossible shape, but they were always very large. They hid in every cave and shadow and threatened every step. They grunted and rustled and whispered all night long. These were certainly creatures of immense power and frightful spirit.

They never saw a living bear, and after two days of good hunting and uneasy rest, the family set off again. The ground was firm, and it took them only one more day to reach the pass. From the top, they could see the plain on the other side stretching out from the base of the mountains just as it had behind them, endless, dry, windy, barren. No sign of another canyon or the river towns. But they felt refreshed and stronger, and moved on steadily.

Soon after reaching level ground, they found the track. It stretched straight in front of them as far as they could see. Graymartin and Pale Flower had been right, and they were all

excited. Now they had a trail they felt sure would lead them to the Great Meeting.

Ka'a's leg still hurt as he moved along the sandy ground, but he fell into the gentle, rocking rhythm of his daughter's music and forgot the pain.

He mused as they walked along. How could anything live out in this desert? Unless you ate sand or rocks, there was nothing to feed on. It was only in the gullies that anything could grow. In them, little plants could catch water as it ran out of the mountains, and there the wind could not reach to scour them with its knives of sand.

The family rested in these dry washes, under overhangs of rock and earth, out of the wind. In several of them Ka'a had smelled water, and he pressed a water reed into the moist earth at the bottom of the wash, but found too little to drink. You would die a dry death here if you couldn't carry water. Wren had been blessed to find the Cave of the Hands, and the snow had provided sweet water in the mountain streams.

"She has been less of a heavy burden than I expected," he said to Pale Flower.

"She was walking better than you were for a while. And you moved to her music."

"She is like the old man. A desert bush with thorns and flowers."

As they were trudging along, something streaked across in front of them kicking up a little storm of dust behind it that hung in the air for a few moments. Wren was startled.

"What was that?" she asked her mother who was walking next to her next to the travois.

"I didn't see anything," said Pale Flower. "Of course she didn't," thought Wren. "She can't see anything."

Graymartin was too far away to ask, but he probably had seen it and knew. He saw and knew those kinds of things unless they were spirits he didn't believe in. Then he would have mocked her. But there were so few things to see up here. This had been something.

A little further on it happened again. There was clearly something in the cloud of dust, darting through the sage brush. She stopped to watch. It was too feathery for a rabbit and too big for a bird, except perhaps a hawk. But why was it running, not flying?

"What's that?" she said shouting out so her father or brother would pay attention.

“That’s a sandrunner,” Cries like a Crow answered.

“What is it, a rabbit?” she asked.

“No, stupid, it’s a bird that likes to run.”

“Could you catch one?” asked Wren. “It looks very fast.” Fast as he was, Graymartin would have to admit he could not.

“No,” he admitted. “They chase insects and birds and snakes, but stay away from us.”

“They catch snakes?” she asked.

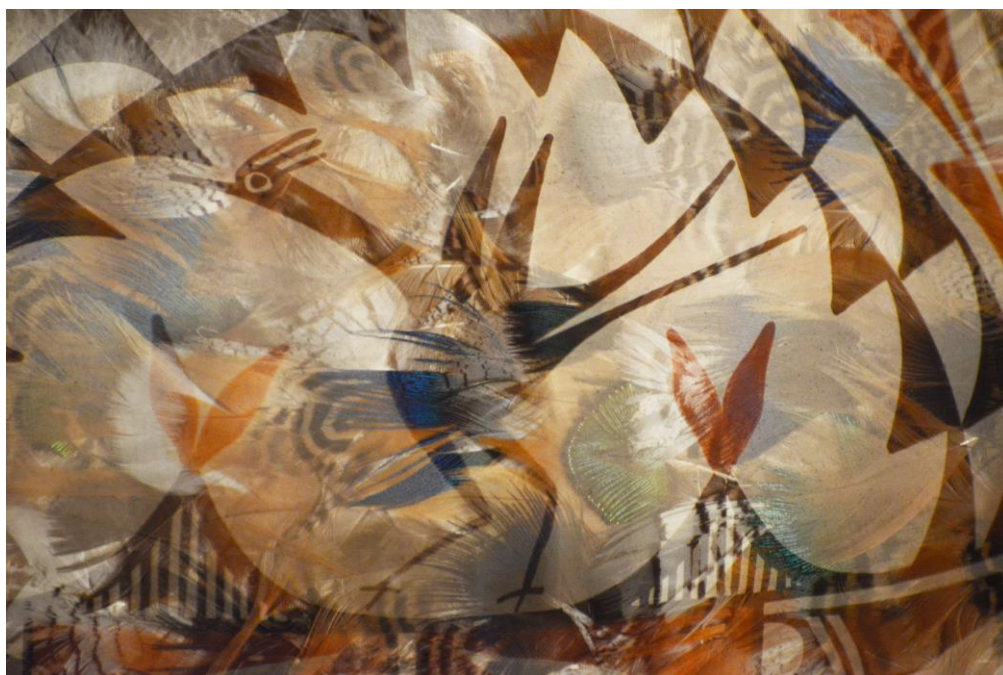
“Yes, sometimes pretty big ones. I’ve seen them carrying around rattlesnakes in their beaks” answered Crow.

It was amazing to think anything could run that fast and catch snakes without being killed by them. thought Wren.

“Why do they not get killed doing that?”

“They catch the snake by the head and bang it to death on a rock. Then they swallow it whole,” said Crow. I’ve seen them do it.” Crow was not someone who admired anyone or anything, but he seemed to admire the birds for being able to do this.

From then on, Wren watched out for sandrunners. Sometimes, the birds seemed interested in their little group, sometime flitting back and forth behind them in the dust the travois stirred up catching what? Bugs that the branches stirred up? She started to talk to them in her mind. They watched her sometimes as if they understood.



Chapter 20

Those on the Long Trail

It was three more days before they started to see other people on the track. They all looked tired and dusty. Everyone was carrying baskets and bags on their backs, but some had long poles with baskets lashed between them.

"Look how long and straight those poles are. I wonder where they grow like that. Our trees are all so short and crooked," said Graymartin.

"I have heard that in the sacred mountains there are trees that reach the clouds," Pale Flower said.

"Perhaps there are places where people fly, too," said Graymartin to himself.

As they walked, there was less and less to find on the ground, even at quite a distance from the track. It seemed that with so many people, the earth had been picked bare.

A sandrunner had appeared again behind them.

"I wish I could run as fast as you can," she thought. "Then we could get out of this terrible sun, hot and cold, hot and cold, and get to the Great Meeting before we run out of food and water." She was very thirsty. She threw a bit of dried scrap from the sledge. The bird ran up to it almost before it hit the dust.

"You like that?" she asked, but he didn't reply. She had heard him squeak a couple of times, but not to her. She wondered what kinds of things he might talk about. Probably insects or snakes. Not things of much interest to her.

Still, there was no one else to talk to, so she held some one-sided conversations with the bird. Once, she saw another sandrunner skittering around in the sage.

"Is that your brother?" She asked. She imagined a yes to that question. They did not seem to be interested in each other one way or another.

"Please stay near me in case there's a snake. You can eat him for me," she thought.

She missed Squeak. It was too bad he had not stayed with her on this long journey the way Happiness Woman seemed to be. She was everywhere, somewhere in the air.

They tried to talk to other families, but ended up making gestures to speak of even simple things. People looked at Wren with distrust, and every time they did, it hurt. She tried to talk with the children, but they always turned away, as if even looking at her curved back and crooked leg might bring them all bad luck. Ka'a was limping too, and people looked at him with fear. He felt ashamed and angry.

"There's nothing wrong with me. I'm not like her," he repeated to himself. He was angry at Wren, but as they went along, he became angry at everyone else instead. She was doing pretty well he thought, remembering how they had all feared that she would not be able to walk for more than a few minutes at a time. There she was, playing softly and limping along, not bothering anyone.

No matter how he tried to think of other things, his mind always came back to the words he wanted to say to people when they looked at his family that way.

Wren trudged beside the travois. Seeing one of the running birds in the sage, she tossed a few scraps towards it.

"Oops! I spilled some of my food on the trail. Don't tell anyone, sandrunner, but enjoy it. You must need it as much as I do, and I love seeing you running up to grab it. It's amazing how you can snatch a butterfly right out of the air! Don't eat any spirits by mistake. I don't think they'd like you very much."

Wren wondered how big spirits were and if they flew around. How fast were they? Did they have little bodies she could not see, or just saw in the shimmering of the dust or heat. Were they in snowflakes? Were they in the crashing of the thunder and howling of the wind? Did they play along with her when she played her flute? Sometimes she was sure she could, but she couldn't always. She felt there were many spirits when she played for Maki, different kinds, but mostly things, whatever they were, there with her.

On the sixth day out of the canyon, they saw that the track they were following led to the mouth of a shallow canyon far in the distance.

"There are groups of houses along both walls," Graymartin told them. "And there are trees running down the middle. There's probably a river there."

"Are the houses built in the canyon walls like ours?" asked Wren.

"No. They all seem to be on the ground. But the walls get higher as the canyon goes back. Who knows what's back in there."

As they got closer, they could see pinion trees, and others they did not recognize, dotting the tops of the canyon, and there were towns up there as well. Paths joined theirs from all directions as they neared the canyon, and many people seemed to be going and coming from this central place.

"These people are so strange," thought Wren. "Some are so big and others so small. They come in all sizes and shapes."

"I cannot understand a word they say. How can they understand each other?" she asked her mother. Not waiting for an answer, she went on, "But their clothes are amazing. Some are old and shaggy, but others are smooth and fine, and have the colors of every bird and flower I've ever seen."

Some of the people looked angry, others looked dull. The variety was staggering. Ka'a and Graymartin were small compared to many of the men, and darker, red-brown, the color of their canyon walls. But there were some here who were very dark, and others pale as chalk. Some were like buffalo Wren thought, and others more like sticks. "Everyone is very scary," she thought to herself.

"Many of these people don't look healthy," Pale Flower remarked. "Their skin is blotchy and covered with sores. I wonder what the matter is."

"You're right," said Ka'a. "And they smell like long dead animals."

It was not at all clear where they should go. When they reached the broad canyon floor with the tall trees running down the middle, the first town on their left rose four and five homes high, with doors and windows leading everywhere. People seemed to live in every room, and even outside, along the walls of the town itself. A large, round

wood and grass roof covered part of the center of the town, and Ka'a guessed that this would be town's main kiva.

No one offered them any welcome, or even seemed to pay any attention to them at all, so they walked to the line of trees which ran as far as they could see down the center of the canyon floor. There, indeed, was a river, with a good steady flow of water at least knee deep, but the water was not very clear and did not smell very good. They had some water left, so they did not stop to get more, but walked along a path up the river for a while.

From the center of the canyon, they could see a series of other towns along both sides, with paths between them. There was the noise of people everywhere, talking, shouting and singing, and it echoed across the wide canyon floor. There was music and drumming, and they could see people dancing even in the middle of the day. Some looked like hummingbirds Wren thought. The noise and colors were exciting, but it was a little dizzying for their tired minds.

The old man had advised Ka'a to find a space at the bottom of the canyon wall just beyond the first town they came to, facing the sun to keep them warm.

"Don't ask people for shelter," he had said. "At least not at first. There are too many new people coming and going, and without knowing who you are, they will not offer you anything. It is quite a different world than the one you are used to."

The family walked together to the area of the wall the old man had suggested, and found that others had had the same idea. But most wanted space on the canyon floor, and Pale Flower suggested that they settle on a narrow but sufficient ledge a man's height up the wall. It was clean and an easy scramble for all of them, so they happily settled there and pushed their baskets and packs to the back of the overhang out of the sun.

"Do not leave anything you value on your ledge. People take what they want for themselves. They consider it like hunting and foraging. If it's there, they'll take it," the old man had warned them.

The family agreed that one of them would always stay to guard their belongings, though the idea that things they made and used might be taken away and not shared seem extraordinary. Still, it was a new place, and these people were very different.

So Pale Flower and Wren stayed on the ledge as Ka'a and Graymartin walked off to explore. For hours they wandered and

watched, commenting to each other on the smells and colors and people everywhere. People here ate and drank from colored clay vessels they had never seen before. They seemed hard and shiny. People called them "cups" and "pots", and they looked very beautiful.

And they saw lots of anger. People struck their children and pushed each other. Especially the men. The men seemed to be drinking from the little cups and seemed unstable, and out of control.

There were amazing smells, too. Wonderful, warm smells and nasty, rotting smells all mixed together. Children played in the dust with little round objects of all sizes and fought without people stopping them. Ka'a and Graymartin were confused and anxious and excited all at the same time. They tired quickly, too, went to look for their little ledge, feeling an odd sense of relief when they found it.



Chapter 21

The Contest

It was very hard to sleep. There were so many people. So much noise. Wren sat with her back against the canyon wall as she watched and listened. People paid no attention to her or her family.

One sound they often heard was the deep pounding rhythm of drums. Wren had seen a man sitting in the evening sun, beating with both hands on a hide-covered piece of wood. He made a rich, musical sound. People near him were banging rocks and sticks together, too, and she loved it. It demanded her attention and made her restless. She wanted to play her flute with them, but knew that they would send her away.

And the colors of people's clothes. Fantastic, bright colors. All Wren's clothes were made from hides. They were brown or tan or the color of the red canyon walls they lived in. The clothes some of these people wore were soft and woven like the colored reeds in a basket. There were little zigzag patterns in the cloth like lightning or the reflections of the sun off moving water.

People were very loud. They cried out and laughed all the time, though they didn't seem all that happy. There was a lot of anger and little respect. People hit each other. Men hit other men and people hit children, who ran away crying, to where? To other people who would hit them again?

Finally, much after dark, the voices slowly hushed, and Wren could hear the wind and see the stars, but when she slept, she had such dreams as she had never had before. People whirled and staggered. Graymartin could fly, and he swooped in and out of windows and doors, back and forth in light and shadow. She saw Pale Flower dressed in feathers, and Ka'a running, dancing, drumming, crying. She herself was walking everywhere urgently, looking for something, but she couldn't remember what it was.

The next morning the noise and activity started again soon after the sun was up. They decided to take their things with them and walk

from town to town to see what was there. They could sleep wherever they wanted to anyway.

They walked along the outside edges of the towns, not daring to enter their walls, but there were people sitting against the outer walls calling out to others walking by. They had woven wraps or colored pots or baskets scattered around them, and seemed to want to trade these things for other things they didn't have. The family watched these trades go on. It seemed that the sitting people often got the better of the trades, and stuffed the food or treasures in sacks behind them before they started up again.

Graymartin saw a group of boys and men in the open field beyond the river sending sticks far into the air.

"Those must be the bows and arrows the old man spoke of," he said. The main reason he had wanted to come here was to see these things and learn to use them.

"May I go over there?" he asked.

"Yes, but be very careful. Those are made to kill. They kill men as easily as animals," his father answered.

So Graymartin went, and for the next few hours he watched how people shot. "It's amazing how far they can shoot and how fast the arrows go," he thought, "I could kill a deer, or perhaps even a buffalo, at those distances without ever being seen."

He picked up some of the words and gestures the young men used, and finally got up the courage to ask one of them if he could try. They showed him, first wrong so they could laugh at him. But he had watched well and learned quickly. He was not strong enough to shoot far, but soon he was quite accurate at short distances.

The others boasted how far and well they could shoot, and he couldn't argue. They showed off their bows and strings and arrows. They carried their arrows in bags, and some of these were very beautifully shaped and decorated with little beads of stone and glass as shiny as stars and flowers. Graymartin wanted all of these things. No one, though, had an arrowhead like his, black and clear and very sharp. It was the only thing he had that might gain him admiration.

After much time and shooting, Graymartin pulled out the martin fetish with the obsidian arrowhead from the pouch around his neck. Everyone wanted to see and feel them. They pressed him to untie the arrowhead from the martin, but the old man had told him never to do so unless his life depended on it, so he refused.

But they pushed and pushed, teasing him for not being able to speak their language and not knowing what most of their things were. Finally, he gave in, and let them feel it in his hands. One young man had seen how much Graymartin had wanted a bow and arrow of his own.

"Let's shoot for this bow and these arrows," he said. "If I win, I get your arrowhead. If you win, you get my bow and arrows."

This was a terrible decision for Graymartin. Some of the older men, seeing how torn he was, and knowing the meaning of his arrowhead, his talisman, urged him not to do it, but Graymartin finally gave in. The arrowhead against a fine bow and a bag of arrows.

The young men had been kicking and throwing air-filled bladders, and one of them shouted, "Whoever hits the bladder first wins them all." So it was settled.

Everyone crowded around. A man on one side rolled the bladder over the rough ground in front of the two competitors from one side to the other. There, another man rolled or kicked it back. The bladder bounced like a rabbit.

The two took turns trying to hit this target without any success at all. Everyone was laughing at both of them. Finally, just as Graymartin shot, the bladder bounced up into the arc of his arrow, and it burst with a pop as the arrow flew through it.

Graymartin was overjoyed, grateful for his luck and relieved beyond measure that he had not lost his arrowhead. He moved to take the bow and arrows, but the young man refused to give them to him. "Do you think I would bet my best bow and arrows for such a little thing as your black arrowhead?"

"You did," Graymartin answered, "and this, my arrowhead, is a very special thing, far greater than your bow and arrows. You could replace all of those anytime."

"If it is so easy, go find others, then."

The people watching had heard the whole agreement, though, and knew that Graymartin was right, and so, after much protesting, the young man handed the bow and arrows over to Graymartin. Feeling very scared, he thought it would be safest to leave right away, before the other changed his mind again, so he thanked the others and the young man.

"I will get them back," the young man spat at him as he left.

When Graymartin found his family, they were amazed that he had gotten these things. "I won it by hitting the bladder before the other man did," said Graymartin. He could not tell them that he had wagered his arrowhead, and would have lost it, if he had lost.

His family had explored the first few towns and had learned a great deal themselves. Pale Flower had watched potters making bowls and vessels, and saw how they could be colored with red and white patterns and hardened and blackened in a fire.

Wren had listened to musicians playing drums and all manner of wonderful instruments. There were rattles made of dried gourds with pebbles or seeds in them that made all types of sound. She had seen women stringing beads of bone and porcupine quills and a softly radiant material that was like the shell the old man had given to her mother. They were decorating cloths and arrow bags and necklaces with these beads, and could turn a dull robe into something that shone in any light. She had tried to ask where the colored beads and shells came from, but people just pointed and shrugged.

Ka'a had watched how men made robes from massive buffalo hides, thick enough to warm you through the coldest night. He had talked to them as best as he could, to find out when they hunted. He discovered that twice a year they went in groups when the buffalo were known to be passing through the plains nearby.

It was getting dark earlier these days, as the sun curved lower in the sky, and the family walked back along the canyon wall to find a place to sleep. Suddenly a figure burst from the shadows. It flew at Graymartin, and in an instant had clubbed him to the ground. Graymartin lay there groaning. The figure grabbed the bow and arrows from his limp body, then tore the fetish bag from his neck and fled.

Wren and Pale Flower cried out. It had happened so fast that no one had a chance to pull the attacker off. Ka'a started after the young man, but with his bad leg, he was soon outdistanced. He came back to help his son, who lay on the ground, unmoving, blood oozing from the cuts on his head and body. Ka'a cradled his son's head in his arms, terrified in a way he had never been before.

Slowly, Graymartin came to himself. "What happened?" he whispered.

"You were attacked, and the bow and arrows taken. Your fetish bag was stolen as well."

"Who...?" asked Graymartin.

"A young man with long hair and fine hide pants," his father said.

"It must have been the man I won the bow and arrows from. But he took my martin and my arrowhead, too?" he cried.

"Yes, he took them all."

"I must go after him to get them back," said Graymartin, struggling to get up. But he couldn't get his balance and fell back.

"Not now," his mother answered. "Tomorrow, we will find him. Someone in the field must know who he is. Unless he runs away, we'll get those things back for you."

Ka'a said, "The elders meet each day, and the old man said that they would know where to find him. We need to see him in any case. Perhaps he can bring this problem to the meeting in the morning. Now, rest yourself. We will stop here for tonight."

They put their few belongings down and settled Graymartin on the ground. He could hardly move and was in great pain.

"Lie back," Pale Flower said.

"I will try to clean you," said Wren, remembering what she had learned when her uncle had been injured. The old healer had come from up the canyon, and the first thing she had done was to wash and wash the swollen wounds. But she had said it was too late then. Wren wanted to make sure that it would not be too late for Graymartin.

"I'll get some water."

"Wait. Someone must go with you," Pale Flower said, and walked with the child.

The river smelled, and it was almost more than Wren could do to soak a piece of her clothing in this water, but she knew that water could help heal wounds.

She brought the material back, and tried to wipe Graymartin's wounds. But he didn't want her touching him, and after a difficult period of trying, Ka'a snapped at her, "Stop hurting him! Let him rest."

So Wren settled herself against the stone wall to rest and wait. Graymartin moaned and whined and turned all night.



Chapter 22

The Circle of Elders

The next morning, Graymartin was in a great deal of pain. The wounds around his head and arms were raw and swollen, his neck was sore, and he was very dizzy.

As he had planned, Ka'a arose early and went to the great kiva in the first village. There, indeed, he found the old man. They greeted each other warmly, and the old man was obviously pleased that the family had taken his advice and come.

"So, the pathway up the Great Wall was still passable? And you found this little canyon without trouble? Were you able to bring Wren, and Graymartin, of course?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Very good. That was brave of you, but right. This could be the most important trip anyone from your canyon has made in generations. It may be important for your whole clan. People have come this time from places very far away, and there are many new things to see and learn.

"Do not forget the most important, though, the mask that could bring rain. It is dry everywhere this year, even here. The river is low and foul. The old stories are whispered again, that the caller is here. Who is she, they ask? Where is she? She is so needed. But if she is here, she's not talking, either to the gods or to men.

"I believe that this is one reason you are here, that the little crooked one came with you. The gods are unhappy, and they are scorching the world. Someone needs to open ways to them, to talk to them and let them talk to us.

"We've been meeting here about this every day. People are even talking about the old ritual of sacrifice. "Perhaps the gods demand a death," they say. The old ones used to kill for sacrifice all the time.

"I have never believed in this. Nothing should be killed without good reason, and I find no reason now. The elders tell stories day and night of ancient ways and truths. But the truths of different peoples contradict each other. I find it hard to know.

"So it is most important that you find the mask, but to do that you must find the old one first. My feeling is that she is still alive. But if you find her, take great care. She will not give the mask up easily after all these years, no matter how great the need, and may not want it ever used again. You must find a way to take it back, and she may not be strong enough to make the journey.

"I have heard that a healer who came here years ago used to live far up this canyon at the edge of the Forbidden Lands. This may be Falling Water. She does not like strangers, though, and may possess powers to keep anyone away she does not want to find her."

Throughout all this talk, Ka'a listened, politely. But inside, he twisted impatiently. Once the old man got going like this, he could ramble on and on. There were more important issues to discuss right now.

"I am sorry, though, to bring you bad news," he said when the old man finally paused. "Graymartin has been badly injured, and we need your advice, and the help of the elders."

The Kiva of the Sun was where the elders of all the clans met each day during the Great Meeting. They heard the story that Ka'a told with much visible distress. "This is very unfortunate. Bad things happen here during the Great Meeting. People do not understand each others' ways or words. We must act quickly to show that violence will not be tolerated," one of the elders said.

They sent word out to find the young man who had attacked Graymartin. Ka'a waited. It was a time when the old man would normally have told a story to illustrate the right way, but this event had so troubled him, he sat at the edge of the kiva in the shade, lost in thought.

"Perhaps he can think of no story to tell," thought Ka'a. "Perhaps even elders sometimes need to hear stories from others to bring them back into balance."

The young man could not be found, so the old man asked that Graymartin lead him out to the field. He was dizzy and in pain, but the boy walked with his father and the old man out to the shooting field. There he asked some of the men he recognized from the day before to confirm his story.

"That was Running Fox. He lives over there." They pointed to a town under the canyon wall on the other side of the river.

"I would ask that several of you come with us now to the great kiva. Your story must be told," the old man said.

When the elder of the young man's clan heard confirmation of what had happened, he was very upset, and took them all over to his village.

There they found him talking with some friends.

"I did nothing to hurt this boy," he insisted. "I haven't even seen him since our shooting contest yesterday." But Ka'a recognized him as the man who had attacked his son the night before.

"I want to go to your home. There we will discuss this with your family," his elder said.

"They're not there now."

"Then we will wait for them."

There in the doorway were the bow and arrows.

"Where is my fetish bag?" cried Graymartin.

"What fetish bag?" the young man growled. "I know of no bag."

"The bag you ripped from my neck last night. It held the martin fetish and the shining arrowhead this man gave to me. There were also seeds and colored sand. They were there to keep me well."

"I know nothing of those things. And, to look at you, they did not protect you very well."

The elders searched the room the young man slept in, but the bag and its contents could not be found. As they did this, Running Fox's father emerged from one of the inner rooms.

"This son of yours has shamed us all. Tomorrow, just as the sun sets, you must all come to the Kiva of the Sun. There we will decide what must be done. Be there, no matter how painful it is."

By the next afternoon, Graymartin had developed a fever, and the wounds on his head and arms were swollen and festering.

"Happiness Woman, what can I do to help Graymartin?"

"What do you think would help him, little one?"

"Medicine. Even water that does not smell the way the water here smells. It makes me feel sick to be near it. It cannot be good for anyone."

"Have you looked for fresh water from a spring?"

"Yes. I have looked along all the canyon walls near us and I see no signs of moving water. No one knows where to get it."

"See what the elders say at the kiva. Perhaps you can ask your father to ask for water. If they feel badly for Graymartin, perhaps someone will give you some. But good water is so precious, even good people hide what little they have.

"Can you teach me how to pray for it?"

"Yes, but even you need others to cry for it, pray for it, dance for it. Unless you had the mask. With that you might be able to call for it by yourself."

"But no one knows where it is."

"There is only one who knows. I feel she is alive, but I do not know how far away she is or if she is well enough or willing to help you. One person's life, even your brother's, is not enough to sway her ill will."

"I will ask my father to ask for help, but he may not think the water or the mask is important enough right now.

"So little he understands."

The family went to the great kiva as requested, supporting him as they walked. Under the massive, circular roof of timbers and earth, a bench ran around the wall of the dark chamber. In the seats facing the rising sun, the elders sat. Several members of every clan were there as well, both men and women. The women sat on one side of the elders and the men sat on the other. A fire burned continuously in the center of the chamber, and it threw a subtle, moving light in every face.

The two children were not allowed inside the kiva, but they were instructed to sit outside beneath the over-hanging roof behind their parents. There they could hear, but not be seen.

Ka'a told his son's story, and others who had witnessed it agreed. Graymartin was asked to show himself. He crawled to the central opening in the roof that served as the door to the kiva, and spoke from the top of the ladder. He was sick, and ashamed of his part in the story, but he had to admit that it was all true.

He apologized to the old man and his parents for his weakness and lack of wisdom. He was asked to come to the bottom of the ladder to show his wounds, but after he had struggled down, he was told to go back into the shadows outside to listen to the elders' discussion.

For a long time they talked. The story was indisputable, but the elder of the young man's clan urged the group not to banish Running Fox forever.

Pale Flower never spoke, but listened intently in the shimmering darkness. She watched the old man, their friend, who was serving as Graymartin's advocate. It struck her that he had probably been the subject of a similar meeting, a long time ago and far away. Fairly or unfairly, he had been sent forever from his home. It might have been a meeting like this that had started him on his unending, limping dance across the world.

With great care, the old man moved the group. Many old conflicts between these clans emerged. There had been insults and trickery, agreements and marriages broken. Clan rules differed, and some had painful ways to handle painful acts. But this was the Great Meeting, and all the clans had agreed to put aside their differences for a while, and try to handle situations like this by discussion and agreement, not knives and spears.

The old man spoke with great skill, softening the old wounds and turning aside old prejudices.

Finally, the arguments quieted, and a decision was made that the young man would be banished from these towns and canyons for the time of the Great Meeting. He must go and live alone for this short time, think on what he had done and seek balance in his life. He was to give Graymartin the bow and arrows fairly won, and Graymartin's bag with all its contents.

"I know nothing of this little bag," he growled.

"Find it then and bring it back before one day has passed. Then leave this canyon for the time, and come back whole." The young man and his family went out, leaving his clan elder alone and shamed.

For a while, the circle sat in silence, but no one left. Then one man took out a long reed with a clay bowl at the end, stuffed it with a brown grass and lit it with a spark from the fire. The elders passed this pipe between them for a while, then passed it on to all the others around the chamber wall.

There was quiet talk as the pipe was passed. The people were clearly still very distressed. Some were angry, others sad. To Ka'a's surprise, as the pipe began to pass, the old man took out his flute and started playing softly. For a while, his slow, clear music flickered in

and out of the shadows thrown by the fire. But as the pipe almost made the full circle back to the elders, another voice, clear and high and flowing, filled the room, weaving in and out of the old man's ancient tune.

The circle fell completely silent as the music rose and fell, first slowly, then gradually faster, lighter. Complex rhythms emerged and danced. Softly at first, people began touching their hands to the wood of their benches, adding their own voices to the songs.

"What magic does the old man bring this time?" one elder asked. "It comes from all around us and outside."

And magic it was. Wren played for her brother, for the old man's peace, and the clan elder's shame. She played to bring the men and women of this meeting back into harmony with each other and their world.



As the music lightened, Wren began her descants, flights of notes like birds and wind and water, and the people around the room relaxed. Their own rhythms grew stronger and more complex. One person stood up and moved gently to the music. Soon others did the same, and gradually the kiva filled with dancing people, adding new songs with their feet.

The dance flowed, and took on its own life. As if by single thought, the old man and the child outside softened their music gently down to nothing, leaving the soft patting of people's feet on the hard earth of the kiva the rhythm of the night. Then, all was quiet.

The elders, who had sat in thought throughout the dance, stood up. One by one they climbed the ladder and walked around the outer ridge of the kiva to the children. Each in turn held Wren's hands, marveling at her skill and grace, and touched the boy's head. They bowed to them both, and went their separate ways.

Chapter 23

The Healer

By the next morning, Graymartin did not have the strength to sit up. He lay on the ground sleeping and moaning. His family gave him water to drink, and Wren tried to put cloths on his wounds that had been soaked in the burning herbs the healer had given her after Maki died. Graymartin screamed and shook the rags off him.

Leaving him with Wren, Pale Flower went from one river town to the next seeking a healer. Most could not understand what she was asking for, and the one who came to see the boy told her that there was nothing she could do.

Ka'a walked back to the First Town and sought out the old man.

"Honorable grandfather, I am grateful for all you have done. I come again only to ask your wisdom because my son is dying of the wounds he received, and we know of no way to heal him. We have asked for healers, and they will not come or cannot help."

"I was saddened to see Graymartin yesterday, and worried that he might not go well. I asked the elders if there was anyone with great powers to heal in this canyon, but it seems they are a pretty sorry lot, lazy, inexperienced or unable to move.

"There is one, they say, who must be very old. She is very wise and used to heal with special herbs and water. She healed with music, too, for she is known for her very low and wonderful voice.

"This is probably Falling Water, of whom I have spoken in the past. She, too, had a voice like water on stones. She is said to live alone in a cave cut in the walls of a canyon half a day's walk up the river. No one knows how she survives back there at all. It is at the edge of the Forbidden Lands, where death walks, and they are not even sure that she is still alive. Still, if anyone can help Graymartin, she would be the one.

"She is the one who also had the power to bring rain. In your canyon, she was the only one of her generation who could use the mask to speak to the gods and let them speak through her. Others who tried, found it brought nothing, or disasters like floods, or dry lightning giving only fire.

"However, when this healer came here, she was never known to call rain, and they know nothing of the mask of the Great Wall.

Perhaps that is because this river always flows, however foul, and the mask's powers were never needed. People here call her Healer who Sings Low. "

"How should we find her?" asked Ka'a.

"Go past the third village on this side of the river, and up the second little canyon. On the left hand side, you will see a cave just above eye level, and in there she is said to live. Few people visit her, and those who do either find the house empty, or are sent away with a growl.

"Do not go at night, because there is a dark creature who guards her from the shadows, and is never seen. Most people will not go for her at all because she lives so close to death. Those who venture there tell of spirits who haunt the canyons day and night, and most do not return at all."

Because it was still the middle of the day, and Graymartin was so ill, Ka'a decided he had to set off right away. The trail was not hard, and he moved swiftly. He found the canyon and a cave, but no one was there. The cave seemed deserted.

He backtracked a little and carefully examined the entrance to the narrow canyon for tracks. Along one edge, the sand seemed firmer, so he pressed through the brush at the base of the wall until his way appeared completely blocked by a huge boulder entangled in flood debris.

As he searched the base of the rock for signs of a path, a shrill cry froze him in his tracks. Fearful and inhuman, it seemed to come from all around him, and echoed back and forth across the canyon. He crouched and held his breath, waiting for the slightest noise to signal an attack. Nothing but the whine of insects in the searing sun.

Here were the spirits of the dead the old man had warned him of. But they seemed to have no shape, and if he was to find the healer before dark, he had to push on. The spirits would have to do more than scream at him.

A faint path curved around one edge of the boulder, and as he pushed through the wall of dead branches he saw another cave, deeper than the first, carved into the canyon wall just above the tops

of the trees. He could not see anyone in it, but there was a passable trail up to one corner, and the earth at the base of the cliff was marked by many tracks, both large and small.

Ka'a paused silently in the middle of the little clearing under the cave, as he would have before the entrance of any honored person's home. After a few moments, he cleared his throat and said, "Healer, I greet you." There was no answer, but also, to his relief, no repeat of the piercing cry.

He waited. He called his greeting once more, louder this time. Still nothing.

He went back around the boulder and a short distance down the path. He picked a ledge, shaded from the sun but easily seen, and there he sat and waited. No one passed.

As the sun began to set, he decided to approach the cave once more before going home to his family for the night. He paused in the clearing and called out softly. This time, he was answered by a low growl. Summoning up his courage, he tried once more.

"Healer, I come to you because my son is very ill. The old man, my honorable grandfather, told me that you were the only one who might be able to save his life."

"Who are you, and who is he?" responded a very deep and scratchy voice.

"I am Laughing Crow, son of Tall Maize of the Great Wall clan, from a canyon many days away. My son is Graymartin, a young hunter who can see paths in light and shadow."

"What happened to this young man?"

"He was attacked and wounded two days ago. His head and his arms were cut and are swollen and draining. He sleeps all the time now and groans in pain."

"Is he warm?"

"He is hot now."

"Does he drink?"

"Yes, but will not eat."

"That is good, at least. Who else is in your family?"

"His mother, Pale Flower. She does not see well, yet can find her way at all times and in all places. My honorable grandfather is the bent old man who plays the flute and brings news from place to place."

"And trouble, too. Yes, I know him. He has left many a family sad or angry as he goes. And who else? Anyone else?"

"Well, yes, one other. A small girl with a bent leg and crooked back."

"And who is she, that you hide her?"

"I do not hide her. She is small. "

"Who is she?"

"She is Wren, and she can play music that touches every heart. She has determination, and a gift with healing. "

" Has she helped your son?"

"She has cleaned his wounds as much as he would allow her."

"With what?"

"With water from the river. But not much because he complains so much."

"Do not listen to his complaints, or he will die. She must wash him, over and over, but with my water only. Make the wounds drain. I will give you water to take today, but it may be already too late. There is not enough of this for him to drink, but he must drink from the river all the time, awful as it is.

"I want you to bring the girl back tomorrow for more. Go back to your perch in the wall down the path, and come back in a short time. The bag of water will be there where you stand. Now go. Hurry." Her voice was like rocks rattled by water.

Ka'a went away and came back as instructed. He found a bag tied tightly at the top with a thong. Putting it on his back, he called out his thanks and left. As he went, he had the sense that something moved with him out of the canyon. He stopped and listened many times, but could not catch a sound.

When Ka'a reached Graymartin, he found him groaning in the darkness about deer and clouds and arrows and pain. He was hot and moved constantly, breathing fast between his babble of words.

" I cannot fly...How can I reach the sheep?.. No.. water, I cannot find the water... The deer ran... Why is the sun.... Oh, my arms hurt... Dust, stop the noise! ... I'm not a toad...Mud and fire!..."

Wren was sitting there, terrified. He was talking to her, and anyone else, in words, but the words did not make any sense. Sometimes his voice sounded odd, and she asked, "Are spirits inside him, talking?"

Pale Flower said, "There are spirits inside us all. Sometimes they help us make sense, and sometimes they make sense only to

themselves. I've heard him talk about each of these things before, but never all jumbled up like this. It's his whole life shaken out of order."

Ka'a told them about the old woman and gave them her instructions. "We must wash his wounds regardless of his pain, and it will be terribly hard. Hardest of all perhaps for Wren, who she says must do the scrubbing."

That night there were many screaming spirits. Graymartin yelled and fought with all his strength, and spirits not his own filled the night with horrible cries and terrible words. Still, they kept washing and washing.

Wren wanted to play for him, not wash him, but she was driven on mercilessly by her father and mother. Crying and crying she made him scream, over and over, until the foul crusts came off and the pus oozed out.

The water the old woman had given them smelled so sweet, but there was bitterness in it as well. They washed and washed, and after a terrible, long time, it was all used up, and they all fell asleep. Graymartin still burned on, and the spirits argued and fought in his mind all night.

"Must I go to the old woman? I do not want to."

"Yes, you must."

Soon after first light the next morning, Ka'a woke Wren, and they set off to the old woman's canyon. Wren was so tired she could hardly walk, and her father was little better. They stumbled on and on, through the dusty roads and past the three villages just waking up. Coyotes scratched for food along the outer walls of the villages, but no one shooed them away. They could hear what sounded like birds in one house that had colored patterns on its doorway.

By mid-morning, the two reached the old woman's cave, but she was not there. They left the empty bag on the path and walked back to the ledge where Ka'a had waited in the day before, and rested. They fell asleep immediately.

Wren had a very strange dream. She was sitting in a tree by a river, and her swallows were flying around her. But they were making odd and terrible cries, and animals of all sorts were swimming in the water and flying in the air around her, turtles and snakes and badgers. She tried to calm them, but she could only talk nonsense.

She wanted to climb out of the tree, but the branches were too far apart. She needed help, but she didn't know why. Then a star settled over her tree. She reached for it and held it in her hands. She looked through it into a most dazzling world. Light and music seemed to flow through her, and the birds and animals settled down and their cries quieted. The dream melted away and she fell into a deep, calm sleep.

Ka'a woke her with a rough shake.

"We slept much too long. Come on. We have to find the healer and get some more of the water."

"I don't ever want to wash Graymartin again!" Wren said. "That was terrible. It hurt him and all that horrible yellow stuff came out everywhere. I can't do it again."

"You will have to, if that's what he needs. Sometimes, like taking a splinter out, you have to hurt someone in order to help them. If that's what the healer says must happen, it must."

When they arrived at the spot on the path where the water bag had been the day before, it was there again, full. Ka'a called a greeting to the healer, and thanked her, but there was no answer. He urged Wren to greet her, too, but she was too afraid to speak. They stood there for a while, and tried once more. Wren found her voice this time, but there was still no answer. They walked down the path and back to Graymartin in silence.

They found Graymartin with his eyes open, his mother holding him in her arms. His eyes were strange, and his wounds were crusted again and swollen. They immediately set about washing him, and again he screamed out in pain, but the crust was thinner and the wounds cleaned much more quickly this time. They still opened and drained horrible, yellow material. When they were done, Wren left the cloths on his wounds wet with the bitter water.

They cleaned him twice that day, and he drank much better, even though he was in the shade. He twisted in and out of sleep, talking to animals and the Great Wall about climbing and flying, but Wren thought she could understand what he meant better, even though it made no sense to talk that way.

The next morning, Wren and Ka'a walked back to the old healer once more, but they had slept more in the night and made much better time. When they reached her cave and called out their greeting, they were answered by her low, gravely, musical voice.

"How is your brother?"

This question was directed to Wren, but she was not at all sure she wanted to answer. She waited, and when no more questions were asked, she replied quietly, "He is less hot, and is saying things that make a little more sense."

"Did you wash him as I instructed?"

"Yes, it was a terrible thing to ask me to do! He screamed and screamed, and I cried all night!"

"And is he better, do you think?"

"Yes."

"So, was it the right thing to do?"

"I don't know.... Yes, I guess so."

"How did you want to heal him?"

"I wanted to play to him."

"Would that have cleaned his wounds?"

"No, but it would have made him feel better."

"He would have died in peace, then. Now you have a lifetime to play to him. Play for me."

"I cannot. I do not have my flute."

"You should always carry it with you. Come back and play for me."

"Yes, when Graymartin is better."

"Why did you come to this place?"

"To come to the Great Meeting," Ka'a broke in.

"I did not know that was happening. The last one was so long ago. But why did you come, from so far away?"

"To see things, to trade, to see what the world was like outside of the canyon."

"Why would you want to leave that canyon. Isn't it the most beautiful place?"

"Perhaps. But no one has been able to climb out for a long time. The old man showed Graymartin the old trail that no one had known about for generations."

"So, just to get out. That is something the old man, as you call him, would suggest."

"And you, Wren. Why did you want to come?"

"I had to show my family that I could climb the Great Wall. Also, the old man told me that I could learn magic here and see wonderful things."

"Learn magic! There is so much danger in magic. Was that really what he said you could learn?"

"No, perhaps to play new music and learn to heal in new ways... And to help the canyon get water again. To find Happiness Woman and learn to call rain."

"Who is Happiness Woman, and why do you need to help the canyon get water again? Why do you need more than that clear running river?"

"The river runs dry earlier every summer, now," said Ka'a. "We have no growing seasons anymore, and the rains no longer pour over the canyon rims the way I remember in the past."

There was a pause. "Do you need more water for Graymartin?"

"Yes, please. If you can. We have used what you gave us, and his wounds seem better, but they still make yellow crust."

"Does it smell?"

"No, no longer."

"Are they very swollen?"

"They seem less swollen."

"That is very good. A little crust is all right. Wait again on the ledge, and bring the skin back again tomorrow, and bring your flute."

Chapter 24

The Mask of the Great Wall

The next day, when Wren and her father reached the old woman's cave, their greeting was returned immediately. Graymartin was much better, and although the family was exhausted from the vigil, they were all relieved and happier.

"Wren, did you bring your flute?"

"Yes."

"Will you come here and play for me?"

"Where?"

"Just here. You may come up, through the trees. You must be an excellent climber by now."

"Yes. Can my father come, too?"

"NO." The voice which had been low and gentle, turned harsh again.

"She cannot go alone," said Ka'a.

There was silence. "When the boy is well enough, then, send him with Wren. They may enter the cave and talk to me. His help will be needed, and he must be completely well."

"You need his help? To do what?" demanded Ka'a.

"I do not need his help. You do, if you want to call water back to your canyon."

In ten days, Graymartin's wounds were healing well. He was eating and had gained weight again. Pale Flower and Ka'a had traded all their goods for food since they had had to stay so much longer than they had planned.

But the time had not been wasted. Pale Flower spent much of each day watching people make wonderful things. She had learned to weave rushes in beautiful tight new patterns that required only small amounts of clay or pitch to make them waterproof. She learned to wind clay ropes into pots for water or grain and to bake them in a fire. Each clan that made these bowls and jars painted their own designs in black or brown, and some of the pots she saw were very beautiful. She watched how some women wove fibers into cloth to make strong and supple clothing, but she had no fibers to do this with herself.

Graymartin had made friends, and the boys found they could understand each other pretty well. He had learned to shoot his bow with reasonable accuracy and to use an atlatl in new ways to throw his spear much further. He had also learned to make hooks to catch fish with out of bone or horn, though there were few fish in this river, and none in the river in the canyons of the Great Wall.

The family had discussed what the old healer had requested. They went to visit the old man for his advice and council on the matter.

"This must indeed be Falling Water who helped you save Graymartin's life. It is a very good sign that she wants to meet with the children face to face. Did she say anything about the mask?"

"Nothing. She asked Wren who Happiness Woman was, but the little one was shy and did not answer."

"Still, we can hope. She will want to test the children to see if they are worthy in her eyes. She must have been very angry when she left your canyon. It was a cruel thing to take its most precious gift.

"Not to have used her powers and the mask here is strange as well. Perhaps it does not work in anger, or perhaps the people here always have had enough water to survive. It's not good water. Everyone dirties it, but perhaps she doesn't care. Perhaps she feels that it is what they deserve, and she has found clean water for herself."

The old man rested back against the wall of the building and looked up at the canyon walls. Hawks cried as they circled in and out of the early morning sun. He mused.

"I cannot think of two better people to seek this mask. They are children, and she may not be so angry with children... But perhaps she feels your canyon somehow owes her a life. That frightens me..."

"But she saved Graymartin, and some feel that once you have saved a life, you are bound to that life forever... And Wren...well, Wren is most important. It all depends on who she really is, which spirits move with her, and if her spirits and those of Falling Water are the same or friendly... much of this first step will depend on her. You and I can do nothing more than make the meetings possible.

"Then? I do not know... This quest may well involve Graymartin in very important ways. He must be ready, too. Who he is, and what he has learned in your canyon, and here, will matter a great deal. Is he ready? I cannot be sure. It will not be easy. Again, we can only offer the support he needs.

"And if the mask is here and they can find it? What then? It is said that this mask can bring fire, floods and death just as easily as water. Perhaps the children's' role is simply to bring the mask back. From what you say and all we know, it seems unlikely that the old woman could or would go back with you. Then the canyon may have to wait for generations for the right one to use it. Without the knowledge, that might be never.

"Wren would not have an easy time learning the dance to call rain. But then, she has overcome many problems, even in her short life, and perhaps the power is more important than the dance. ..."

The old man's eyes closed. Pale Flower and Ka'a waited in the sun, unwilling to intrude, yet unwilling just to leave. After a while, he seemed asleep, so they rose to go.

"You should not address her by that name," the old man said suddenly, opening his eyes. "That is a ceremonial name, and all might be lost if she does not use it anymore, or it was not the right time to speak it... Go well now."

"Be well, honorable grandfather, and thank you."

Pale Flower and Ka'a heard death as well as life in the old man's words.

"Is this our quest? How can we know?"

"We don't know. But the need is great, and we are here. Our children may be chosen, or not, as will be."

"But we have almost lost both of them. I do not want to lose them now that they are well."

"Perhaps that is part of why they are the right ones. They have been in both worlds, and are here with strength now. That is not for us to decide. As the old man said, perhaps it is only for us to make it possible, and see."

They walked slowly back to where Graymartin and Wren were playing in the dust.

"Where did you go?" asked Wren.

"We needed to walk and listen," said Ka'a.

"Are we going home soon?"

"Are you ready to go home? Have we done what we came to do?"

"What did we come for? We have traded away all our things, for food. We do not have new things."

"I do," said Graymartin. "I have the bow and arrows."

"But you also will go away without the things that sustained you when you came, your martin and the arrowhead. Was that a worthy trade?"

"I don't know. Perhaps that is the nature of trade. "

"Wren, how do you feel?"

She was surprised to be asked such a question by her father, to be included in such a conversation. "I want to go back to the old healer with the stones in her throat. Just once more. She asked us to. I would like to see her. She asked me to play for her. I am not sure I can just play when someone asks me to, but I will try. There were things she wants to tell us, Graymartin and me. I'm not sure what they are, but I think it's important that we go.

"I had another dream last night. I was in a cave, dark and filled with crying. There were piles of dry stalks, but nothing to eat. I was very hungry and thirsty, but I couldn't find a way out. Then out of the crying, swallows called me. I followed them, flying up through the darkness and dust, and there was a hole to the sky and the sun shined through it. There was Happiness Woman, and she sang to me in a low sweet voice like wind and water, and I wanted to go home so badly. I do want to go home, soon."

"I want to see this old woman, too," Graymartin said.

"You must thank her for the healing water. "

"And all the pain she gave me, day after day?"

"Yes, that too. But know that you may never see her. We never did," Ka'a said.

"That may be just as well," said Graymartin.

"No! I want to see her", cried Wren. "I don't care what she looks like. Can we go? Today?"

"Yes," said Pale Flower. "I think it's time. It is getting colder and darker each passing day, and we must start for home, soon. We should bring all our things to the houses near her canyon. Perhaps I can trade some more things for food and clothing to get us home. I hope the people there are more friendly than these are here."

They gathered their bags and baskets and set off up the canyon.

As agreed upon, when the family got to the town nearest the healer's canyon, they looked around for a sheltered place to stay. It was much less crowded and noisy here, but the people of the town would not let them stay within the town walls and did not understand why they wanted to stay there at all.

"We are going to see the old healer up the canyon," Graymartin said.

"Do not go there," a young man said. "A very evil spirit guards the place. We cannot hunt there, we cannot go there to get water. One of our brothers went there several seasons ago. He did not believe in spirits. He never came back."

"But we have been there several times, and the healer gave us water which saved my son's life."

"You are very lucky then. Did you not feel that there was something evil watching you?"

"The first time, I felt we were followed everywhere, but I did not see anything, and we were not harmed in any way."

"Well, do what you will. But watch carefully, and heed any warnings. Never go there after dark."

After drinking together at midday, Wren led Graymartin up the trail high into the canyon. When they got to the clearing near the healer's cave, they stopped, and Wren called out a soft greeting. There was no answer. She waited and tried again. No answer.

"Perhaps we should go sit on the ledge and wait, as we did before," Wren said.

"Let me try once," said Graymartin.

"All right."

"Greetings, honorable healer. This is Graymartin. I have come to thank you for your wisdom and the water that saved me."

"And the pain?" replied the deep voice.

Graymartin jumped back to edge of the clearing in amazement. As he did, something moved in the bushes behind him and crashed away. Wren cried out and Graymartin crouched, ready to run or fight. He was carrying his bow and arrows, as he always did now, and with great deftness strung an arrow. There was nothing but silence. They waited. Nothing.

"Stay. Talk to me," the old voice from the cave said. "Tell me about yourself, and why you are here."

"You asked me to come," answered Graymartin.

"Is that all?"

"No. We are all grateful for what you did."

"Are you strong now?"

"I am much better now, thank you. Usually I am fast, and can see things others can't. I also climb well."

"He can climb anywhere," Wren said. "And now he can shoot well, too.

"That is what started this trouble in the first place, isn't it? Was it worth it?"

"I am not sure. I lost my most precious things, and almost lost my life."

"What were those most precious things?"

"A martin fetish and a black glass arrowhead the old man gave me. They were stolen by the man who attacked me. We could never find them. I miss them terribly. Without them I almost died."

"Are you still trying to find them?"

"I have nowhere more to look. The man who hurt me has been banished, and he probably took them with him. Though they cannot give him health or power."

"Wren, why are you here?"

"Because you asked me to come back. To play for you."

"Any other reason?"

"Yes, to ask you about water, and Happiness Woman. What is the secret of your water? Could I heal with it too? Is there a way for us to call water back to our canyon? Do you know about the mask that can talk to the gods and the spirits?"

"All these are very difficult questions.... Did you bring your flute?"

"Yes."

"Do you have more than one?"

"Yes. One is one I made, and I play it for the birds and bushes and clouds. The other is very old, and the old man gave it to me. That one I play with people."

"*With* people?"

"Yes, when they are ill, with their spirits, when they are happy, with their songs, when they are angry, with their cries."

"For now, that is the music I want to hear. Come through the bushes, carefully, and climb up here."

"May Graymartin come too?"

"No. Not yet. You must decide if you are ready to come alone first. Then perhaps your brother can come too, later."

Wren and Graymartin looked at each other.

"Father refused to let you go alone the last time, you said."

"Yes, but now is different, and I want to go. You must be very watchful here as well."

"Go, then. I can handle myself," he said a little uncertainly. "I will be ready."

So Wren pushed through the dense brush and climbed toward the cave.



Chapter 25

Old Questions and New Answers

The ledge on which the healer lived was up a short and narrow trail at the height of the tops of the trees that surrounded it. It was sunny but had a good protective overhang. Several crude mud brick walls had been built to divide the ledge and protect the healer from the rain and wind. There was a little pit in the middle with stones around it.

Wren had a sudden pang of sadness, missing her own home high in the canyon wall, and this was heightened when she saw a small image along the dawn wall of the cave. It was clearly Happiness Woman - the same round, sun-like face and open eyes, the same corn stalk hair. She almost cried.

But where was the healer? She looked around more carefully, and there, on the opposite side of the cave from the image, was a notch in the wall, and in it sat a small, brown creature, wrinkled everywhere, with the most startling white eyes that seemed not to see, but looked straight at her.

"Greetings, grandmother," said Wren, almost in a whisper.

"Greetings, child," came the rattling, low, musical voice from a toothless mouth and an impossibly wrinkly face. Even the face looked like ripples on water when she talked.

"Come closer. I cannot see you well."

Wren approached her carefully. "Do not be afraid, I will not eat you. In fact, I haven't eaten anyone in days... You are bent. Why?"

"I fell from my home when I was a baby, and was broken."

"But you climbed out of the canyon, and you walked here. That was a hard trip, I know. I made it myself many years ago."

"You did? You know our canyon?"

"Yes, I know it well. It is beautiful. But sometimes it is the people in a place that change the balance of spirits. So it was for me."

"But the people are all good now. And the spirits are good, and the trees and stones and swallows are good. It is only that recently there has been little water. That makes life hard."

"And what can you do about that?"

"Nothing. We take water from a spring to make mash and drink. But there is no one who knows how to call the rain. The old man told us that there was someone generations ago who could call water when it became dry like this. But she left, and our canyon has gotten drier and drier ever since."

"So. There is sadness now. And do they talk about the one who could call water?"

"There are stories. But no one remembers her except the old man. He told us that she could talk with the gods through a beautiful mask that had been in the canyon for many generations. She alone could call for water, and she left the canyon long ago.

"The old man told me that the mask looked like Happiness Woman, who shines on the wall of our cave in the rising sun. You know her. Her image is on your wall as well, over there."

"And where is this mask now?"

"Gone. Forever lost to us. I do not know."

"Do you play to Happiness Woman?"

"I used to. All the time. Why, do you play to her?"

"No, but I do sing sometimes. If you could play to the mask, what would you play?"

"I don't know. Whatever comes. "

"Sit and play to it. Imagine the mask was here."

"Is it here?" Wren asked excitedly.

"No, but its spirit lives here too, with the image on the wall. That's why I made it here. I love its company."

"Oh, I do too. May I sit there under it?"

"Of course. I do not see well, but I still hear very well."

Wren wanted to ask how she walked around and got food to live on, but she did not dare. She went and settled herself under Happiness Woman, and took out the old flute.

"This is for you, Happiness Woman. I miss you."

"Thank you. I miss your chatter and your music, too. Play for me, and for the old one, too. She already cares for you. Calm her old anger, and make us happier, all of us."

Wren was very shy about playing for such a strange person. She had not missed the old healer's comment that she had not eaten anyone for days at least, and might be hungry. But Wren doubted that

the old woman could move very fast, and felt that Happiness Woman would not like her to be eaten while she was playing, so she started.

The flute seemed dry and reedy, and the sounds were like dust and moths and fallen leaves. But as she relaxed and explored the little canyon that Happiness Woman watched over, the tones became mellower. She felt warm, and happy that Graymartin was well and that they might go home soon, so the music was light, and floated out over the canyon. It was wonderful to play from a canyon wall again. Each place has its own spirits and listeners and echoes, and she began to find the ones here.

Wren played with the light shining off Happiness Woman. She saw swallows and played with them, too. She played to the swallow who had been killed by the hawk back home, so long ago now.

In the canyons of the Great Wall, the wind often played with her, as did the river and trees, but out of this cave came another song, low and smooth like the wind through an old tree or over a deep hole with water in it far below. It wove in and out below her notes, the way she embellished the songs of the old man when they had played along the river side. Then a faint thump, a-thump, like a woodpecker on a hollow log.

She played down the rays of the sun, and in and out of the corn stalk hair of Happiness Woman. Her trills were joined by little clicks and swishes like snakes in the sand or dead grass in the wind, or little streams of water. A large cloud moved in front of the sun, and Wren played to the cool, wet darkness inside it.

Abruptly, the deep sounds and tapping stopped, and Wren stopped, too. She waited to see if the healer would speak, but she said nothing. Wren stood up and walked over to the other side of the cave to see if the old woman had fallen asleep, but she hadn't, and the cool, white eyes watched her.

"Call your brother," she said. "We have much to do."

Graymartin moved up the canyon trail like a mountain lion, fluid, silent.

"Good," said the old woman.

"Greetings, grandmother," said Graymartin, pausing outside the mouth of the cave.

"Sit." She gestured him to a spot in front of her. "I know why Wren is here. Why are you here?"

Graymartin couldn't answer right away. "You asked me to come.. To find the mask."

"Do you know that this mask you speak of, if you can find it, is like your sharpest arrow. It can be a fearful tool for good or evil?"

"I am careful."

"But if something goes wrong?"

"Nothing should go wrong if you are careful."

"That is true sometimes, but with men and spirits, things can go very wrong at any time, no matter how careful you are. It seems that you have found that out already. Do you believe in spirits?"

"Yes. Well, I am not sure."

"Have you ever missed the animal you are hunting?"

"Sometimes."

"Why did that happen?"

Graymartin thought back to his first deer hunt with his father. He had missed then. "Because I was careless."

"Is that the only possible reason?"

"I don't know."

Shadows had moved into the cave, and the old woman had started to shiver. "What can you do for me?" she asked.

"I could give you my robe if you are cold."

"That is only a small part of why I shiver, but thank you." Graymartin carefully placed his hide robe on her lap. She took the skin, and very slowly shifted it over herself.

"How do you expect to find and use a mask of such power if you do not understand its spirits?"

"I see very well, and can find things."

"Go, now, and come back when you have a better answer than that." The old woman's voice ran cold.

Wren looked at her, and then at Graymartin, with distress. "Yes, honorable grandmother." She paused for a moment. "Come on, Graymartin."

The boy was stunned by the directness of the old woman, but she spoke with such authority that he did not argue. He looked at the white eyes that followed him wherever he moved, and said, "Yes. And thank you, honorable grandmother," and backed away. She had his precious robe, but he could not ask for it back.

He and Wren turned and picked their way down the trail, but before they reached the clearing beneath the cave, the deep, raspy voice, all filled with wrinkles, called out again.

"Children of the Great Wall! Come back to me one more time."

"Now, grandmother?"

"Yes."

"Thank you."

"What are you thanking me for? For giving you another chance to put your lives at risk, with no certainty of success?"

She said nothing more until they reached her again. "How do you answer my question?"

"Honorable grandmother, I do not understand these things, and it is not for me to use this mask, but perhaps I can help find it, with your help."

"And what do you need to learn from me?"

"How I need to be and what I need to do to find it."

"Yes, good. Sit. Let us begin, then...When I came here, I had the mask. That was long ago, and I was angry. The people here knew nothing of our past yet did not welcome me, or my son, as we deserved, so I vowed to hide the mask away and never help anyone again. My son had been banished from your canyon because he was a hurtful man, and he soon was driven away from the towns here, too.

"But I could not live alone in this place without help, so I moved to this cave, which felt a little like home to me, and Rages against the Moon, my son, hid in the forests and caves of this and nearby canyons, hunting and plaguing people. I could do nothing for him, but he provided me with food and clothing, for I had nothing to offer in trade, if I was not going to use my powers to heal or help people.

"I decided to hide the mask somewhere that no one could find it without my help, and I asked my son to find such a place. He hid it in the most difficult of places, and it is guarded by the most horrifying spirits. Only something with the powers it has could survive there. Everything else died long ago.

"Since you will never see my son, although he watches you, I will tell you how we marked the trail. It will take great skill to find and follow, and every step is dangerous. I am old, and do not remember every danger, but with great care and true sight, you, Graymartin, could succeed in finding and bringing back the mask.

"You must discuss this carefully with your mother and father. If they agree to let you go, Graymartin, Wren must stay here with me, and with your father. I will teach her, as best I can a child, the way,

the music, and the words, to find and use powers of this mask. Laughing Crow will find us food.

"Your mother will go with you, for she has skills that you will find essential on this quest. You must accept her help and trust her judgment."

"My mother? How can she help me on a dangerous trip like this?"

"If you have not discovered her talents yet, you will learn them as you go. Listen carefully to her advice, or you will certainly be lost.

"Now, go this time, and talk about these things. Return to me if you are truly willing to attempt this journey."

"Happiness Woman, can we trust this frightful woman, her terrible son and all the spirits in these canyons? Does she mean us harm because we come from the canyon she left?"

"I do not think you should fear her. She feels your power and the love you have for your home and its people. Under all her growls she is essential to your quest."

"She is sending my brother and mother into great danger."

"Isn't that what you asked her to do?"

"Yes, I guess. It just scares me so much."

"It should. But the more important things are, the more difficult and dangerous doing them may be."

"Will my mother be alright? She is not strong."

"She is, in ways you do not appreciate. And she has skills your brother will need."

The next morning, the two children returned to the old healer. The family had argued late into the night about whether this was safe to undertake. Between Graymartin's confidence that he could find the mask, with even general directions, and Wren's determination to bring it back to the canyon, Ka'a and Pale Flower agreed. They were all confused at the old woman's decision that Pale Flower should go with Graymartin, but agreed to separate the way she asked.

The old woman sat as before, with the robe around her, in the corner of her cave. There were signs that she had eaten, and a crude design was formed in the sand in front of her.

"The signs are good, and you should start today," the healer told Graymartin. "The journey will take a day to reach the canyons,

one night with the stars and moon to get through them, and a final day to scale the cliffs to the cave, if you can. The air is cool and the moon is bright now, but I feel that there will be snow again soon. There are many dangers, even more now than usual. There is a man in the Forbidden Lands with a troubled soul and many spirits shrouding him. I fear for you.

"The way is treacherous, and you must only walk on stone, not sand or leaves. Remember this, not only because you make no noise and leave no trail, but because there are places in the sand and under the leaves that will hold you forever. The earth's traps and man's traps, both, are there, and you cannot tell them just by looking.

"Once in the canyon tangle you must follow the cold star. That is the only way through. It is like the web of a sick spider, deadly, with many impassable ends that lure you on until they end without any way out. If the man catches you in one of these, you will be in great danger. This is where you will need your mother's skill, for without her, you will not get through, and you might never find your way out again.

"You must look for the signs of water, like this: WWW, with little stars over them to tell you how to progress. This way, you should not repeat mistakes. There is almost no water, and quicksand guards the springs, but press a reed near where cottonwoods stand, and they may share a little water with you now and then.

"If you make it through the maze of canyons, you will find yourself in a massive bowl of sand and stone with walls as high as those at home. But unlike yours, this is a place of violence and starvation, and sacrifice to gods no longer known. To find the mask, you must climb a trail as thin as a shaft of light up that wall to one of the uppermost caves. Pray that your soul may be steadfast and your feet sure.

"All the marks relate to water. There is only one way across the face of the great bowl to the top. This path, Graymartin, you must take alone. Your mother can watch the whole way to make sure no one follows you. But she must be watchful for herself, as well.

"This is a world of caves, and death. In these caves are many passages, and terrible things were done there long ago. It is a place where ancient tribes sacrificed enemies and slaves to appease old gods. No one even speaks of this canyon now, haunted as it is by its grim past.

"Up there, you must use what you have learned from your mother. Only one passage in one cave holds the mask, and that one runs from the mouth of the cave toward the cold star."

"How will I know the right cave?" asked Graymartin.

"By that..." and the old woman pointed to Happiness Woman. "She faces the rising sun.. Then look carefully. Use everything you have learned to find the mask. Remember the source of rain. Do you understand?"

Graymartin held the whole journey in his mind for a moment. "Where do we start? How can we find the entrance to the maze of canyons? And how do we get back?"

"Up the river, here, after three turns you will find on your left hand, a narrow passageway marked in the curve of the wall with the first of the water signs. Enter there. As for getting back, with or without the mask, you must devise some way. There are the marks for going in, but they are of little help going out. Others before you have left their own marks, but they did not all return, and it would be better for you to leave your own trail."

Wren had been sitting with her back to the cave wall trying to listen, but such directions were confusing for her and she hoped that Graymartin understood them very well. The thought of vengeful older generations being in this place frightened her. Some canyons were dense with spirits, and this great bowl would be a place of fear and darkness.

"How will I learn to awaken the powers of this mask? And not bring floods and fire?"

"You will come to me every day. Bring me food, and bring your flute. Perhaps that is how you learn best.

"Few people can call water, but I have seen you call it without the mask at all. There must be balance in the powers of the natural world, the spirit world and your internal world. There must be need, partnership with the spirits, concentration and force inside you. We shall see.

"Graymartin, start as soon as you can. Take food and water. There is little to be had on the way. But hurry, you are racing many elements that do not want such power returned. It is easier and sometimes better if man is not involved in such decisions, but perhaps it is important now for the mask to return to your canyon.

"Oh, Happiness Woman, I'm so worried! Graymartin and my mother are going off to a very scary place to find your mask in the hidden canyon. They say it's protected by terrible spirits and evil men! And all I can do is sit here and listen to the old woman with a voice like rolling stones!"

"Yes, child, I know it's scary. I'm sorry. Be calm. Still your mind while they do their part in this. You have been so brave."

"I wish there was something I could do to keep them safe!"

"There is. You are. You are building a most important friendship with the old woman you call Falling Water."

"But what good is that to them??"

"Shush. That's really important."

"How do you know?"

"I do know."

"But how? How can she help?"

"As little and old as she is, she, too, has great power. Like you. Not all power is to prevent bad things from happening. Some is to help things to take place. You played for Maki and he still died. That does not mean that you failed him. You gave him peace as he moved on into the other worlds. That was really important. You brought calm to the council in the Great Meeting."

"This old woman you speak of has similar powers. I know she brought the shield here and I know she hid it. She had been badly hurt by people in your canyon. But you have found her, searched her out of the hidden places, and she let you speak to her. She taught your mother and brother how to search for the shield. She is teaching you how to use your powers and heal."

"But that's not protecting Graymartin and my mother from all the terrible spirits in that canyon!"

"We all are though. Together, you, me, the old woman, we are all guiding and helping them."

"But how do you know?"

"Because the old woman and I have worked together for a very long time. Long before now. She and I are related the same way you and I are. We are sisters."

Wren then fell silent. Something moved inside her. She began to understand it all, and for the first time in a long time, she had hope.



Chapter 26

Into the Forbidden Lands

Graymartin and Pale Flower set off by mid-day. Thin white clouds were streaking across the sky, and the heat of the sun was dimmed through them, but the way up the river was clear. Graymartin had never hunted with his mother, and was astonished at how easily she moved. As they worked their way along the river, they went over and over the instructions the healer had given him. Every turn might present them with new problems.

There were so many unknowns, and some things Graymartin simply did not understand at all.

"What is the cold star? What is a water sign? How will we find and mark our way through the canyons to the other end?"

"Unlike the fickle moon, the cold star does not wax and wane. It does not move. It will appear about there," Pale Flower pointed up and to her left, "when the stars appear tonight, if the clouds let it shine through."

"How do you know that, when I have never even heard of it?"

"When I was your age, I used to hunt with my father. Even though I could not see well, I was able to sense things, like where the cold star is, and I could read a lot from tracks and spoor. I was good and loved doing this with him. I miss those times together.

"As to the marks, I have seen several ways that healers and painters show water," and here Pale Flower stopped and drew in the sand with her finger. "Usually it looks something like this: `wwwww`, for a stream, but a pool may look like this: `0`, or it may show a creature that lives in water, like a turtle or a frog. My mother helped a healer, and she often showed me what paintings and carvings meant.

"The way through this canyon will be very difficult. I think, from what the old woman said, we should follow the cold star first and always, but if there are two possible choices, we should look for marks. To return through the canyons again, if we live to return, we will have to establish marks of our own on the way in. These should be things that will last for us, not get covered by snow in case it snows, yet able to be smoothed away with time. They should not intrude on the true nature of the canyons, where the right way may be

different for each creature and spirit each time, they enter. Few people will ever want to go the way we go again."

As the shadows lengthened, they came to the third turn in the river. The water looked quite clear, so they filled their water bags and looked around for the opening in the curve of the wall. A stream must have cut the wall from the other side allowing water to flow into the bigger river in the past, but there was no sign of water now.

The healer's rule that they must only walk on rock was impossible here, but they moved with great care because of her warnings. There had been occasional footprints as they walked along the river bank, but here were none here, and Pale Flower and Graymartin agreed to smooth out their own tracks before they passed into the hidden canyons, in case they were being followed. They had not felt threatened so far, but a good tracker could melt into the air as sheep might when motionless along a canyon wall.

Finding nothing their first time, they inched along next to the rock face step by step, looking both forward and back. Part way along the smooth curve they found a narrow cut in the wall which arched back against the flow of the river. They searched the opening for signs of a mark, and found a small squiggle about knee high around the first curve, invisible from the opening. There were no stars above it, but it ran straight across the rock's vertical seams and water lines. They went back and smoothed over their tracks in the sand and backed into the canyon entrance.

The trail was narrow, and it curved back and forth, one turn after another without choices for a long time. They moved silently, and again Graymartin marveled that his mother could move so effortlessly, like a trained hunter.

They paused every so often to listen. Only wind and an occasional crow. They came to the first fork, but the choice was simple. The cut on the right ended quickly in a steep wall.

The left way wound on, rising steadily. The sun line had moved off the tops of the canyons now, and the sky was getting pale.

"Can you see the cold star?"

"No, but we're moving in the right direction. It's not quite dark enough yet. I felt that the old woman was telling us that it would be easier to travel through the canyons at night because of the star. It may make the choices simpler, but it will make seeing the water marks and walking on rock much more difficult. There is a good moon, though."

The path opened up, and three choices appeared. They searched for marks, but finding none, they chose the left hand one which seemed to continue them in the same direction they were heading.

It was getting cold. Graymartin had left his robe with the old healer, fearing that she would become angry if he asked for it back. Wren had told him about the remark that she had not eaten anyone in days. Although he scoffed at the idea, he preferred that the old woman not decide to have her son, or some evil creature she was in league with, bring him back as food, or even eat his sister in his absence. Wren had to go to her each day, and although he would not admit it out loud, he was glad that Laughing Crow was there to find food for her and watch Wren, not him.

The little riverbed they were following now wound well away from the direction they wanted to follow, and they began to wonder if they had made the wrong choice. The air was moving as evening birds and animals started to hunt, and it seemed that every so often they picked up extra sounds. They always stopped, and listened, but heard and saw nothing.

The path opened up into a little sandy basin, and the rocks on the right seemed a little wet. Three choices again presented themselves. One led back the way they had come. One broke to the left. The best choice seemed to be straight and to the right, but as Graymartin moved to look at that path more closely, his mother cried out sharply, "Be careful! That sand is shiny!"

He stopped in mid stride, perfectly balanced on one foot. As he did, the sand under him started to move of its own accord.

"Fall backwards," his mother whispered. Graymartin obeyed. He lowered himself backwards and felt solid ground beneath him. He swung his legs off the sand to stone and stood up.

"Throw a stone in the sand where you were going," his mother said. He did, and it disappeared beneath the surface. "There is one reason to walk on rock."

Graymartin had seen quicksand before, usually along the river in the Spring, but he had never been so close to taking the last step.

They looked around. It really seemed as if the way they wanted to go was up the path beyond the quicksand, but they checked the other way first. It seemed perfectly passable, but they saw no mark. So Graymartin edged himself across the base of the shallow rock wall leading to the right hand path above the quicksand and jumped onto

the trail once it became stone again. Searching closely, he found a water mark, this time with one star above it. His mother carefully followed his steps and joined him.

"I thought you could not see well? How did you see that?"

"There was something different about the color of that sand and its shine," Pale Flower answered. "Those things I sense well.

"We must start marking the path ourselves now. We do not want to step into the quicksand out of carelessness on the way back, and we must take the correct return path out of this opening."

Graymartin's footprint in the shifting sand had disappeared completely, and there was nothing left marking the path that they had taken in.

"Let's scratch a mark with an arrow, this way, as father and I sometimes do: ← ."

"It is not for us to scar these walls forever, but yes, that type of mark should work. Here it is better - this wall is soft and the mark will disappear in a season or two. Hopefully we will be back before it has worn away."

They scratched a mark for the quicksand, and another to indicate which path to take on the way out. Then, in order to remind themselves to look, they placed a branch across part of the trail, and moved on.

"There is the cold star," Pale Flower whispered suddenly, pointing far above and to the left of them. The clouds had broken and other stars could be seen.

"How can you tell which one it is?"

"I know where to look for it. It's bright, and always stays with certain other stars. My father showed me, as his father had taught him long ago. They used to take long hunting trips together, and needed to find their way to the best hunting grounds, and their way home."

The canyons twisted and turned, and they had to make a number of choices, but led by Pale Flower's unerring sense of direction and the full moon, they were able to find the water marks which guided them deeper and deeper into the canyon.

"Let's stop here and rest for a little while. We must be a good way through this maze by now, if the old women meant for us to make it in one night." They stopped and ate a small amount, and drank.

"Do you have the sense that there is something moving with us?"

"Yes, but I have not seen any signs, and in this place, we may not see him, or it, until it shows itself. This is an unusual journey we are making. There is a greater purpose. It is possible that spirits, as well as men, have interest in what we do. I am not sure that they all want us to succeed, though.

"The old women spoke of this place we are going to as a place of sacrifice. I did not dare to ask her what she meant."



"I have heard the tales. Long ago, other tribes lived along these rivers. Every so often, traces of old buildings and tools have been found here that are different from anything even our elders have ever seen.

"Old stories tell that these people were angry and cruel, and terrified all the time of their great and horrible gods. Unlike ours, their gods demanded that men or animals be killed for them to keep them happy. The people are said to have fought among themselves, and they fed the enemies they captured to their gods so that they would not have to feed them their own people.

"I fear that this place played a terrible part in that history. That may be why no one ventures here and it is called the "Forbidden Land". Perhaps the spirits and gods of the old people still rattle and roar among themselves."

Graymartin was silent. He was generally not afraid of things he could not see, such as spirits, but certain animals, like wolves and spiders and turtles, seemed to have especially strong spirits, as did water and the wind. He had had many disturbing dreams during his recent illness. Certain spirits, who had perhaps felt harmed by him in the past, came back to haunt him and make his illness worse in every way they could. Only the healer's water and the pain inflicted by his sister beat these forces back. Which were good and which were bad? He was confused how pain could be a force for good.

They did not rest for long. They were anxious to continue through the canyons, and knew that the cold star would only be there to help them out at night. They pushed on, exhausted.

The canyons rose higher and higher around them. The walls were still not quite as massive as those in their canyons back at home, but clouds were moving in, and it was not always easy to see which way to turn.

They made a bad choice. The canyon they had been following spiraled around and ended in a vertical wall even Graymartin could not climb. They knew they had taken a wrong turn somewhere, but couldn't remember when that might have happened.

They started retracing their steps very carefully. As they came around a curve, a huge, dark shape loomed in front of them blocking their path. It stood, human, heavily robed and unmoving. Graymartin and Pale Flower stopped in their tracks.

After a moment of hesitation, Pale Flower greeted it. If human, that would be the right thing to do. Her words melted into the silence of the canyon. The figure made no sound, but turned and moved soundlessly back out the trail they were following.

Pale Flower and Graymartin stayed rooted in their tracks for several minutes.

"If it meant to harm us," Pale Flower whispered, "there could have been no better place than this, with our backs against the wall. We cannot go back. We have to move forward, so I think we must follow it. Have your bow ready. We will go with even greater care. If it is not human, there is little we can do to protect ourselves."

They worked their way back the canyon to a point where an alternative route lead off further to the right than they had wanted to go, but with the help of the moon, which emerged from behind the clouds for a moment, they found a water mark. There were now six stars.

There were no footprints. The figure could have been anywhere around them. It was either taking care to make no tracks, as they were, or had no substance to leave tracks with.

A short distance up this right-hand canyon, the walls opened up to reveal a huge bowl. They were at the bottom, and in front of them curved smooth stone walls reaching to the pale clouds far above. A faint howl flowed from the walls and hissing swirled from the sand and bushes around them.

They had made it through the canyons, and had been sent there by the healer herself, but this was certainly a place filled with tormented spirits. There were no rocks or trees to protect them, and they could not rest there, so they stepped back into the canyon they had just emerged from and looked for a shallow cave. They marked the entrance to the canyon and settled onto a ledge.

Pale Flower slept first, while Graymartin watched. The shadows of the moon played across the canyon walls, and he listened intently for messages in the moans of the wind. After several hours, Pale Flower awoke and took her turn. It was a very long night.

Chapter 27

The Caves of the Dead

As the dawn light sifted through the clouds, the curved wall loomed cold and smooth. Graymartin and Pale Flower were wide awake watching the scene unfold around them. They ate mash without a fire, and took water. Since they had no idea where Graymartin's trail would run, they started at the sandy base of the cliff nearest them and started walking in opposite directions looking for any possible beginning.

The high canyon walls fell straight and treeless from the top, and even if there was a path, one misstep would send the victim straight down to the base without hope. Graymartin imagined a sacrificial human or animal being sent up the trail, driven by the threats and arrows of his captors below, to starve and die in one of the high caves he could see dotting the wall, no hope of going up or returning down alive, ever.

Who would these old ones have been trying to appease, he wondered? What kind of gods would demand sacrifice of human lives in order to earn other humans rain or crops or peace? Strange and horrible gods they must have been. He was glad his people lived with gentler gods.

As they worked their way around, they each found possible trails, but none led far up the walls. They each had similar thoughts, worrying that the trail might have eroded or chipped away in the years since the mask had been taken up to its remarkable perch. How angry the old woman must have been to do this, Graymartin thought. She had probably been afraid to destroy the sacred object, but felt fury enough to hide it away so that no human could invoke its powers. It did not seem to be bringing much water to this place on its own.

He wondered why he and Wren had been chosen to try to retrieve it. Perhaps they had chosen themselves. The old healer knew they intended to take it back to their canyon again. But conditions were different now. The canyon was slowly burning. Each year the river water dried up earlier, and even the early crops were beginning to fail. Perhaps now there were new generations of people there who harbored no anger against her or her son. Perhaps she did not want to see the beautiful canyon turn to dust for lack of water.

In the midst of these musings, Graymartin found the mark - not just the wavy water mark with a line of stars. Now the stars had become an ark over the water, like a rainbow. He signaled to Pale Flower.

The trail seemed to curve, steep and shallow up the face of the cliff. Where it started, it looked easy enough, but Graymartin knew that it would become terrifying as it climbed hundreds of feet up the wall, even if it did remain as clean as this. He took a bag of water, but left his bow and arrows, since he would have to carry the mask back if he ever found it.

"How will I find the right cave? What if there are more than one with Happiness Woman on the walls? Where do you think I should look for the mask? It will certainly not be just lying there."

"Look where the rising sun strikes the wall of each cave now. Happiness Woman will be on that sunny wall in the correct cave. The old woman told you that you would have to use all your searching skills to find it. You are good at that. She also said something about rain that I did not understand. Consider that as you look. The right passage will lead directly toward the cold star."

"But I will not be able to see the cold star. I cannot see it now even."

"The cold star is that way," and she pointed. "Try to remember its position relative to the canyons around you. Also, I will be here, and if you can still see me, I can help you with that. Go well, and very carefully, my son."

Pale Flower hugged the boy, something she had not done for a long time. For an instant, Graymartin held back, reluctant, but then he relaxed and greeted her in return, knowing that she needed some way to offer him strength and confidence. The well-being of many people depended on him now, and it would not be said in any other way.

The trail was narrow, but firm and clean. In other places and times, such a wall would be beautiful and a supreme pleasure for Graymartin to climb. He moved up steadily, the trail becoming invisible to Pale Flower within moments. He seemed to be climbing thin air.

About a third of the way up, the trail became steeper, and Graymartin had to climb over a little overhang to reach a ledge. This

would not be easy to pass over with a big object in his arms, but he would have to deal with that when the time came.

As he pulled himself over the ledge, he found himself in a shallow cave. To his horror he saw that it was filled with human skulls and many bones. He lost his breath and looked around for a way to escape even the sight of these remains, but there was nowhere to turn. He knew that he had to steady himself before going on, up or down. He sat on the edge and tried to calm himself. He looked at Pale Flower but did not call down to her. This was something he might not ever tell her.

He looked up. The trail continued to spiral up the wall, and all along it were caves similar to this one. He wondered anxiously whether he would find each one like the last, filled with the remains of people sent there to die, for long forgotten misdeeds or beliefs.

He left that cave as quickly as he felt able and worked his way up the trail. He remembered the old woman's firm advice to climb on rock not sand. There were parts of the ledge that had already slipped hundreds of feet to the floor below. He tested each step carefully.

Each cave was indeed filled with bones, but there were fewer and fewer as the trail rose. Two thirds of the way up, he reached a cave with several chambers and small passageways. Because there were bones and there were other caves further up, Graymartin reasoned that this would be an unlikely cave to hide Happiness Woman in, even if that was only Wren's name for her. Besides, he could not find any trace of a carving or painting on the wall.

The trail got narrower, steeper and more crumbly as it neared the rim, and Graymartin had to press his body against the stone wall. There were no bushes to grasp and few hand holds, and the combination of the height and difficulty of his position made Graymartin breath fast and get a little dizzy. The world began to spin and he slowed to make sure of each step.

Over another difficult ledge, he pulled himself into what seemed the uppermost cave. There was no more trail to be seen beyond it, and Graymartin hoped that this would be the cave he sought, because if he had to climb over its top, he would never get down again. He would have to make the difficult decision whether or not to turn back empty-handed.

To his great relief, he found that this cave had no bones, and on the far wall of the overhang there was a crude image of Happiness

Woman. He turned to the open canyon and waved to the tiny speck that was his mother. He thought he could see her wave back.

There were three passages in this cave, all dark in the shadow of the early afternoon sun. He looked at where Pale Flower stood and tried to imagine the direction she had indicated the cold star would be. He could not feel direction as she did, but he thought he knew which should be the correct passage. He entered its darkness and let his eyes accommodate. He could see no mask, and no irregularities in the sandy floor that might suggest something hidden there.

He explored the other two passages carefully. He looked at the walls near the entrances to the passages for marks that might indicate the right one. Nothing.

He sat on the ledge and thought. The old woman had said that he would have to use all his searching skills. What had he done when he could not find the bear rock marking the entrance to the trail canyon at home. "Step back and open your eyes to all patterns of light and shadow" was what the old man had taught him.

"I will not step back. Not a good idea here," he said out loud. He returned to the passage he thought was the right one and stood looking in, trying to see any patterns he had missed. Nothing.

"Look at things again and again as the light changes," the old man had said when he was trying to find the trail up the canyon wall. That would require waiting, but he had nothing else to do. He had to find the mask. "I hope the old woman is not playing a cruel trick on us to take further revenge on people from our canyon," he said to himself. "Hasn't she done enough already?"

It was very cold, Graymartin lay down on the sand at the entrance to the central passageway and watched the shadows change along the walls. He played every trick with his eyes he knew. Nothing.

Suddenly, though, as he put his head back to rest, he glanced at the roof of the passageway. There lay the mask, staring down at him. It took his breath away. It shined even in that dull light.

It was held in place by a branch wedged into notches in the stone roof. Quiet, simple, unmistakable. He reached up carefully, and dislodged the branch, fearing that the mask would be heavy and come crashing down on him, or would break into dust in his hands. To the contrary, it was light and supple, perfectly round, and beautiful. It reflected light everywhere, and seemed to have been made of tiny, magical shiny objects all woven together somehow. Brittle stalks of

what probably had been maize long ago stuck out of the upper rim of the mask. Its simple eyes were made of transparent stone, open, serene.

He cradled it carefully and walked to the edge of the cave's ledge. He held it high for his mother to see. She seemed to wave, and he was pleased.

Now he had to go down the trail with it. This would be harder than climbing up, and he had something so precious he hardly dared hold it in the cave. But he had to go. It was getting late, the white-gray light of early winter was flat, and it was cold. The wind had picked up a little, and he was sure that the old women had been right that they were racing snow.

Graymartin considered all the possible ways to hold the mask. Although it was remarkably light, it was almost as big as his chest. It had old straps, but he judged them too old to trust. But he did have some thong of his own, that Wren had made for him before they left home.

He threaded the thong to the strap rings. Should he wear it? That seemed crazy, because he needed all his skill to see the trail ahead of him without any limitation of vision. If he put it on his back though, with the strap around his neck, he could both see and have his hands free to hold on to the wall if he needed to. It meant that he would have to face inward against the rock wall the whole time, but that might be easier, and better than looking outward toward the terrible drop.

He edged his way over the lip of the ledge. He found his footing, and took a deep breath. Step by step, past each horrifying cave, he threaded his way down the canyon wall. It had been much less difficult to help the old man and Wren up the canyon at home than to bear this treasure down.

When he finally stepped onto the sandy floor of the canyon again, his legs almost buckled. He was exhausted. He carefully pulled the mask straps over his head and turned it to show Pale Flower.

"That is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen," she whispered. "And it's so light, and reflects the light everywhere." It seemed to radiate light even in that gloomy dusk.

"I do not think I can travel tonight," Graymartin said. "Let's eat and sleep here. We should be able to get all the way back tomorrow with an early start."

Pale Flower agreed, and they settled into the same cave they had used the night before. It would be deep enough to give them some protection if it started to snow, and it had a small nook where the mask could rest behind them.

Chapter 28

The Ragged Man

Snow fell during the night, and in the morning the world was a pristine white. The crows complained.

It was not very cold, and Graymartin and Pale Flower awoke happy and proud that they had found the mask. It was resplendent, reflecting the snow and the sun as it tried to break through the thinning clouds. They ate some very cold mash and drank the last their water. There would be no problem finding water on the way back.

They started out, carefully as before. Graymartin walked in front with the mask on his back, and Pale Flower followed a few paces behind him. They tried to walk on rock as best they could, but it was often impossible to tell flat rock from flat sand. The canyons were very quiet. Only a few small birds hopped in the bare branches of the bushes, and there were no footprints to be seen except those of a few squirrels. The going was easy and the ground was very soft in the melting snow. As twisted as the canyons were, they had no problems finding their marks where they had cut them.

Several hours into the canyons Graymartin stopped suddenly. There in front of him were human foot prints. They had assumed that the robed figure they encountered the day before was the healer's son. She had told them about him, and he seemed to mean them no harm. He could have attacked them anywhere, and could have easily prevented their recovery of the mask. Like the sacrificial victims, Graymartin could also have been trapped on the canyon wall until he died of starvation or fell to his death. They felt he walked behind them.

These prints were fresh. They went in and out of a small side canyon and lead back and forth down the trail Graymartin and Pale Flower needed to take. They listened very carefully. Nothing. Pale Flower had been carrying the bow and arrows, but now she passed them on to Graymartin. They moved slowly and soundlessly forward.

In their caution, they were almost too late in hearing the movement. It came from behind them, and Pale Flower whirled around with a shout as a ragged man appeared, running down the

path. Graymartin notched an arrow and yelled, "Stop!" The man paused.

"Get behind me, mother, quickly, and run.

"What is it you want from us?" he said. "Food? We have none."

"I want my bow back, and I want to finish what I started."

Graymartin shuddered as he recognized the young man from the towns, the one who had attacked him, now ragged and somewhat unstable.

"You almost succeeded then, but you won't touch me now. Stay away! Why isn't it finished between us? You have my arrowhead, and my fetish." There, around the man's neck, Graymartin recognized his own pouch.

"You have my bow and arrows, and now I cannot go back to my home."

"You can, in a short time if you do not hurt us."

"Your family shamed me and my town."

"You shamed yourself and your town."

"I will finish this now," said the young man. "I am hungry and cold, and I want to be done with you!" he cried, and stumbled again at Graymartin.

Graymartin started to raise the bow and yelled, "Stop" again, but with the mask on his back, he could not get his arm up to shoot. He turned and ran down the canyon.

Graymartin was very quick, and moved like the wind. He heard a shout from his mother just in time to see the branch on the ground and leap onto the sloping rock at the side of the canyon. He raced around the edge of the open space and turned down the path to where his mother waited. Together they turned and ran on, but they were stopped in their tracks by a cry from their pursuer.

They glanced back and saw him, flat on his stomach on the ground. Not on the ground, they realized, in the ground. He struggled furiously to get up, but the sand held him tightly, and he started to sink. He yelled for help, but there was no way for them to help him, even if he had not wished to kill them both. After a moment of agony, they turned and ran. The man continued to cry out to them, but they ran on.

By the time Graymartin and Pale Flower reached the cave of the old women, their tears had dried. Ka'a and Wren came down the path to greet them. They were overjoyed to see the mask, but shaken

by the sadness and exhaustion of the two who carried the treasure back to them.

Together, they climbed up to the cave of the old woman. Ka'a had kept her fire going, and Pale Flower and Graymartin asked to warm themselves in front of it before they told their tale.

"Extraordinary." the old woman said, looking at the mask and the two who had brought it. Her low, old voice was gentle. "Those canyon walls were cut by ancient gods with fire, and wind, and water, but men since then have scarred the trails with fear and suffering. It seems that you have felt its pain.

"The mask you bring back from that place of the dead is even more beautiful than I remember. This, too, must have been carved by gods. Its face reflects the light and darkness, while its eyes are pathways to and from those gods. Few in this world can stand such scrutiny.

"However, through one whose spirit is pure and strong, and whose mind, in words and songs and pictures, speaks clearly to the gods, a people may talk with them, and they will listen. Like the sharpest stone, though, this dialog can bring both life and death. And gods are moody just like men. They may become irritated with you, or with your people.

"So, it was with me. For many seasons, I saw into the world of the gods and they could see through me. I could ask for rain or sun, and it would come. Then my son brought troubles to the canyon, and I had to choose. I chose my son. The gods sent fire and floods, and I could not look through the mask without great pain. The pathway closed. This was best for me, but my people in the canyon did not understand. I could heal in little ways with herbs and music, but I could never touch a person's heart, because mine was closed to them.

Here the old woman's deep voice got cold, and cracked like ice when it is stepped on. "My son and I came here, but there was trouble here as well. I never used the mask again, knowing what it would bring. I was tired and bitter, and told my son to hide the mask away.

"But then you came, from my canyon, needing my help. Your old man took a great risk, sending you to me. I might have poisoned you in anger for the past. But perhaps he knew me better than I knew myself. To send a child with such gifts to me was something I could not refuse. The rest you know."

"Was there magic in your water?"

"Sweet water flows from the world below into a tiny, shining pool, up the canyon. I love this pool. It reflects every cloud and star and glimmer of light just as the mask does. It is my son who brings the water to me when I cannot go there myself. Into this for you, Graymartin, I put sage and willow for your wounds. Your sister's painful scrubbing released the poisons that were killing you. This water washed them all away and healed you once again. "

Wren wasn't listening. She had taken the mask in her hands and was watching the light play off its shimmering surfaces, fascinated. These were shells, she had been told, out of vast worlds of water far away.

The mask looked alive. Its eerie, translucent eyes shone gray and white as they watched the winter sky. When they reflected the darkness of a storm or a flash of lightning, this face would strike fear, she thought. "I wonder if the sky makes the mask the color it is, or the other way around," she murmured to herself.

She held the mask up and looked through its pale, transparent eyes. The trees and canyon walls seemed to tremble as she watched. Faint colors floated in and out like flocks of birds, and she felt a rushing like wind or water flowing in her head. It was like a waking dream. Her mind was feeling things her body couldn't. Meanings without words, songs without music. Was this what it felt like to talk to spirits or a god?

Through the mask, she looked out over the treetops, and there she seemed to see the Great Wall again. A surge of homesickness swept through her. Did she want to be home, or did the mask? She closed her eyes, and there were her swallows, too, playing in the sun. Her head spun. "Enough, for now," she said, and put the mask down gently on the sand in front of the old woman.

"Through these smoky eyes of mine, I sense it moves you."

"Yes," said Wren.

Ka'a had listened to the old woman for many hours over the past several days as she taught Wren the songs and stories for healing and calling. He had watched the old woman draw pictures in the sand with sticks and colored sand and stones, and sing in her impossibly low yet flowing voice.

He could not imagine that this little child of his would remember much of what the old woman told her. He had tried concentrate, to help her, but his attention often wandered to thoughts of where he

would find that night's food for them or why there were so many eagles in this canyon. But Wren had listened and watched with amazing care, and asked questions he did not understand as she played in the sand near the old woman.

"This mask has a powerful spirit of its own. I am scared to look through its eyes. It might be all right to see our world, but I don't want to look into the eyes of a god."

"You will only see what you are ready to see, sometimes with new clarity, sometimes with unexpected distortions. In this world, you will start to see spirits that you never knew were here, all around you. These spirits will not harm you, especially while you have the mask on. Greet them, learn from them and care for them. Keep your mind open and try to understand the meanings of all you see.

"Of their world, the gods will only let you see dimly, lights and shadows. They do not want you to know too much of them, though they do want to learn through you."

"I don't want the gods to hurt my eyes, and I really don't want fire to flash out and hurt someone else by mistake. I do not know if the mask will do anything I ask."

"It is the gods who act, not the mask, as you know. The mask is the doorway, both ways. Speak with the heart of your people. Reflect the strength of the great walls, the grace of the trees, the skills of the animals and the wisdom of the earth, and this mask will share that energy with the skies, and you will be able to call the rain as no one else I know.

"Now you must be warm. Tell us your story," she said to Graymartin, who was shivering less in the warmth of the cave.

The boy spoke carefully in front of the old woman and his family. He described how they had followed the cold star through the tangle of canyons, and how he had climbed up the narrow path in the great curved wall. He said nothing of what the caves held. He told them how he had found the mask in the roof of the cave and made his cautious way down the trail carrying it on his back.

"You are very brave and very clever. Did you find anyone there?"

"Not there. We met a man in a dark robe, watching us, on the trail in, but he walked away without a word. We thought he was the son you spoke of. He seemed to mean us no harm.

"But we met another man, too, on the way back. It was the young man who had attacked me before. He wanted the bow and

arrows back, and I could see he had my arrowhead and fetish around his neck. He attacked again, but he was not very steady this time. We ran, and he was taken by the quicksand that was in the trail." Graymartin paused, and swallowed. "He cried out to us, but there was nothing we could do. We did not stay to watch."

"So that is what upset you in the end, when you should have been so proud of all you did," the healer said. "And that is not all you saw, I know, but you told the story well, for now. At some other time and place you should tell it all. What you found needs to be added to the history of this place, frightful as it is."

"Honored grandmother," Pale Flower asked, "Would you help us to heal that death scar? "

"Yes, that is right to do. But now, go. Rest and gather yourselves together. You, Graymartin, should find the old man, your friend, and tell him all that happened. Ask if he will join us in this healing ceremony. We all have parts in this, and should heal ourselves together. I will prepare, and be ready at this time tomorrow."

So the family went, leaving the mask in the old woman's cave until it was time for them to return home. Graymartin, though exhausted, was warm now, and set off to find the old man. The others settled themselves near the town at the edge of the river to rest and tell stories.

Chapter 29

Music For the Earth

The old man was seated near the large kiva in the first village, watching the evening sunlight play off the walls and buildings around him.

"That is an extraordinary story. I am pleased, but a little surprised that Falling Water Woman directed you so clearly to the cave of the mask. She and her son certainly made sure that no one would ever find it without their help. Wren must have impressed her with her honesty and potential powers. The old woman was so bitter at life that I was not sure she would ever help anyone from the canyon.

"She would not have been sure about you, Graymartin. You are young and confident and irreverent, all traits that she does not trust. But she set you to a very difficult task and you succeeded. She was very wise to send you with your mother. You would have chosen your father for this task, I'm sure, but the two of you might have died in the canyons together.

"Yes, I need a healing ceremony, too, perhaps more than anyone else. I have not heard her sing in many years. She was unique in the way she could make her voice rise higher and fall lower than anyone else, and she used her hands and body as drums. I wonder how she will perform the ceremony. You should bring your heaviest robes, because sweating out the evil spirits is one of the most important elements, and that will be hard to do in an open cave.

"Tell me where I should go, and I will be there."

Graymartin wanted to talk to someone about the caves of the dead, but he was still a little afraid of the old man. He had often been reprimanded for talking about inappropriate things. But he did not know who else to tell, and he felt he needed to be healed even for passing by those places.

"Grandfather, I saw fearful things in the canyon wall, in the caves below the cave of the mask."

"Yes. "

"May I talk to you about these things?"

"Yes, it is right to tell me, but not your family yet, for such things should be kept in the realm of history, not fact. I think I know what you have found, and it is beyond imagining. I am sure the old woman knows as well. She cannot take the memory away, but she can help you heal without making it obvious to anyone else. Still, you must ask in your heart for peace and harmony during the ceremony."

Graymartin described his climb up the canyon wall and the caves he passed.

"You are brave indeed. In the cold lands beyond your canyon that jagged tooth of rock is such a place. There the creatures of the worlds below are said to fight with those from other worlds above for power here on the earth. Lightning strikes it all the time, yet ice remains. Around that place and others, forces take on earthly form to wage this war, and in men's shape they inflict horrifying evils on each other.

"Across the earth there are ancient battle fields like this. In some, active conflict still occurs, where rocks of fire turn men to stone, and waves of water, high as canyon walls, engulf and sweep whole towns away. Other sites lie desolate, destroyed in ancient battles, guarded forever by their dead. You have walked through one of these, and lived. Not only did you live, you proved yourself, and brought a treasure back to life. It is right that the one who sent you there to test your skill and courage should heal you once again."

"She told me of the ancient ones who sacrificed their enemies to their fearful gods, but that was long ago she said. Such things still happen?"

"There is a constant struggle going on, but you cannot always see it, and we are in a place of peace right now. But in your lifetime, you may see men take sides against each other. Recognize these conflicts for what they are, and try to make some peace before old terrors are replayed. Men like you have special roles. As one who has seen the results of war, you may be called upon to wage different kinds of battle to keep the peace.

"Go carefully, Graymartin. I will see you in the morning."

At sunrise, Graymartin heard the faint song of the old man as he shuffled his way along the river. Together once again, the family walked the path to the healer's cave. There they saw that she had made a great fire on the rocks in front of her niche. She sat there with her white eyes staring forward, singing low and gently to the fire. The

mask was hanging on the sunrise wall next to the little drawing of itself, gleaming, radiant.

"Come up," she said. "Settle yourselves around the stones, and close your eyes."

They did so, and soon they realized that the smoke from the fire had a special smell, biting and strange. It made them tear despite their closed eyes.

"Let your minds rest. Breath deeply, and let the heat of the fire enter your souls."

For a long time they sat there, and as they did, the little cave began to radiate heat into them. Slowly and softly at first, the old woman began to sing. There were few words they could understand. The sound resonated through the cave, across the walls and through the fire. Then there was another sound, a rhythmic thumping like the drums they had heard in the villages. It punctuated the low music and moved it onwards. Then a tapping, too.

Graymartin opened his eyes, and regretted it immediately as the stinging smoke burned them. But he looked long enough to see that the old woman was playing herself like a drum, tapping here and there, and making different sounds wherever she played.

Her voice then changed, and spiraled upward to an unearthly cry, like a lonely hawk. Then a dove, singing with a woodpecker, tapping along a hollow tree. There were words hidden in this music. To Wren, they had a quality like those of Happiness Woman, and the words began to weave a story. The story was about spirits and dreams. The Moon and the Sun, Lightning and Water all woven together in a long tale from the beginning of time. Bargains were made and man appeared, brown and hard like the stones and the earth. First Hunter, and Woman Who Brings Fire, children of the Sun, and spirits of stone all built the world together. All creatures of the earth and sky were spun together into song around the searing fire, amazingly high and so low that the ground moved.

Then the singing stopped. There was a rushing noise and a hiss like a giant snake. Graymartin opened his eyes again to see if the old woman was creating some new and remarkable sound, and found that the cave was enveloped in smoke and the fire was out. They could hardly breath, the smoke was so dense.

"Stay. Breath through your clothing," the old woman said. They could hear her throwing more water on the stones, and the smoke began to clear, only to be replaced by hot steam. "Move as close to

the rocks as you can. Wren, it is time to say the prayer you and I created while Graymartin and Pale Flower were recovering the mask.

"Graymartin and Pale Flower, open your eyes. Very carefully step over the rocks into the hole in the middle of the fire and sit there together."

In the middle of the ring of stones was a shallow pit with dirt and ashes in it. Graymartin and Pale Flower did as they were instructed, and found themselves in an intensely steamy hole that they could just sit in. Continuing to cover their mouths to breathe, they closed their eyes. The old woman started to hum again, and Wren began her little prayer.

"Let us heal with the power of the earth," she said, and she scattered ashes lightly over her mother and brother.

"Let us go gently when there is peace, and with strength when there is injustice." She walked around the stones.

"Let us shine with the brightness of lightning." She took the mask off the wall and walked around the ring of stones with the mask reflecting the sunlight on each of the people in the cave, one at a time.

"Let us move with the power of the flood when men must work together," and she poured some water from her hands over the edge of the cave.

"With the clarity of still water, let the people see themselves as they are," and here she passed a little bowl filled with water down to her mother and brother to look at themselves in.

"Let us sing with the music of the wind and the water to make the souls of the people dance." Wren and the old woman had settled themselves in her niche, and together they played and sang a song of joy. It seemed to Wren that the voice of the old woman had now merged with the voice she knew so well of Happiness Woman.

"Earth and sky, make us strong. Water and light, let us heal each other's wounds forever."

There was a pause, and when there was no more prayer, they all opened their eyes and looked around. The steam had cleared and the evening sun was shining brightly on the trees and canyon walls around them. They were all covered in ash from head to toe. They looked ridiculous, but no one laughed. They all stood up, and, moving together near the old healer, hugged each other without the slightest embarrassment. Wren stood there beaming with pleasure, as they each held her for some moments.

Into the rich darkness, Wren said, "Thank you, Happiness Woman! Thank you for helping and guiding me, for being my friend. Now I know that I can really help even though I am not strong and cannot walk well."

"You are strong, Wren. Very strong. Know it and be it, with us."

"Now, go," Falling Water said. "Find some snow in the woods and wash yourselves with the ash, and then clean yourselves of the ash. It is time for you to return to the canyon."

"You, Graymartin, are the guardian of the mask. When you get home to your own cave, place it on the sunrise wall. Protect it, treasure it. You have knowledge of life and death, the vision of a great hunter and the strength and grace of an eagle. Use them wisely, and you will be the preserver of your clan.

"Wren, you seek joy and wisdom as the earth seeks sun and water. Explore the winding pathways of the souls of your people, and learn the secrets of the gods and spirits. You have the power, as your friend the old man discovered. Through the eyes of this mask, share these truths. Its light and your spirit will keep the canyons green and your people happy. You will be called Music for the Earth.

"Laughing Crow, you are a leader of men, with kindness now and new vision. Walk with grace and strength.

"Pale Flower, you are the secret, the rock, the sun and the water. Nourish the world.

"Go carefully, my gentle family. And you, old man, may you walk in beauty. You will be remembered."