



A Story From The Records Of Time

*By
Tom Butler*

We Do Not Work Alone

This story can only be dedicated to Alisa, my wife. It was she who discovered our friends in Santa Fe who introduced me to One Who Cares, and it was she who insisted on exploring the possibilities that they offered. I might not have written this book which is so out of character for me, without her encouragement. Finally, no one else seems to have the stamina to endure reading my rough drafts as does she.

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The old woman sat on a small wooden bench, surrounded by the priests of the Wooden Peg temple. One of the men, the oldest it appeared, held her hands in his and murmured a rhythmic chant that most of the others in the small room followed. The woman kept her eyes tightly closed as she swayed in rhythm with the chant, her relaxed breathing matched perfectly with the man who held her pain at bay. Fully three scribes frantically dipped their brush between ink and reed paper, writing every word she spoke. A young novice priest followed his master's lead by hitting a small leather drum to punctuate each pause of the chant and to keep death away until the old woman finished her story.

The Woman knew only of the old priest's hands on hers, his mesmerizing voice and the story of her life she told for the clan records. Quietly and with gratitude for the opportunity to share her life, she told the priest how she came to be One Who Cares, Grandmam of the Blue Mountain Clan.

There are many things I would rather have been doing that cold afternoon, than hiking on that frightful trail. It was still early Winter and even though it was just past noon, the sun could hardly be seen over the naked crags on the other side of the canyon. "Oh, Old Father." I cried to myself as I hurried along the rock strewn trail vainly trying to avoid the shadows, "What have I gotten myself into now? You never told me of the fear!"

I tried to keep my head down and my eyes focused on the trail so that I would not see the deep canyon falling away to my right nor the dark shadows lurking in every crevasse to my left. I tried to think only of Old Father laying on his sleeping pad, arms

held tight to his chest and a grimace of pain on his wrinkled face. "I promise, Old Father! I repeated time and again as I hurried down the trail. "I promise to get you the medicine plant."

The cold was from the fear in my mind more than from the starkness of the canyon. I feared for everything as if I was the only good thing in the world and all around me was an evil awareness seeking to touch me and take anything of value I might have. Old Father always insisted that my fears were only superstitions pushed into my head when I was not looking, but surely he could not have remembered that trail!

I hurried through the foreboding twilight, alone in the shadows, until yet another pack train rounded a turn below me. Then, once again, I found myself wishing that the comfortable fear of the shadows and the loneliness would return.

Even though I could easily pass as a boy on an errand to the city, I remained afraid whenever pack trains with their rough speaking trailmen, came near. The trail is so narrow in places that the mules often brushed my cloak when they passed, even though I pressed hard against the rocks of the canyon wall. Old Father always told me that I would be safe in the world if I looked down and seemed lame, thus making myself appear to be uninteresting to those who might do me harm. I did as he instructed, but while I looked as lame as I knew how, fear numbed my mind and made me wish I could disappear within my cloak until they passed. They often laughed at me and named me beggar or dirty urchin and they scorned my father for letting me be on my own so soon, but to my relief, they always turned their attention back to their surly mules lest the animals find a way to rid themselves of their burden. I hurried on with my head down only to discover myself once again alone and shaking in fear at how much darker the shadows had gotten since before the men had come into view. This seemed to go on forever . . . for better than three days I walked that dreadful trail alone! "Oh, Old Father!"

I remember that just when I thought I could go no further, the trail curved and I found myself looking down at the most beautiful sight I have ever seen. It may have been just because I had been walking the whole day, but at that moment, my legs grew weak, and with a whimper, I slumped down to a rock at the trail's edge. I silently prayed thanks to the biggest gods I knew and promised a dream for them that night. Never before had I ventured so far from home, and I was certain that I would not have made my way this far without their loving guidance.

My eyes watered with tears of pride for the wonderful city my people had built, and form my happiness for finally seeing my destination. There below me, just as the canyon opens wide into the plains and where the river turns hard to the south, the city crowds the highlands and spreads out over the lowlands to the East. Old Father told me it was called Whitehome, and I could easily see why. Even though it was half in the shadows cast by the mountains above me, the other half glistened all white and green. Green! Never had I seen so much green as I saw there. Even in the Winter! "Oh my friend, Old Father, you were right. Whitehome is beautiful!"

I almost forgot my mission while I stood there admiring that wonderful city cloaked in white and green. Then I noticed yet another pack train moving along the trail below me and hurried on down the narrow trail hoping to make it to the city before dark. Old Father warned me that they would close the gate at sunset and if I was outside, there I would remain until morning.

It was nearly twilight by the time I finally stood in front of the big western gates of the city. While they were the portal to the mountains for Whitehome, they were the threshold to an entirely new world for me. I shuddered with excitement before their awful beauty. Everywhere I looked there were people moving about, busily engrossed in one task or another. None of them seemed to notice the giant stone dragons brooding over their activity from the tops of the gates as if considering which one they would eat next. Nor did they seem to notice the great stone gods who held the gates open for them to pass. I noticed and whispered my respect, saying that I was pleased that the wise builders of the city selected such mighty gods to guard the portal to the city for my mountain clans. It did not occur to me then that those mighty dragons and gods were guarding the gates from clansmen such as my family who once raided the farming settlements along the foothills.

Old Father told me that the city was both a center of commerce and the home of the provincial Emperor. My clan home also belonged within the Emperor's jurisdiction. That meant that my clan paid taxes to him and properly received protection and services in return. In fact, the very trail that I had just traversed had been built at the direction of the Emperor. Even then, in my youth, I recognized that he must be truly a great leader to provide such wondrous services.

There is little I can say to properly explain how I felt that first evening in Whitehome. I was only a simple girl raised in a mountain clan house far from the plains and great cities like Whitehome. Not one of my clan had ventured beyond our nearby village for generations, and other than Old Father, I was the first of my people to see Whitehome. It was another world there on the edge of the plains and despite the tutoring Old Father gave me, I was totally unprepared for what I now saw. Had Old Father not taught me what to do and how to act, I would surely have made some disastrous social blunder or starved trying to find my way through the city's immense maze of backways. Without his simple instructions, I would not have had the nerve even to enter those great gates. But I did, and the fear was grand.

I quite naturally expected the guards to challenge me because I felt it must have been obvious that I was from far away, but they ignored me as if I were only a shadow passing among the many citizens hurrying in and out of the gate. Old Father was right. The guards were only there to keep order and not to stop good folk from passing through those massive arches. I knew that I offered no threat to the good people of Whitehome and decided it was best to appear as an upstanding citizen, so I forgot my limp and marched through the gate as if I lived in the palace within. Such a moment of excitement! My hair grew prickly on the back of my neck and my throat was tight from fear of what I imagined might follow me into the city from the dark trail. In I marched, and once within those walls, I felt so safe! Again, for a moment only, I forgot my mission and stood looking down the mainway at the palace arch and at the many-colored waving flags. My country-girl's heart swelled with wonder and pride for my people's grand works evident there. I was so proud that the people of Whitehome were also of my clan, though as Old Father pointed out, many marriage agreements removed.

Old Father! And my mission came crushing back to me. My heart cried out for him to once again walk that mainway, only to walk it with me and touch my hand to lead me as he had done so many times at our clan house. I followed his instructions and hurried to my left and down the backway marked with a basket and keg. There were fewer people about than I had expected by Old Father's description, and I passed the market thinking to find a bigger crowd just around the next turn. Fortunately, I knew enough to

turn and retrace my steps when the backway became Hogs Head. The market was empty! I did not know what to do, and there was so little time. My heart sunk and I cried for a bit but finally, the cold made me think of more urgent needs. It was getting dark and I had to find a safe place to bed for the night.

I searched about for a long period before I stumbled across the backway marked with a prone man on straw. Sure enough, just as Old Father said there would be, I found an open lot with people scattered about preparing themselves for the end of their day. I stood at the edge of the lot for a long moment to let my eyes adjust to the distant brightness of the many glow pots placed here and there for cooking and warmth. People could be barely distinguish moving near what sounded like water drains flowing near the distant edge of the lot. I decided that they were tending to their personal needs in the privacy of the dark and made a point to remember the place for my own use. A man coughed near me and I looked to see a dark shape move under a cloak laying on a mound of straw. A glow pot was sitting beside him, casting only a faint glow from nearly dead embers. The man snored loudly.

I was able to see places near rocks or under trees, that were obviously intended for sleeping. Many of these sleeping areas were already occupied, glow pots casting dim light to fill the camps, some holding small containers of food for cooking. Here and there, I saw people selling straw and food and I even saw armed men patrolling the lot to keep order.

Surprisingly, the scene had a quiet glow that brought back images and smells of my clan house and I felt a longing for those more familiar surroundings. The little glow pots being tended by shadowy figures moving in relaxed rhythms told me of people with little fear of the night. The clank of cooking utensils and the casual murmur of men and women in conversation assured me that, at least for the moment, I was safe.

Old Father said it would be safe to move about if I stayed away from the occupied places and did not meet the eyes of the people staying there. Still, I hesitated to give up the protection of darkness the backway I stood in offered. I watched long enough to see two dark figures emerge from another backway and casually move to a vacant place by a large bush. Without hesitation, one of the people kneeled down and set up a glow pot while the other moved on to retrieve water from a fountain that gurgled softly near the center of the lot. Satisfied that I could do the same, I cautiously entered and found a place to bed down against a wall that was not far from the fountain and a large glow pot burning there. An old man looked up and greeted me when I passed his sleeping pad. I responded with as deep a voice as I could muster and was thankful that he turned and ignored me as he nestled into his small mound of straw.

Everyone seemed to ignore people outside of their camps, but I could tell that there were many who also watched. Old Father had warned me that I must be very careful not to give an opportunistic villain an opening. As he instructed, I slept with my back close to a wall and kept my face hidden so that no one could tell if my eyes were closed. Even so, three times that night I jumped to my feet in fear as one stranger or another stumbled by me apparently trying to find a place to sleep.

At sunrise, I sat up and looked around, my mind still in a fog. "These city people are so soft," I thought to myself as I looked around at the people still sleeping under their cloaks. As far as I could tell, there was not one who had yet awakened to start the day. I was curious at the kind of life they might lead to permit them to sleep so late, however, I

kept my curiosity to myself and quietly moved through my morning preparations before turning to prayer. I waited until I was off by myself in a quiet backway before I prayed, and yes, I remembered to include Old Father first and last in my hope for happiness.

The market was already coming to life when I returned to Basket and Keg backway. It was finally time for me to accomplish my mission. Somewhere amongst those puffy-eyed, half-awake merchants was a man who could sell me the cure for Old Father. I had to find him.

Old Father had told me what he would look like and how to deal with him. "Find his corner next to the redfaced straw seller and let him see that you are of the Blue Mountain Clan. He will remember me when he sees your cloak and will know what I need because he has helped me deal with the pain before." He had said this to me through teeth clenched against the pain of a strange illness that gripped his chest and arm. Once before, I had seen him in such pain and watched him drink of a small keg that smelled simply awful. That day, I came to understand that something bitter can sometimes bring something good as I watched Old Father come back to his happy self, the pain going away nearly as quickly as it had come.

A woman selling cups occupied the corner by the redfaced straw seller. She was busily arranging her merchandise when I asked her where the medicine hawker was. "He died of his own medicine, he did! You'll have to look elsewhere for whatever it is you think you need, young fellah. And if you find a cure for that limp, come back and see me 'cause I have a young son, lame just like you."

I had prayed that morning and offered dreams during the night. I had always been good . . . except perhaps with my sisters. Was this my punishment for being so close to Old Father? Must he die because I am not worthy to save him? "Oh God of all Gods," I cried to myself as I aimlessly wandered along Basket Keg backway, "what must I do to please you?"

I searched the backways for hours trying to find another merchant who could sell me the medicine, all the while realizing that I would not know what to ask for when I did. I asked many people and got many kind suggestions, but no one really knew what to tell me until I finally got the nerve to ask one of the guards. I guess it was good luck that the guard I asked was the captain of the backway, because he understood what I was asking and was able to tell me where I could find it.

"Go find Grows Medicine," he told me with a smile. "He has a corner down that backway there." He pointed to a street marked with a lamp.

I found Grows Medicine just where the guard told me I would. But to my regret, his corner was in the middle of one of the busiest sections I had encountered. The walls of the passage near his corner were close and there were many people crowding in to barter with Grows Medicine or one of the other merchants crammed into the corner. Such a melee intimidated me and I had some doubt that I would even get close, let alone make my voice heard in that crowd. I didn't even know what to ask for!

Finally, I swallowed my fear and tentatively pushed at a small opening in the crowd of jostling people. No matter how hard I pushed or jammed myself into that mass of bodies, I was ignored. I discovered that shoving was not the way in, but if I stayed close to the crowd, people finishing their business made room for me when they left, and as new people came in, I found myself slowly pushed to the front. Soon enough, I found myself standing in front of Grows Medicine.

At first he ignored me, so I reached into my chest pouch and fished out my coins. Then I reached as high toward his faces I could with my handful of coins. He turned his attention to me and asked me what I wanted as soon as he saw my money.

"Medicine!" I shouted over the noise.

He cocked his head to consider my word. "I have many medicines, little boy. Which one would you like?"

I thought as fast as I could. I knew his attention would be mine for only a moment longer. "Chest . . . and arm!" I pointed at his chest and left arm where Old Father complained of his pain.

Grows Medicine considered for a moment and then I saw a light of understanding in his eyes.

"Oh! You are talking of a sick heart. It must not be for you. Do you have someone who has a sick heart?"

"Yes! An old man!" I answered. "Old Father," I cried to myself.

Grows Medicine looked closely at my dirty fingers tightly holding all of the money I had in the world. He began to slowly shake his head. "That is not enough to buy even the smallest keg. There is very little of that kind of medicine this year and the money I can make from what there is, will feed my family for many days. I cannot help you, little boy."

I only had to consider his words for an instant before I became desperate. "Please," I pleaded as I shoved my coins to him. "Please let this be enough!"

"No. That cannot be enough. Now go away!" Grows Medicine For Only The Rich, as I will always remember him, waved my hand away and turned his attention to a man standing beside me.

I did everything to crowd in front of his eyes again but only got cuffed on the side of the head by a new customer. The customer and the merchant had a good laugh as they watched me cower from the man's hand and retreat back through the crowd. As I moved through the crowd, I remember noticing how easy it was for me to get through the crowd when I was trying to get away from the corner.

Realizing that I was failing in my mission to save Old Father and how futile my mission must have been in the first place, I began to cry. Tears welling up in my eyes threatened to blind me as I slumped down onto a doorway step. I huddled there, consumed by my grief and the growing realization that I was a failure.

"My Old Father! I have failed you." I repeated over and over as I rocked back and forth sobbing in that dark doorway. People were staring, but I didn't pay attention to them. All I could think of was my grief at having failed the most important person in my life. I owed him so much for the years of happiness he had given me and the worlds that he opened to me through his teachings. My heart ached with the love I felt for him. I cried for a long time.

2

One Who Cares

A sense of calm slowly seeped into my awareness. It seemed to absorb the source of my tears, and even though I wanted to continue crying, a nagging sense of uselessness made me stop. For a long time after that, I hugged my legs close to my chest and leaned against the cold stone of the doorway while I waited for the cloud of grief to dissipate from my mind. I was exhausted! I must have cried for hours that lonely afternoon, there in that strange city, no one to hear me or share in my grief save the strangers who only offered curious glances as they hurried by. No one to care except myself.

"Oh, Old Father, my poor old friend. I have failed you," I repeated over and over in my mind, each repetition nearly causing me to start crying all over again. I wallowed in my grief.

I was grieving for myself that day, as much as I was grieving for Old Father. I sealed his fate by failing to obtain the medicine he needed to live, and in doing so, I assured that I would lose the only real friend I had. The only person who could give me reason to return to that barren mountain house. Without knowing that he would be there to greet me, I could not bring myself to return home. By failing him, I condemned myself to a new life.

I remained on the edge of despair for some time before I decided it was possible that there might be another merchant, one with a better price and kinder heart. With that realization, I struggled to my feet and squared my shoulders, feeling a rush of hope leading me from that dismal backway to search for another who grew medicine.

Whitehome was big even back then, and it took me the rest of that day and all of the next, searching its backways, before I finally had to accept the simple fact of my poverty. Of the six merchants who claimed to have what I wanted, none would sell me the medicine for the amount I could pay. The last one made my plight clear to me.

"I don't know where you are from little boy," the young clerk standing by his booth told me, "but there has been drought for the past three years and little of the medicine tree you need has been able to grow. You would need . . ." and he peered at my outstretched handful of coins, ". . . more than twice that amount to get even a taste."

I have always vividly remembered what that young man said next, for his words were for me, the final stones on Old Father's grave. "How long has it been since you left him?"

"Four days," I answered.

"And he had no medicine left then?"

"No . . . none."

"Then he is probably already dead. You . . ."

"No!" I cried and turned to run from his words.

I heard him say something about spending what money I had on food, but I ignored him as I tried to outrun his words. Again, I found a doorway with no one nearby. Even though I knew it would do no good, I cried.

"You're a girl, aren't you?"

I froze in the middle of a sob and slowly looked past the wet sleeve of my arm hugging my knees. The young medicine clerk had followed me and was kneeled down

beside me in that dingy backway. I involuntarily shrank from him. He had seen past my guise and now would know what else I had to pay.

"No!" I shouted at him through my tears.

My heart beat quickened as he put a tentative hand on my shoulder. "You look as if you have not eaten for days. Come with me and my wife will feed you."

Leaving his hand firmly on my shoulder, he put his other hand out toward me. I choked down a sob and dumbly stared into his thin face. He urged me, "Come, I will not hurt you, and you can leave my house anytime you wish. Come."

He extended his hand toward me a little further and gently nudged my shoulder with his other hand.

My mind surrendered then, and I reached out to take his offered hand. Old Father always warned me that my budding womanhood was held more valuable to some men than was my life. He said that most men were good and that a young woman, such as I, was safe around them, but there were others who would do anything to have their way with me.

"It is a confused world you are born into, my child," he sometimes said during our walks alone. "Always greet a stranger with simple kindness, reserve your personal gift of love for those who are worthy of your life."

At that moment, I could only hope that the young man holding my hand was offering me simple kindness, and was not like the others that Old Father warned me about.

Remembering Old Father, I whimpered a little. The young man heard me and gently put his arm around my shoulders to comfort me. That made me think of the warmth of my mother and I started crying in earnest. He held me close to his side without saying another word until we reached his home. I followed him through an unassuming doorway and into a small courtyard which was cluttered with bundles of dried plants and racks where still other types of plants were spread for drying. He instructed me to remain there, while he continued ahead to tell his wife of my presence. I remained where he indicated, preoccupied in my own oblivion, until a pretty young woman came striding out of the doorway in front of me, the young man close behind her, wringing his hands and trying to calm her down.

The woman came to an abrupt halt before me. Putting her hands on her hips, she began to speak to me in terse words about vagrancy and pity. But suddenly she stopped in mid-sentence and cocked her head a little as she looked hard at my cloak.

"You are from one of the mountain clans, aren't you?"

I hesitated for only a moment and then stuttered, "Why . . . why yes mistress. The Blue Mountain Clan from the high glacier fields three days east of here."

The woman turned to her man and gave him a hard look. I could not tell what she was thinking or what unspoken signals may have passed between them, all I knew was that I was happy she had not continued her tirade toward me nor had she turned me away from her house. The man shrugged his shoulder in submission and the woman turned back to me with a kindly smile on her face.

"Here child, I'll show you where you can wash that filthy face of yours. We can talk later."

The woman put a firm hand on my arm and began leading me into the house. When we neared the man who had brought me there, she hesitated long enough to introduce me, "This here is Son of Medicine Grower and I am his wife. You can just call him Medicine Grower" She patted Medicine Grower on his chest and quickly placed a kiss on his

cheek. To him she said, "Okay, so maybe we can help her a little. Go back to your corner and I will take care of her."

Wife of Medicine Grower took my hand and lead me directly to a bath chamber within the house. "Here, wash yourself. When you have finished, I will feed you and give you a place to sleep." She turned and left the room before I could thank her.

"May I wash my cloak?" I had come from the bath chamber into the main room without Wife of Medicine Grower noticing. She was busily arranging a sleeping pad against a corner of the room and my words startled her.

"Huh? Oh, yes. I have found a fresh one for you to wear while yours is drying. Here, take yours off, it is filthy from the road." She crossed the room to me with a neatly folded cloak in her arms.

When Wife of Medicine Grower saw my undergarments, her eyes opened wide and she dramatically put a hand to her mouth in fiend horror. "Oh my! Your cloak is not all that is filthy. All of you needs washing. Back into the bath chamber you go, young lady." She turned me around and gently pushed me toward the small room. "I have never seen undergarments as dirty as yours, you must have sleep in them all winter."

"No, only for the four days since I have left my clan house. The trail is very dirty and it is cold at night." I defended myself, remembering how I crawled into rock crevices at night and covered myself for warmth with branches torn from the small bushes that grew along the trail. Remembering those branches made me realize that I must also smell like a wild beast. "Am I that awful?"

Wife of Medicine Grower helped me take off my undergarments and loosen my hair from the tight knot I made with it to keep it hidden under the hood of my cloak. "No child, you are only a little awful." She grinned at me to show that she was teasing me, and turned to a low wooden trough in the corner of the room. There was nearly a hand's breadth of water already in it, but when she pulled on a cord that extended over her head, more water gushed out of a wooden chamber that reached from just above the trough to the ceiling of the room.

"What is that?" I had never seen such a thing as water running out of the wall on request.

"It is magical bath water, I am giving you, so use it well." She took me by my shoulders and guided me to the edge of the trough. In you go and do not come out until you are clean."

I began to step into the trough as she turned and left the room. My loud squeal brought her rushing back in with a worried look on her face. "What is it?"

"Forgive me mistress, but the water is warm. I was not prepared."

She laughed at me and teased me for being from so far out in the country. "It is only water warmed by the sun and the smoke from the fire pit. The rain fills the holding pot sometimes, but mostly, I have to carry the water to the roof so that my husband can have a warm bath.

"You mean this is Medicine Grower's bath water?" I was mortified that he would be angry and make me leave his house.

"Yes, it is, but he will understand . . . this time. You had better get to washing that skinny body of yours before the water becomes cold. It will not stay warm all day, and as you can see, much of it will trickle out of the trough in time." She left me to my washing.

When I returned to the main room, I found Wife of Medicine Grower sitting at a small table, poking at a bowl of food sitting before her. Another bowl was across from

her. "Well now," she said when she saw me, "it looks as if my cloak fits you rather well. Is it warm enough?"

"Yes, mistress, it is very warm. Thank you." I looked around the room and saw my cloak and undergarments hanging in the sun to dry just outside of the main room.

"Come, sit and eat. I know this is not the kind of food you are used to, but I'll bet you are hungry enough to eat just about anything. Is that right?" Wife of Medicine Grower watched my face as if she was looking for the answer to her question without my words.

"I have eaten enough." I said defensively.

"Yes, I can see you have. But just in case, why don't you go ahead and eat this."

The cheese tasted strange to me but despite that and its strong odor, it was filling and went well with the hard corn cakes and beans that I also found in the bowl. My stomach growled with pleasure and I felt warm inside and out for the first time since I left my clan house. I could tell that Wife of Medicine Grower wanted to talk, but I could hardly keep my head up to finish the food so she relented and satisfied herself with watching me wolf down her food. Then, with a clean, warm body and a full belly, I curled up on the sleeping pad she gave me and fell asleep under her kind gaze.

I awoke to street sounds filtering through the wall near my sleeping pad. Without moving, I opened my eyes in an attempt to determine where I was. I was not in the sleeping park, nor was I at home, safe in my cube. The only thing I could see was an expanse of smoothly tiled floor terminating on a white stucco wall and a prettily painted big toe. I was terrified and held my breath for a moment trying to suppress a cry of alarm. The big toe wiggled slightly and I heard a throaty voice whiff across the room to me. "I wondered if you would sleep forever."

Where had I heard that voice? I was so confused! It was . . . the girl . . . yes! It was Wife of Medicine Grower. I jerked myself into a sitting position with my back against the wall. My eyes riveted to hers. She smiled and stretch luxuriantly, leaning back in her floor seat, her short cloak falling to either side of colorful blue and red trimmed white cotton britches. Her toe and finger-nails were still wet from the dye she had been smearing on them. I could smell her all the way across the room. She smelled like roses.

She examined one of her hands and then lifted it for me to see. "Do you like the color?"

"I . . . I guess so." I stammered, still confused, but beginning to remembered where I was, the bath and the food.

"I dare not be in public dressed like this, but sometimes I entertain myself pretending that I am of the high court. These stuffy old people around here would never understand."

She looked again at her hand and abruptly nodded her head, satisfied that her nails were correctly finished. She then moved to her feet in a single, fluid motion, and quickly disappeared into the next room. I looked around for a bed pot.

"In the cupboard by you. You may use it, and anything else you need, in the room you took your bath in yesterday." I heard her making noise in the cooking room. It was such a large house!

Wife of Medicine Grower called out for me to help her in the cooking room when she heard me return the pot to the cupboard. I did as she requested and began my education in the preparation of the meatless food so common in Whitehome.

Soon we were back in the sleeping room, me on my pad and she on her floor seat, quietly eating what she called flour spice. We had said nothing in the cooking room beyond talking about the food preparation. This pleased me because I knew the personal questions would come soon enough. I even sought to forestall them by showing intense concentration in the act of eating.

Wife of Medicine Grower finally broke the silence by trying to speak with a large piece of green leaf in her mouth, only getting a mumble out for her efforts. I had to giggle at that and with the silence broken, we swiftly moved to a questions about my life.

"I do not even know your name." She searched my eyes for some sign.

"It is Morning Glory of the Mountains."

"What a beautiful name. And it suits such a lovely young lady as you very well. Who gave it to you."

"Old Father did. He gave it to me because he didn't like the one my father gave me. It was very mean of my father to give me such a name, just because he was angry with me for being a girl instead of a boy. He said he needed boys to help him grow food."

I sniffed at the memory of how he treated my two sisters and me. He hated having only one son.

"Oh, and what name was that, if I am not too prying."

She continued to look into my eyes with a slight smile on her face. She could see my honesty, I hoped!

"Please, it is such a . . . Oh, very well. He named me Another Girl Damn It."

"Another Girl Damn It? Why, what an absurd name. Your Old Father was very right to give you a new name." She tossed a radish at me and playfully winked at me after I had caught it and looked at her in surprise. She was not really much older than me, and she seemed to want my friendship.

"If it was not for Old Father, my father may have traded my services for a boy. He came back just in time for me."

I was surprised at being so talkative with this stranger, but it felt good to talk. "Do you answer to Wife of Medicine Grower?"

"Wife of . . . Oh, no. Well, maybe when I am around his clan, I do. But I am Sheman. She--man because I can do almost anything a man can do, and I'm proud of it! My Father gave me that name when I out worked him on the farm one summer. Of course he was old then."

Sheman's eyes lost their intense focus, and I sensed a change in mood trying to steal into the room. Considering the shape I was in, I surely did not want to see her crying over her father.

"Sheman, what a wonderful name! You must be very proud." Sheman was still clouding up so I pressed her for more attention. It may have been rude of me for not asking why she was so distressed, but my own sadness was all I could barely at the time.

"So, you are not from Whitehome?"

That was all it seemed to take. Sheman responded to the name of the city with a new flash of spirit in her eyes.

"No! I am from east of Whitehome where there is room to think." She thought for a moment, and then got a new smile on her pleasant face.

"You seek to divert my attention away from my sorrow. You are a very nice young lady, and I am happy that my husband brought you home." She thought for a moment longer. "He told me that when he found you, you were crying about the death of your Old Father. Do you want to tell me about it?"

I concentrated on my toes extending beyond the bottom of the cloak Sheman had given me. They were such crumpled things compared to her nicely-shaped toes.

"Yes, I suppose so. Medicine Grower told me that Old Father may as well be dead. I cried and ran away. He followed and brought me here."

There, we were finished with the telling.

"That is not what I meant, Morning Glory. Tell me of Old Father. He must be a very kind old man."

She was gentle, but persistent, and I finally accepted that I would have to discuss Old Father if I was going to get any quiet.

"Very well." I took a deep breath and let my eyes lose their focus while my thoughts turned inward.

"Old Father used to live in Whitehome. He is, was, the brother of my father's father. He left the clan as a youth, because there was room for only one brother to take over the clan's leadership when their father died. My father always insists that Old Father ran off because he didn't want to do the hard work of the farm, and that he only came back after he was too old to work. I don't believe Father, of course, but there was friction between the two when Old Father returned."

I cast a brief look at Sheman to see if she was listening. She had both knees hugged up close to her chin with her arms wrapped around her legs. She was absentmindedly playing with her toes and looking intently at me, waiting for my next words.

"I got deathly sick soon after Old Father returned to the farm. He ended up taking care of me, because he had gained some knowledge of medicine in Whitehome. He stayed with me for a long time and I would have died, had he not twice given me breath through a tube. He later told me that my body was reacting to the unwashed wool. My throat closes and I cannot breath. I would stay sick like that all spring while the sheep were being cut. Old Father told me that my child's body had protected me from the disease, but that as I became a woman, I no was longer protected. He taught me how to live in a different room from where they stored the fresh wool so that I would not breath the dust. He even built that room for me, because Father would not spare the time. He did not believe Old Father and thought that he was cheating death by finding ways of protecting me. I am happy that Old Father did not agree."

"You had an allergy, we call it, and your Old Father was exactly right. My husband sells plants for that sickness all the time." She was so proud of what her people in Whitehome knew. I wondered at her mixed feelings about the city.

"Yes, that is a word I have heard. Old Father told me many words that I have not yet learned to understand. But he told me many that I have learned too. Other than Old Father, I am the only person in my clan that can read and write. I do math all the way up to circles and squares and I can read floor drawings. Old Father worked as a builder in Whitehome before he returned."

I too, was proud of my people, especially Old Father. I looked again at Sheman and realized she was grinning at me.

"Oh, forgive my claiming. I did not mean to boast."

"Nonsense! You have a right to. I will never deny one such simple pride. You do your Old Father great honor."

Sheman nodded to me to continue telling my story. It appeared she seldom had a chance to talk with someone outside of Whitehome and was enjoying the conversation.

"I spent a great deal of time with Old Father even after he had cured me and finished my room. My sisters were very jealous of the attention he gave me, especially of the

room he had made for me, because even though they were also able to use the room, it always remained 'my room.' The many extra chores they managed to have assigned to me was testimony to their dislike of the favoritism Old Father showed to me. Because of my allergies, I was much weaker than were they and Old Father often found ways to save me from their meanness with the excuse that he could find productive work for me to do elsewhere. Still, my sisters insisted in teasing me whenever they could, and they always ridiculed Old Father as a shirker of his duty." I sat there staring off at nothing while Sheman waited patiently for me to continue.

She finally decided that she had lost me and gave me a gentle nudge with a question. "What else did your Old Father teach you?"

"Huh? Oh!" My attention came back to the room. "He taught me to understand that there is work of the mind as well as work of the body."

I thought over the many things that he was able to teach me while we tended the sheep. We could have no heavy tools or bulky carts up in the hanging meadows, only our backpacks and our minds. I smiled when I remembered my favorite lessons. "I specially enjoyed learning to work with the colors."

"Colors?"

"Yes! Old Father learned how to work with color from a master of the garment guild here in Whitehome. He could make and mix the most beautiful colors that there ever were."

"No wonder your family thought Old Father was useless. My father only thought there was one color, chalkwash. He painted everything with it. He would not have had time for any fancy colors, so I can see how your father may have reacted to such a skill. Here in Whitehome, on the other hand, we take color pretty seriously and he would have been a valued worker. What else did he teach you?"

"He taught me to love other people by telling me beautiful stories that had special meaning about love. He said the stories explained why I should feel love for another without trying to control their actions. What he taught me, he said, was simple kindness."

I started to cry silently, to myself, as best as I could with Sheman staring at me.

Sheman moved to sit beside me on my pad. She put her arm around my shoulders and hugged me to her side while she murmured meaningless sounds to me and rocked me back and forth for a time. It felt so good and I felt so safe. I could not remember when a woman, even my mother, had held me as did Sheman that day.

"Will you go back?" She asked, once my crying had subsided.

"No, I don't think so. I cannot. With Old Father gone, there will be no one who will stand up for me and my sisters will be relentless." I almost started crying again but stopped when Sheman stroked my hair and made more soothing sounds.

"Why don't you go back and teach them what Old Father has taught you?"

"I cannot. They would not listen and I could not bare to spend the time with them." I thought about that for a few moments and then went on. "No, I will stay here in Whitehome. I will find a way to stay here and I will never return to my clan." Having said that, I instantly felt better.

"Then I will give you a new name for your new life in Whitehome." Sheman patted me once more on the head and then nearly pushed me to the pad when she playfully used my head as a crutch to lift herself to her feet. "I will name you One Who Cares. Because you care so much about Old Father. You will not have to remember him so much because his spirit will always be in your name."

I only had to think about that for a blink of the eye before deciding that I liked the new name. I jumped to my feet and hugged Sheman.

"Oh Sheman. You do me and the memory of Old Father great honor. I will forever carry this new name."

Finding A Path

Sheman and I talked for a long time that middle winter day. We were still in the sleeping room sitting on the floor and talking like a couple of long, lost sisters when Medicine Grower returned home from his corner. He looked first at Sheman and then at me and exaggerated the motions of sniffing the air to smell what was being cooked for his dinner. There was no sent of cooking in the air, only the flower essence that Sheman was sharing with me.

Remembering how my father would have reacted to a situation like this, I lowered my head, frightened of what Medicine Grower might do to Sheman. She giggled and put a hand on my arm to get my attention and simultaneously put her other hand to her mouth, we looking at me in mock dismay. She giggled, and her funny face made me giggle too. Soon, we were overcome with the merriment of two little girls giggling over some private humor. Medicine Grower stood over us with his hands on his hips and looked at us in feigned disbelief. He snorted and gruffly requesting that his wife come out of hiding and make the two kids on his floor behave. Then, when we giggled even louder, he threw his hands high in the air in despair and retreated to the cooking room.

To my relief, Sheman quickly gained control of herself and went in to fix her husband dinner. I remained on my sleeping pad, thinking of what I could do with myself now that I had no reason to return to my mountain clan.

"There is a man down Cloak backway who comes by my corner nearly every day. He is always in a big hurry and has told me he must hurry about as he does because there is so much work that he must do. I believe he enjoys being so busy, but you may earn your keep with him, perhaps using your colors. He has three handsome sons, one of which you may find suitable for a husband. I can introduce you to him if you like."

With the evening meal finished we gathered around the cook pit in the courtyard to watch the stars come out. Sheman was cuddled close to Medicine Grower with his cloak pulled tightly around their bodies. They appeared to be a single mound of comfortable warmth caught between the red glow of the sun's twilight and the yellow flicker of the coal fire. I watched them with a small tug of envy. They were two fine souls united in their warmth, while I was left alone to find warmth from a rock bowl aglow with a few meager pieces of coal. I felt cold and alone, making the idea of a husband sound pretty good to me at that moment. I sniffed back tears and held my old cloak close to my body for added warmth while I considered Medicine Grower's suggestion of a way for me to stay in Whitehome.

I could feel their eyes calmly regarding me while I concentrated my attention on the small coal fire. They patiently waited for me to respond to Medicine Grower's comment about work. Relaxed, sitting in a moment of peace as if they were accustomed to such times. My family never had time to wait without filling that time with other productive work. Father would have never permitted himself time to sit by a fire and hold Mother, just to be together. Never!

Sheman cleared her throat expectantly, and I snapped back to the moment.

"I will have to do something." I said, looking over at their shadowy form. "I have such a hard time understanding how you live here. Working for survival, I understand,

but working for coins so that you can buy survival is a strange idea. Old Father tried to explain this to me many times, but I never understood. I just cannot see how one can survive with little coins." I had decided to ignore Medicine Grower's comment about eligible men.

"But you understand coins for buying medicine. You know that you did not have enough to buy what you wanted from me." Then Medicine Grower heard his own words and grew silent.

I stared at him in fascination as he searched for a way from the path he had just entered. An unfamiliar feeling surged within my heart for the slightest moment and then collapsed only to return with even greater force. Surely he could not feel responsible, I wondered to myself as I watched Medicine Grower lower his head. Surely he could not think I blame him for not giving me the medicine, especially since Old Father must have passed even before I reached Whitehome. As in the slow motion of a dream, I mused over the feeling of concern surging up from deep within my inner self while I watched Medicine Grower struggle for words and Sheman ever so slowly reach a slim hand up to touch his cheek, the look of concern on her face. As I watched and tried to understand my feelings, I could hear Old Father's words deep within my young mind.

"Morning Glory of the Mountains, I taught you much more than most of our clan will ever know. I have taught you many things, but only things. I have taught you about love, but only about love. I could never teach you compassion. For compassion, you must experience and know a reason for it to exist within your bosom. That, you must do for yourself."

In that frozen flow of time I saw a great cavern open before me and I knew it was my heart, that unformed place within me where love had yet to take form. I watched as a glistening black metal form slowly rose from deep within my self to form a cluster of glowing, golden flowers that filled that awesome void and radiated through my very nature. Old Father's words rang in my ears as I stood and rushed over to my two benefactors and embraced them both with sobs of thanks and forgiveness.

"Oh, Medicine Grower, you could not have known. What you did was as it should have been." I held them both in my arms. That lovely couple cried with me as I continued trying to ease their minds.

"Please do not feel that you let me down. You have saved me and together, you two have given me new life." And I hugged them even tighter and they hugged me, in turn.

I did not cry then for Old Father, nor for Morning Glory of the Mountains, that pitiful little girl who could never return home. I was crying out of gladness for having felt true compassion and for becoming the woman, One Who Cares. And for a few moments my crying turned into laughter and I cried my joy to the stars.

The next morning, Medicine Grower repeated his offer to introduce me to the man who worked on Cloak backway. I knew that Medicine Grower was not a wealthy man and that since he could not support me as a guest for long, I would soon be an unwelcome visitor. I wanted to remain his and Sheman's friend so I accepted his offer.

I went with him that morning when he set off to his corner. Sheman gave me a big hug before we left and made me promise to return to tell her every detail, once I was established. "And let me know the son you select before you bed him, you hear?" She winked and giggled as I feigned wilting in chagrin and ran back to her for another hug. Medicine Grower waited patiently.

I followed Medicine Grower without speaking as we wound about the backways on the way to Cloak backway. I couldn't shake a growing realization, that with each step, I was walking toward a new life and it was exciting! I was truly not returning to the mountains. Instead, I was to have work in Whitehome. I would earn my own way.

Cloak backway is probably the busiest passageway in the city, and surely the most colorful. Everywhere you look are men and women working with brightly colored cloth. Even though the backway itself is very wide, overhanging balconies give it the feel of a great winding tunnel over-draped with ribbons of cloth stretched across the way drying in the air. And there was so much activity! Medicine Grower had to warn me many times to watch my step so that I would avoid the carts moving about, loaded with everything from fluffy white cotton to neatly folded cloaks ready for the market.

"Here One Who Cares. This is the door." Medicine Grower told me as we rounded a corner and he snatched me from the path of a passing cart. He laughed at my bewildered gaze and told me to stand very close to the wall while he went in to discuss an arrangement with his friend.

After a few minutes, he returned and beckoned me to follow him into a large courtyard. Two young men were standing at one side of the court with heaping piles of cotton in their arms, trying to look busy while they watched my entrance. A younger boy sat at a bench on the other side of the court, busily peddling a thread spinner while he watched me hesitantly enter the courtyard. Medicine Grower turned to stand beside an older man in the middle of the court. He waved an arm toward me and said, "Day Weaver, this is One Who Cares. She has come to ask for work."

Day Weaver screwed up his face into a scowl and bellowed at the three boys to get back to work. I thought I was going to die! Then he focused his attention on me and gathered a small smile out of the scowl wrinkles on his face.

"Well young lady, Medicine Grower tells me you know a little of color and wool."

He lifted a scrap of cloth from his pouch and tossed it to me. Thank my fortune, I caught it.

"What is wrong with it," he asked, nodding his head toward the scrap now tightly held to my chest.

I examined the scrap with a rush of panic. There was nothing wrong with it except that it was very rough to the touch, I would hate to hold it close to my skin. I glanced at Medicine Grower but recognized that he could not help.

"Mas . . . Master," I stammered. "This is a very fine scrap of course work cloth" as I stepped toward him and offered it back. "I see nothing wrong with it."

He took the scrap and examined it in great detail as if he had never seen it before. My heart sank as I realized that I must not have given his question the consideration he thought it warranted and that he was mimicking my omission. Finally, he looked into my eyes for a long moment and then reached out to touch the hood of my cloak. After that, he touched the cloth of my blouse.

"Your cloak is made from the wool of your mountain herd yet your blouse is made from the soft cotton of the planes. Why is that?"

I bowed my head a little to him. "Because the cotton is so much softer than wool. Your scrap of cloth is cotton, yet it is rough." I frowned at the uncertainty of my answer but continued. "Is that the answer you expected?"

"That is true. It is from a stretch my youngest son has just finished as his first. Only he could possibly have taken the softness of cotton and turned it into the roughness of wool."

Day Weaver slowly turned his head to look at his youngest son who was furiously peddling at the machine. Then I saw Day Weaver wink at Medicine Grower, and I knew that I would learn to like this man.

Turning back to me he said, "Very well, young lady, I think I can find work for you as an assistant. I do not know how they do things in your clan, but we cannot have women doing men's work here in the city. You will not be weaving here, but there is much that must be done."

Day Weaver turned his head toward a doorway behind him and raised his voice for someone inside to hear. "Mother, come out and be introduced to your new helper."

A moment later a stout woman of Day Weaver's age came from the doorway and stood beside him. "Mother, this is One Who Cares. She will be your helper. Take her into the house and show her what she must do."

The woman gave me a long hard look, and without comment, took my hand and led me into the house. She left me standing in the middle of a large room that had bales of cloth and baskets of cotton stacked against the walls. I could see were sleeping pads tucked in amongst them as if they were walls of small rooms. A table, big enough to seat seven or eight people, was in the middle of the room. The woman moved around the table looking first at a stack of cloth and then at a small stack of thread spools, all the while wringing her hands and mumbling to herself as if I were not there.

"Has he no sense of common decency. What am I going to do with this waif when I have real work to do that I cannot get done? How can I be a proper wife and still run this man's affairs for him?" She stopped and looked at me out of red-rimmed eyes.

"And now I must run an orphanage for him!" She sniffed once and plopped her ample self into a bale of cloth.

I remained standing by the table where she had left me, a ball of fear slowly taking shape within my stomach. I knew that I must have a way to live and I surely did not want to shame Medicine Grower by not living up to his recommendation. Back home, the old crone who was Wife of Great Grandfather, was the supreme ruler of the clan home. It was she who determined that Old Father would be permitted to return to the clan, many years ago, and it was she who determined how well a guest would be treated. She could not control who Father brought to the house, but she could make that person's stay as miserable or as delightful as she was inclined. Yes, I had lived long enough to recognize that the old woman staring at me through puffy eyes was very important to my happiness.

I remembered that Old Father often talked to me about how to deal with strangers. "Simple kindness, my girl." He would admonish me whenever I would get cross with those around me.

"Even if they show themselves not to be your friend, show them simple kindness and they cannot find fault with you."

He was right, of course, and I knew that it was all I had to help me now.

I lowered my head in submission to her authority and bowed slightly to show that I was willing to do her bidding.

"Mistress . . . I am first a woman before I am a worker, but I am a very good worker." I hastily added in response to her narrowing frown.

"If you are a lone woman in this household, perhaps you would enjoy a friend more than a helper. I can do many things that can ease your great load, but most of all, I can listen and be your friend."

Even to this day, I still do not know if what I said made sense to the woman, or if my lame effort at kindness only shamed her into relenting. Whichever it may have been, she began crying and waved at me to sit at the table in the chair nearest her.

She blurted out between sobs, "Forgive me. I am being rude." She sniffed loudly and wiped her eyes. I waited patiently while she collected herself, wondering what could be so distressing for her.

"Please, just call me Mama. That is my name in this house."

Mama rolled her eyes toward the ceiling and produced the most mournful sigh I have ever heard. Then she turned her attention back to me.

"You have come to me at an unfortunate moment. I am," and she managed to raise her eyebrows in dismay and lower her head in submission at the same moment, "in my cycle of the moon. I hate it when I am like this!" She looked squarely at me to see if I understood.

"How old are you?"

"I am seventeen years." I held my breath hoping she would not argue my age. I was afraid that she would turn me out if she knew I was only thirteen and hoped Old Father was right when he said that I looked old for my age. To ward off any challenge, I quickly added, "I have been in cycle for over five years now." I had only started the year before, but I was experienced enough to know how uncomfortable it could make me and how emotional I sometimes became during the moon.

Mama shook her head and lifted her bulk off of the bale of cloth. "Okay, if you insist. But remember to keep raggedy baby out of sight."

I giggled. Only a child would carry a doll around with her.

She clearly wanted me to know that I was not fooling her but her reference to raggedy baby was the only time she ever suggested that I was younger than I claimed. She grinned at my giggles and beckoned me to follow her into the cooking room. "I don't have time to teach you anything today. I am much too busy to take time for such waste. I'll bet you already know a thing or two about cooking rooms, though."

"Here!" She handed me a crude wooden rack. "Go get the pots from the sun and make sure the room is ready for me to prepare the midday meal."

I took the rack from her hands and watched as she turned and left the room. I was a maid!

The Oath

Third Son pushed a sandaled foot out from under his cloak and nudged my foot. "So what is it like living in the mountains?"

"Huh?" I was deeply engrossed in overhearing Day Weaver and Mama arguing about the day's sales, and his intrusion startled me.

"You know. What was it like living way up there?"

He sidled along the wallbench to sit by my side, obviously expecting a good story. It was already dark and I had finished my chores only moments before. I was exhausted. "What's it to ya?" I countered, knowing that my response would perturb him. We had settled into that sort of give and take kind of conversation almost from the moment of our first meeting. He obviously enjoyed it, and I'll have to admit, I liked it too. Youthful insolence was never mine to enjoy in my clan because of the strained relationship with my sisters.

The first time Third Son was rude to me, I instinctively recognized his words as a test and decided to answer in kind. Shocked, he retreated for a moment only to return and challenge me with a cleverly rude remark of his own. In the Weaver house, Third Son was my favorite and after only five days, had become a close ally.

He playfully stuck an elbow into my ribs and tossed his head toward the open doorway of the house.

"You listening to them fight?"

"Uh-huh." I answered, still trying to follow their words. They had argued each night I was there, and I was beginning to suspect that they must have done so every night after the meal and the giving of thanks. None of their arguments directly concerned me, and I really had no business giving them much attention, but the things they found to argue about were fascinating to me and what they said often told me much about their lives I would not otherwise have learned. Most of all, I was fascinated because my family never argued. Father was absolute Lord of the clan and no one dared confront his authority. No one, that is except Wife of Great Grandfather, but even that old crone was very careful not to appear to challenge Father's authority. But to actually argue with the master of the house! I was amazed.

"They like to argue, you know."

I looked down at him and tried to read his thoughts. "Do they do this every night?"

"Yeah, only sometimes Mama throws things, but that is only when Father comes home after drinking wine and gaming with the other men."

"Does it bother you?"

"No, why should it? I'm going to drunk with the men myself one of these days."

"No. Silly. I mean, does it bother you that they are always fighting?" He knew what I was asking the first time.

"Na, why would it? They hardly ever yell at me." He nudged me in the ribs again and insisted that I tell him about living in the mountains.

The two oldest boys were not as quick to come to be my friend as was Third Son. At first, I didn't understand their reticence and repeatedly tried to offer my friendship. They responded cordially enough, but always remained reserved as if they did not know

exactly how to respond to me. This left tension between us that I could not understand. It was Third Son who finally gave me an idea of the nature of the problem when, in his innocence, he found reason to lift my cloak away from my body to reveal my blouse. "Yeah, she's a woman, all right!" he announced to his brothers, and quickly ducked out of reach of my swinging arm.

"Why, you little dragon spoor, I'll . . ." I chased after him until he hid behind Mama just as she entered the court to ask what all of the fuss was about. Of course, none of us had any idea what she was talking about and we were soon left alone in the courtyard to continue our chores, the three boys across the courtyard giggling to one another as if they were speaking in a secret code and with me trying to ignore them while I sought to understand what the meaning of little Third Son's actions.

I thought about that little playful incident far into the night. It took me a while to recognize that Third Son was only answering his brothers question. But when I finally did, I bolted full awake on my sleeping pad and looked closely to see that the three boys were where they belonged. I knew what the problem was. The older boys saw me as more than a hired helper, they also saw me as a woman. I remembered Medicine Grower's casual comment that Day Weaver's boys were ready to take wives. Apparently the boys thought so too because they had sent Third Son on a mission to determine if I was full grown or still in my childhood, for they could not tell by my face and my ever-present cloak hid the rest of my body. Now they knew.

Old Father had warned me that I was old enough to be wed and that it was time for me to consider my options. I remember his words very well, because it was one of the more embarrassing lessons he gave me.

"You are a slight little thing, my Morning Glory Of The Mountains." We were sitting side by side on a great rock resting at the edge of Falling Meadow. Old Father patted my hand and pointed at a spotted lamb nursing from its mother. The lamb would have been born dead had we not helped its mother by turning it and dragging it from her belly. "Like that lamb, you are only alive today out of the good wishes of the Gods and you must be careful not to abuse the favor." He moved his hand from mine and roughly nudged my hip. "Look at you! You are a woman, yet you are barely fuller than a man. Carrying a child would kill you." I know my eyes were round with wonder. "You must decide now to choose the path of learning, because choosing the path of motherhood may very well be your end."

Old Father did not seem to know how to make himself better understood, and when I left the clan house, I had not yet understood why he was so concerned about the prospects of my motherhood. I suppose, since Old Father occupied so much of my time, my mother never really had the opportunity to properly train me in the secrets of womanhood. When I left the clan, what I knew of the subject had been mostly taught to me by an old man.

"Forgive me Old Father," I whispered to the darkness around my sleeping pad, "what you taught me was not enough."

Having finally figured out that the tension between the older boys and me concerned my womanhood, I set about trying to make them see me as a frail little girl who was not fit to be a member of their clan. However, after my third day in the Weaver clan house, Mama began to treat me as if I had already joined the clan, and Third Son became more aggressive in his friendly-rude play with me. Near the end of the second week, I discovered that Day Weaver had decided I would make a suitable wife for Weaverson,

his first-born. To this day, I curse the gods that I was not born with the privileges of a man. It has shaped my life so.

I discovered Day Weaver's decision quite by accident one morning when I was drawing water from the public water well. An old crone was also there and watched me curiously while I filled my kegs. I knew she was watching me, but thought nothing of it, since all old crones in Whitehome seemed to stare. Finally she moved closer to me and poked her walking stick at the air between us.

"You are that young girl Day Weaver has taken in to be his son's wife." She said, not as a question or a greeting, but as a statement of fact.

"No!" Startled, I turned to face her. She had a grin spreading across her face. For some reason, seeing her satisfaction in my reaction made me think of Day Weaver's honor and I quickly regained my composure.

"No, I was taken into Day Weaver's clan house to be of service to Wife Of Day Weaver. But yes, Weaverson will make a very good husband. Don't you think?" With that, I gathered the kegs onto my shoulders and turned my back to her.

"Husband?" I repeated over and over again to myself as I labored under the weight of the sloshing water. "How could they think I would be his wife? I will not! I can not," I cried to myself, but there seemed to be nothing I could do. After all, no one had said a word to me about becoming Weaverson's wife, so how could I say no. Indeed, how could I say no even if I had been asked. I thought about it a great deal and realized that, if the people of Whitehome dealt with such matters in the same fashion as they did in the mountains, I would have nothing to say about it. In fact, Son of Medicine Grower may have sealed my fate when he delivered me to Day Weaver's house in the first place. I was given to him for his son just as surely as if my father had come down from the mountains to give me away. In the mountains I would be cast out of the clan if I refused. There, a woman had nothing to say about it. Nothing.

I returned with the water and quickly poured it into the holding place above the fire pit. No one was around so I hurried back to the well to fetch another load of water. What had become a friendly haven had suddenly become a hostile place that threatened my freedom. How could I bear to belong to a man? What if Weaverson was as mean as Father? I could not! I passed a woman on the backway so swollen that I could see she was pregnant even through her cloak. Old Father's words shouted across time to me and I imagined myself laboring as she did, as if she was soon to split open like an over ripe fruit.

"What are you so quiet for One Who Cares?" Mama had come out to the drying court and found me alone in a corner, cleaning spools.

"You have become like a shadow in my house."

"Forgive me Mama. I guess I do not feel well." I had managed to avoid casual contact with the family for almost a day since my discovery. My mind was clouded with despair, because I could not imagine how I could get myself out of being a wife. I did not wish to shame Son of Medicine Grower by being ungrateful. Worse, I had no idea how I would survive if I simply left. I could not agree to be Weaverson's wife, and I had no idea how long I had before that truth would need to be confronted.

"One Who Cares?" I had moved back into my thoughts and Mama was trying to get my attention again.

"You do not look sick, only sad. Do you mind talking to me about it? You have heard me out so many times in your short stay here. Surely I can do the same for you."

Tears came to my eyes even though I willed them away. I lifted my head to face her and blurted out, "Oh, Mama! I do not know what to do!"

Mama stepped forward and held me to her ample bosom. There is something about such plenitude that I hope someday to offer. Soon the gasping of my crying turned to gasping for air, as I struggled to breathe, surrounded by her great chest. Yet, her hands patted and stroked my head even more firmly into her, as she attempted to sooth me. Finally, my giggles brought release for my head as she determined that I was once again, under control. "Now, don't you feel better after crying? I always do." She stroked my hair a few more times. "Now One Who Cares, what is this all about?"

How could I? I studied her kind face. If I were to marry her son, she would be a wonderful mother to me and grandmother to my children. Children! No!

"I am too young to marry!" I blurted out and started to cry again, dodging her arms as she reached to comfort me again.

Frustrated, she put her hands on her hips and cocked her head, looking at me in dismay. "Marry? What on earth are you saying?" Then she got a peculiar look in her eyes. "Why, that old goat. I swear one of these days I'm going to hang his manhood on our front door. Men!" She paced about the small space for a moment and then abruptly sat down on the wallbench. Patting the bench beside her, she beckoned me to sit beside her. "What have you been told, my young friend?"

Cautiously, I sat beside her. I had no idea that I would get that sort of reaction from Mama. After all, Day Weaver was her husband and Weaverson was her first-born. At Mama's bidding, I described my conversation with the old crone by the well. Mama considered my words for a few moments, looking me over while she did.

"I suppose we both should have known it would come to this." Then she considered me again.

"Or perhaps we should not *both* have known it. You are really only twelve or thirteen years aren't you?"

"Yes Mama, I am thirteen. But I am almost fourteen." I hurried to add.

Nevertheless, you are a child. However, you must know that by our custom, you are old enough for a husband, so why are you so set against Weaverson? He is a fine pick for a girl from the mountains."

I knew that I could go wrong very quickly if I answered thoughtlessly.

"Weaverson is very nice and I know he would be a very good husband, Mama. It is not him, but me. I fear that I have learned of men through my father and have sworn myself to maidenhood for the rest of my life because of it."

I dared not look at Mama, lest she see in my eyes that I was not telling her the whole truth. Old Father told me that such an oath would be honored by some and that it might be protection against having to be married. I felt it would be better to have the protection of an oath than trying to explain my slight nature. Surely Old Father could have had no idea that I would have to use it so soon.

I could tell Mama was looking me over trying to determine just what I might mean by "learned of men through my father." I knew it painted my father in a very bad light, but I really didn't care. He was such a villain, always using his authority as clan leader to push around the older and weaker clan members, I was sure he deserved anything I might bring upon him. Besides, he was far up in the mountains and there was little chance that my words would affect him there. I relished having that measure of revenge for all of the meanness he showed to Old Father and me.

"You are very young to be taking such an oath, but I can tell that you are serious. Your father must have been very hard on you, poor dear."

She was quiet for some time, leaving me to remain tangled in my thoughts. Finally, she patted my on my knee.

"Day Weaver is a good man, no one can say otherwise. All he is doing is trying to help his sons grow up. You should be very proud that he thinks enough of you to consider you worthy of his first-born."

"Oh I am! Honestly, I recognize the honor. It is I who am not prepared. It is not your fine husband. Please"

Mama put up a hand to stop the jumble of excuses. "That is all right. I understand . . . your father." She fell silent once again, and I sat beside her almost afraid to breathe. There was so much tension in that small court, I could almost feel the moment of truth moving to the present. I knew that I could either lose a friend and ally when that moment came or safely move on into the future as her friend and helper. It was all up to a woman whom I only partially understood.

"You have taken an oath that Day Weaver may not appreciate, but there is another oath you can take that he will certainly understand." She looked toward the house, "and in telling of your oath, you can help me put an old goat in his place." Mama put an arm around my bent shoulders and hugged me to her ample form. We women must stick together, my little one, and we will!"

"But Mama, I do not understand how one oath could be different from another." I knew that my mind was clouded, but even so, Mama's words made no sense to me.

"There is an old custom of honor here in Whitehome that young people still sometimes follow to show they have dedicated themselves to the Holy Spirit. If you say that you have sworn that oath, your maidenhood will be left you by any God-loving person."

I thought for a moment. Old Father had never told me of such an oath and there was no mention of it in the clan or at the village. "Are you sure Day Weaver will recognize it, I have never heard of such an oath."

"Yes, he once made fun of me for not wishing to lay with him before we were joined. He accused me then, of taking the oath." Mama laughed quietly to herself, obviously remembering a happy moment. "He nearly tickled me to death, looking for my oath dagger." Then she turned her attention back to me. "Everyone knows about it" she insisted, "but I know of no one who has sworn to it."

Memories began to creep into my mind of times my sisters tricked me into doing things they knew would get me in trouble. They would not do such things themselves because they knew they would be punished, but if they could get me to do them"

"It is called The Oath of White Snow" Mama's words jerked me back to the present. "Swearing the oath indicates that you have dedicated yourself to live a pure and uncorrupted life." She stopped pacing long enough to pat me lightly on my head. "This, my dear One Who Cares, includes maintaining your maidenhood." She laughed lightly like a young girl delighted with herself and continued pacing. "To prove their devotion, those who take it are said to wear a small dagger around their neck as a symbol of their willingness to take their own life should they fail the oath." Mama was intense. "Don't you see, One Who Cares? This is perfect. All you have to do is get Day Weaver to discover that you are wearing a small dagger around your neck and he will think you have taken the oath."

“But, Mama,” I protested, hoping that I had a way to end this madness, “where would I get such a dagger?”

“Hah, I know just where I can find one, even carved with symbols on its hilt to look like an oath dagger.” Mama was enjoying this too much.

“I don't know, Mama, to suddenly shield myself in this way . . . what if he doesn't believe me?”

Mama stopped pacing again and lowered herself down on the wallbench to sit beside me. “I didn't know you had taken an oath of maidenhood, yet you had. Who knows how a person behaves when they have sworn to the oath? It is not good manners to talk about such things in public, so why would you announce that you have taken an oath. Remember, you are not supposed to know that you are to be chosen for Weaverson so you have had no reason to tell Day Weaver that you would rather die than bear his grandchildren.” She chuckled at her own words.

I scrambled through my mind looking for a better concern to counter her argument. “How can I show him I am wearing the dagger? I can't just pull it out and show it to him. He would think I was flaunting the oath.” Then I thought of an even more alarming concern. “What if I violate the oath in some other way and actually have to use the dagger?”

“Nonsense! Few, if any others, will know you are claiming the oath. Besides, from what I understand about the requirements of the oath, you may as well have already taken it, the way you behave.” Mama thought for a few moments while studying my face, probably measuring my commitment. “My little friend, I know of no other way.”

That was all the convincing I needed and I mentally prayed to Old Father to guide me in what I was about to do. “Very well, you have convinced me that the Oath of White Snow is more powerful than my simple oath, now tell me how this will help you with Day Weaver.”

Mama's face clouded a little and she showed that she did not want to explain. I leaned against her and nudged her to encourage a reply. She sniffed in response and, with her face lowered away from me, tried to explain. “He is a good man and a wonderful father, it is just that he spends so much time with the other men in the evenings.”

I knew he often left the house after the evening meal. Sometimes late at night, I awoke to hear him return, more noisily than one would think necessary, and then there were the fights.

“I know that many evenings, he goes out of the house. Is he always with the men?” I tried to be sensitive to her obvious embarrassment.

“Yes, to a corner on Keg backway or sometimes to the caravan stables to talk of business.” Mama growled her words and lifted her shoulders in despair. “I sometimes think women are there who give him their favor, I sometimes smell them on him when he comes crawling back to me full of wine.” Mama twisted around, took my hands between hers and looked intently into my eyes. “Have you ever been around a man who has had too much wine?”

I could only shake my head. “No, I never have.”

Mama continued, “Such a man can hardly stand on his two feet. If you should encounter Day Weaver alone when he is this way, say, near the water well on his way to the house, then he would surely ask you to help him the rest of the way home. The old goat would like to lean on you so that he can see what you are made of. Such a situation

would be a perfect opportunity to let your dagger 'accidentally' fall out from under your cloak. Seeing that dagger will certainly clear his mind!"

Mama was very pleased with her plan. So pleased, I was certain that she was not telling me everything. "But Mama, you are asking me to deliberately trick your husband into approaching me! I do not understand!"

Mama grinned her delight at my ignorance. "Oh, One Who Cares, I would never put you in jeopardy. You just don't know Day Weaver. As I have said, he is a good man. He just needs a little help, now and then, remembering to be a good husband. I am confident that he would only flirt with you, especially since you live in his house. Besides, he is much more interested in whether or not you will make a good strong wife for his son." She considered for a moment, "No Little One, the reason I think you can teach Day Weaver a lesson is that he will be embarrassed by his actions before one who has sworn the Oath of White Snow. He is not a particularly spiritual man, but he is proud and I am willing to wager that he cannot help but notice the contrast between his drunken self and your sweet behavior. Please, One Who Cares, please try this for me."

It was late in the night and I was once again carrying water from the well. I had taken to doing so, at that hour, knowing I would eventually meet Day Weaver returning home from his time with the men. If Cloak backway is the brightest backway in Whitehome during the day, it is the darkest at night for the same reason. The drying cloth draped overhead is full of color and brightly dances in the sunlight, but at night, the same cloth blocks even the stars, making it darker than the night. Because of that I suppose, it is a custom there to light a coal pit at the intersections. They are lit at first dark and once the coal is consumed, there is no more light until dawn. So, each night I made sure to finish my water bearing before the coal burned out for the night.

I was on my last trip when a dark shadow moved between me and one of the coal pits. My mind froze and I felt spirits crawling up and down my back. I stopped in place, trying to determine what I had seen when a voice spoke softly near my ear and I clearly heard a person slightly stumble. "So this is where my water comes from, so late at night."

"Oh!" I exclaimed in surprise. "Who is it?"

"It is me, my little weaver helper. Who do you think it would be at this strange hour but Day Weaver home from his business." He staggered and put his hand on my arm, nearly tumbling the kegs from my shoulders.

He moved to take the kegs from my shoulders. "Let me help you with those before you drop them. You will find better use for your arms helping me home than carrying my bath."

I gave up my load as he bid and turned to steady him. But as soon as I stood up from setting the kegs on the ground, he put a hand on my shoulder and leaned heavily against me, nearly causing us both to fall to the ground. "Here, young thing, you must help me home." I gripped his cloak at the sleeve to steady him and we moved slowly off toward his clan house.

As we neared a coal pit, Day Weaver stumbled and very nearly fell to the ground. As he pulled on my cloak, the little dagger fell from its hiding place around my neck and dangled brightly in the red glow of the coal. Day Weaver's eyes opened wide and then squinted as he tried to determine what he saw.

"You carry a small knife like a woman who has taken the *oath*." He emphasized the word "oath" as if it were a thing of concern.

"Yes Master, I have sworn to follow the path of Spirit." I held my breath.

"But you are much too young to know of such things. How do you come by an oath of the Holy Men?" He was obviously forgetting his fermented juices. "You are too young!"

"My family swore me to the Holy Men when I was only a girl." I tried to remember the instructions Mama had given me. "Forgive me. If my devotion offends you, I will leave your house."

"No, no, it is honorable. I understand . . . Each to their own way, I always say." He was quickly regaining control, indicating to me that he was able to walk without my support. He seemed embarrassed and indicated that he wanted to be away from me, so I retreated back into the darkness saying something about the water kegs.

"Yes! Yes! Get the water. I will go ahead to open the gate for you." He had already retired to his sleeping room when I reached the house.

During the three years I remained in Day Weaver's house, he never mentioned that night to me nor, Mama assured me, to anyone else, and he never, not once mentioned a marriage between me and Weaverson.

A Turn On The Path

Once my status as helper was all sorted out, there was only pleasantness for me in Day Weaver's house. Then one night Old Man Change crept into my life, and I suddenly found myself embroiled in the birth of yet another phase of my life.

It was in the Fall when the days were growing shorter and the smells of fresh picked cotton had not yet left Cloak backway. I woke from the middle of a fitful night's sleep with a strange feeling of weakness. I remember that I had been dreaming about being chased by a screaming baby and had just run into the arms of Old Father. He pointed a shaking finger at me and scolded, "I warned you that you were too frail to make babies."

I told him that I had only fantasized about being with Weaverson and would never dare to actually lay by his side. Old Father told me he understood, but then my father appeared beside Old Father and began laughing at me, saying that he would show me what could happen if I to have a baby, and I woke up crying for him to leave me alone.

Despite the cool air, I was damp with sweat and . . . and something else. I reached down under my night cloak and discovered that I was very wet between my legs and the wet was thick and sticky. My hand smelled of more than body odor when I carefully moved it near my face in the dark. When I cried out in fear, Wife Of Weaverson came in with a coal pit cradled in a sling.

"What is it One Who Cares? You have been moaning all night and now you cry out like something has gotten hold of you."

Wife Of Weaverson had been in the family only since Spring, and I had not yet succeeded in winning her over as a friend. I supposed she was uncomfortable having a young woman in the house that did not belong to a man. However, she was a good person and very attentive to me that night.

"I was dreaming," I told her. "Then when I awoke, I felt ill." I continued talking as I moved my hand into the light. "There is something wrong with me . . . Oh!" My fingers were dark with blood. "What is happening to me?" I whimpered and quickly held my hand away from the light.

Wife Of Weaverson sat the coal pit on the floor before me without a word and hurried from to Mama's sleeping room. She soon returned following closely behind Mama.

"Let me see your hand One Who Cares!" Mama insisted.

"No, Please."

"One Who Cares. I must know what is wrong if I am going to help you." She continued hovering before me in the small light, her hand reached out between us.

"I am afraid." I felt my blood drying on my hand and shrinking the skin on my fingers. I was afraid, but I slowly brought my hand out and held it for her inspection.

"Let me see you, my child." Her face was somber. "Open your cloak for me to see where this has come from."

My mind went numb with those words and I obeyed without further protest. Mama moved my legs and carefully inspected me while Wife Of Weaverson held the coal pit high to help her see. Then Mama gently folded my cloak down over my legs. "You are past your day of the full moon, aren't you?"

I nodded my head. She knew it was not my time for such things. We had both moved into the same rhythm of bleeding and always helped each other remember to be prepared for the inevitable mess that came from being in our full moon cycle. The clean cloth I normally wore for such times was now dark red when it should be no more than slightly spotted.

"I have never more than stained my cloth this late. You know I started four day ago and should be nearly finished by now." I was concerned that Mama might think me unclean.

"I know, little one. This is different. Change your cloth and use two extra. There is nothing you can do tonight, but tomorrow, you will go visit our friend, Medicine Grower to get something to slow you."

She patted my head. "This is not going to kill you little one. It happens to us women often enough, and often enough, it passes. It will pass for you too."

My troubles did pass, but the experience was just too much for Wife Of Weaverson. She seized on the opportunity to rid herself of me as competition and talked Weaverson into partitioning Day Weaver to discharge me because I was sickly.

"She will bring other sickness to us. One may harm our children!" Of course, Day Weaver could not argue against this.

Mama tried to help me, but in the end, she had to support her husband. I was in the corner of the courtyard that had come to be considered "One Who Cares' corner," when Mama came to tell me. There was shade on the wallbench where she sat and talked to me while I spun cotton into thread. That morning, she sat where she usually did and absentmindedly pulled at a tuft of cotton. I had an idea of what was to come and patiently waited for my friend to find her words.

"Little One, you have been with us for over three years, and during that time, I have come to love you as my daughter." She looked closely at my eyes. "You know that, don't you?"

"Of course, Mama. You *are* like a mother to me, like none I have ever had." I felt a little lightheaded. I had known this moment was coming for days, and had already accepted it as inevitable. It was good that I had, because in that moment, there were more important things to experience and I didn't want to miss a single one of them.

"I am honored that you have come to tell me in person, Mama."

"Huh?" She had not expected me to know.

"I know that you must tell me to leave."

I had stopped peddling and turned so that I could face her. I put my hands on hers and held them together between us. Her great hands cradled by my very small hands was a funny sight to me and I giggled as I said. "You have come to tell me that I must leave."

"Well, you don't have to be so happy about it!"

"No, no, I am happy about knowing you and your wonderful hands." I tilted my head toward our hands and giggled again.

She looked and saw our hands in the same way. She laughed and then reached out and hugged me to her breasts and we both had one of those happy/glad cries we seemed to save for such occasions. Finally we regained our composure.

"What will you do, Little One?" Mama asked with a concerned look on her face.

"I do not know. Perhaps I can find work in another household. But, I so wish I could be more creative. This work is good for the body, but the creativity in weaving is good for the Soul, and I would like to experience something like that."

"You know it is considered man's work in Whitehome. You would never find a man who would let you do anything more than string the thread." She thought for a moment. "You know your cloth very well, and I have seen few as good as you with color. Perhaps you could find fulfillment in one of the great homes on Mainway. There are very wealthy clans there who must have fine clothes to wear to court."

"But, how would I make contact there?"

The idea caught my imagination and I was starting to squirm about like a child with excitement.

"Oh, what an exciting idea, Mama." I nearly jumped out of my seat every time I thought of another possibility the new life could bring.

Mama saw my excitement and joined me and we were both sharing our vision of the possible future I might have when Day Weaver stuck his scowling face through the doorway curtain and demanded:

"What is it that has taken both of you away from productive work?" He moved to stand stiffly in front of us, his hard stare darting back and forth between Mama and myself.

"Have you no respect for those of us who are working so hard?"

"Oh, Day Weaver! Are you disappointed that we are not drowning in our tears?" Mama giggled at me and continued.

"One Who Cares is going to go become a seamstress in one of the great houses."

Day Weaver lifted eyebrows toward his hairline and turned his scowling lips into a smile. "And have you selected the family that you will serve, One Who Cares?"

"No, of course not, I have only this moment been told that I must leave your house."

Mama put her hand up to her mouth and howled with laughter while her eyes became large and round. She had stood when Day Weaver first entered the courtyard, but now sat down again to avoid tripping over the spinner. I watched her reaction to my sarcastic reply and felt a warm sense of satisfaction.

In his heart, Day Weaver truly is a good man. He first snickered at how Mama sat so hard that her hair bounced, and then he too began laughing out loud and sat down beside her.

"One Who Cares, you have been a very nice person to have in my house and the Holy Men should be proud of you."

Mama and I looked at each other and held our breath hoping that he was not about to bring up my oath.

He continued with hardly a pause, "I hope you understand that I have to keep peace in my house."

He looked at me and waited for me to respond. I reached out and took one of his hands and held it to one of Mama's hands.

"I do understand, and thank you for being so good to me these years. I will always number you among my finest friends."

"Going to work on Mainway is a good idea, One Who Cares, but how are you going to find someone who will take you in?" Day Weaver slowly shook his head as he watched the smile fade from my face. Then he grinned and patted my hand.

"Do not worry, I believe there is a caravan yet to depart eastward before the Winter. If so, there may still be people trading for the last of the Summer's silk. Surely one of those traders will be from a great house."

Mama jumped up and kissed Day Weaver on the lips. "You old goat! I knew you would help us. We have time to go to the bazaar today."

She grabbed my hand and dragged me into the house to gather my belongings.

"Third Son, do not forget me."

Third Son hung his head and nervously fidgeted while I gathered up the few things I would take with me. I held up a polished piece of metal the family had given me to commemorate my first year with them.

"Do you remember this? I was so proud when your father gave it to me, but not nearly as proud as I was when you gave this to me." I held up a small infertility god he had carved for me as a joke when he learned about the oath I had taken.

He looked at the figure and sniffed loudly.

I finished gathering my things and stood. "Well, Third Son, are you not going to give me a huge hug to say good-by?"

He opened his arms and embraced me. The boy had grown into a young man in those three years.

"I would have loved you as your sister for life." I told him, holding him close to my heart, "Will you remember me as my brother now that I will be gone?"

"Oh, One Who Cares . . ." He kissed me lightly on the lips and then hugged me again. With a great sniff, he regained control and straightened his frame.

"I will miss you."

"No you won't! You are soon to meet a fair young girl who will be your wife, and you will never think of me again."

"No! No!" He began protesting that he would always remember me.

"Then prove it," I chided him. "See to it that I dance at your joining."

"Yes, you will! I promise" Third Son took my sack for me, and arm in arm, we returned to the courtyard where the rest of the family was waiting to say good-by.

You know, I sometimes wonder what I would have done if that caravan had already left, or if there had been no traders in the bazaar. Having gotten me out of their house, would the Weavers have left me there? I shudder to think of how my life might have been had the gods not smiled on me that day.

Mama and I watched as Day Weaver moved among the many people in the bazaar, looking for someone that he thought might be from one of the great houses. We were sitting in the sun on a wall that separated the camel pens from the trade booths and we could easily see Day Weaver as he stopped and talked to first one merchant and then another. It was obvious that he knew some of the people he talked with very well, and once, Mama grumbled something about "old boys." I suppose she thought that as many were friends from his days of carousing as were friends from trading.

Finally, we saw Day Weaver turn his head toward us and wave for us to join him. He was standing beside a well-dressed little man who was carrying a stretch of brightly colored cloth. I looked him over carefully as we approached. The sparkle in his eye told me to be happy, without his needing to say even a word.

"One Who Cares, this is Song Of Willow. He may be able to help you if you are the one right for his need."

"And what might that need be?" Mama stepped beside me protectively and asked the little man in a threatening voice.

His eyes seemed to twinkle in response to her gruff question. "Wife Of Day Weaver has good reason to look out for such an attractive and young woman such as you." He

took my hand and held it firmly. Old Father once told me that such a clasp was a way that menfolk had of determining if a stranger was armed.

"I am not armed," I said.

"Huh? Oh, the clasp. So you still have some mountain clan left in you after all." He turned to Day Weaver. "I thought you told me she understood our Whitehome culture."

"She does understand the culture of our backway, Song Of Willow, but you cannot expect her to understand yours when I don't even understand it and I live here." Day Weaver sounded exasperated.

Song Of Willow patted the air between himself and Day Weaver in a calming gesture and once again turned his attention to me.

"I am afraid, our seamstress, old Scrapper has finally gotten too old to keep up with the new ideas. She is going to need someone to help her out, but I hesitate to pick her help without her approval." He slowly walked around behind me and then back to my front. "Have you ever danced?"

"Yes, Master. I know all of my clan's dances."

"No, no! Not that tribal bouncing about. I mean dancing. Oh, never mind. What color is the sky right now?" He succeeded in asking the question without, himself, looking up at the sky. Instead, his eyes narrowed and his ears almost pointed at me in his attention, waiting for my answer. He was such a fascinating man to watch.

The rest of us looked to the sky as if Son Of Willow had jerked a puppet string. The sky was dark gray with a slight cast of red from the sunset.

"It is not a color, Master, only dark white with a cast of Winter Woman's breast." That was all that I could think of in the moment. I could only hope that he had heard the Mountain Clan's legion about the snow white woman of the north who carried the winter with her when she ventured south looking for the sun.

The others looked at me as if I were crazy, but the little man quickly glanced at the sky and then looked at me with a genuine smile, his sparkling eyes once again clearly favoring me.

"Yes, my child, very dark white, indeed. You do have a flair for color! I believe old Scrapper will like you, for sure. Would you like to take a chance with me?"

Thank you, my Gods. I bowed deeply to Son Of Willow. "Yes, Master, I truly would."

"Then stop calling me 'Master' and come with me. You may call me Willow." To the Weavers, he said, "You folks should come by some time to visit and to see how happy your young friend will be. Good evening."

Without another comment, Willow turned and headed away from the bazaar with his brightly colored cloth flung over his shoulder. I turned and quickly hugged my old friends and ran after the little man.

The people who lived on Mainway lived in a different world compared to the people of the backways. Their great houses had many courts and baloneys and appeared to be big enough to support two or three clans. Willow laughed at my amazement and told me that the people who live in the great houses were very high on the social ladder of Whitehome, and that the closer they lived to the palace, the more prestigious and older was their clan. To my delight, the house that Willow lead me to was just a house or two from the palace wall. My new master was wealthy!

Willow lead me through a doorway at the side of the main entrance and into the cooking room. There, he ordered a young girl of my age to deliver his dinner to his

room. Then he told me to follow him as he moved on out of the room and into a poorly lit hallway. We had only gone a few feet when he turned and waved his hand toward an opening in the wall and told me to wait. He pushed a curtain aside from a doorway and cautiously looked into a room.

"Yes, you will stay in this room for now. I will send someone to tell you what to do next." He moved a little closer to me to make sure I would understand his words.

"Just stay in this room for now and you won't get in trouble." He turned and quickly walked away.

I did what he told me to do, and spent the next several hours impatiently waiting in a dark little room barely three paces on a side. There was a neatly folded sleeping pad in one corner and a wall bench nicely painted with colors that brightly reflected the light from a coal pit sitting there. Without the coal pit, there would have been no light in the room. Wooden planks lined the ceiling and slightly bent as someone moved across them from above. Not a breath of air disturbed the cloth hung in the doorway.

"If this was to be my room, I had better find a quiet place where I could see the sun now and then or I would surely turn into a mushroom," I told myself in a loud voice to break to silence of my little room.

I sat on the wallbench and played with my little breast dagger a sound came to my doorway and I heard a slight knock.

"Yes?" I asked, startling myself out of meditation.

"Father has told me to feed you and tell you of the house. May I come in?"

"You may if you don't mind sitting in my lap." I looked about for a way to accommodate another person in that little room.

"Oh!" A little girl stood against the far side of the doorway holding one hand to her mouth and the other to her breasts. Her eyes were focused on my knife.

"Huh? Oh, I forgot, forgive me." I turned my back to her and quickly returned the knife to its hiding place below my breast. Turning back to her, I gestured to the sleeping pad and invited her to sit down.

"Better we go into the cooking room. There is a table that we can sit at and more light to see by."

"More room would be welcome about now. Are all of the rooms this small?"

The girl answered my question over her shoulder as we walked back to the cooking room.

"No, of course not, only the sleeping rooms of those who work here. You will get use to it, since you will only go to your room for sleep." Turning slightly so that she could see me, she continued, "And for love." She smiled happily at her last words.

Once we were in the cooking room and seated at the table with bowls of bread pieces and vegetables before us, she introduced herself and told me what I needed to know about living in the house. Her name was Feather and she was one of Willow's many daughters. Her mother was one of the cooks, thus explaining how she was able to get food when she wished. Willow was the head man servant and his responsibility was to keep the household running smoothly for the Royal Garment clan. I was in the service of one of the most important family in Whitehome.

"Father tells me that, if Scrapper likes you, you will become an apprentice seamstress."

She looked wistfully at me and hugged herself. You will be taught by Scrapper, herself! I can only dream of doing such a thing."

I looked my young teacher over carefully, wondering why she was not considered for apprenticeship under Scrapper.

"Who is Scrapper?" I asked.

Feather's eyes widened. "Surely you jest! Scrapper has made the Empress's garments for the past fifty years. There is no one else permitted to touch them." She thought for a moment and then looked at me with even more envy. "No one, except Scrapper's apprentice."

The more impressed Feather was with my new position, the more I wondered if I could possibly measure up to Scrapper's standards. Surely there were others in Whitehome who were in a better position to become apprentice without Willow bringing in a stranger.

"Feather, when will I meet Scrapper?"

Feather looked at the ceiling for a moment and grinned. "Father told me to take you to her after you have been properly instructed. Do you want to know anything else?"

"How do I behave before Scrapper? Is she nice? Do I speak openly to her or do I treat her like . . ., well like the Empress?"

"No silly. Not like the Empress!" Feather giggled. "Scrapper is not the lady of the house, she only works here like Father and me."

"But, Willow and you both talk of Scrapper as if she were the most important person around. I do not understand."

Truly, it was difficult entering into someone else's world.

"If I do not understand, surely I will make a mistake and Scrapper will not find me acceptable." Tears were beginning to come to my eyes and I recognized the childish confidence of the morning evaporating.

"If she does not accept me, I will be turned out to the backways. What would I do then?" I turned to Feather with a look designed to let her know I was at her mercy.

Feather became alarmed at my reaction and reached across the table to take my hands. "Be quiet, silly. Having brought you into this home, Father would never let you go without helping you find a new house." She stroked my hands and waited for me to calm down some before continuing. "Scrapper is not the lady of the house because she is not of the Royal Garment clan who owns this house. However, she is under the charge of the Royal Garment clan and has been since she was only a child."

She cocked her head at me for a moment and then went on. "You really do not understand the guilds of Whitehome, do you?"

I sniffed. "No. I worked for the Weavers, but this is different."

"No, not different, just more. You see, the Royal Garment clan is really a very special guild for producing garments for the great houses of Whitehome. There are four seamstresses in the house who work for the clan, but only Scrapper can prepare garments for the Empress. The Royal Garment clan runs the guild and takes care of the house and the people who actually do the work, but they do not, themselves, prepare the garments. They stopped doing that generations ago."

Feather patted my hand once again and stood up to clear the table.

I thought over her words. It did make sense to me, except for why I might not have competition. "Why has Willow not found an apprentice for Scrapper before me?"

"Oh, he has. Many of them." Feather got a satisfied look on her face. "Scrapper has hated every one of them!"



Now A Woman

The old lady sat in the middle of a large, well-lit room, calmly watching men and women move meaningfully about the cutting tables and dress mannequins around her in a swirl of activity. She was perched atop of a simple stool from which she could easily turn about to face first one part of the room then another as she surveyed the progress of their work. I stood just within the entryway of the great room where Willow had left me. I watched as the old lady quietly spoke directions that were promptly followed by the others in the room, workers who were apparently assigned to be her helpers.

"Yes, that is it, Walker, but maybe a little higher on the shoulder. Yes, very good." She pointed to her own shoulder to illustrate her point.

Walker was a lean little man, all gray in hair and cloak and bouncy in his enthusiasm for his work. After following the old lady's direction, he stood back from the mannequin and admired his work. As he did so, he clasped his hands together at his neck and pursed his lips in a decidedly feminine manner. Seeing him stand so, I could not help but to giggle. When I did, the old woman in the middle of the room cocked her head slightly at the sound, but did not otherwise acknowledge my presence.

She saw me, I knew she had for after I giggled, she found reason to swing around to gaze at my part of the room more than three times, yet she ignored me. Willow had told me not to interrupt the work under way there, so I had no choice but to wait until I was talked to. I stood there for an unbearable length of time, my muscles growing weak and my courage sinking into my stomach as I realized how little I understood garment making. How could I dream to be Scrapper's assistant if I could not better understand the work I was watching there?

After a time though, I realized that I was beginning to see a pattern in the activity. The old lady sitting in the middle of the room was obviously Scrapper because she was orchestrating the work of the six workers as if they were her hands and eyes. They in turn, were each creating a part of a garment so fine that it might be worn by a lady of the Emperor's court. The longer I stood there, the more I understood what they were doing and the more relaxed I became. At last, a plump little lady stood on a wooden perch and held a portion of the garment up to a mannequin a full foot taller than was she. She cocked her head one way and then another to look at the piece, finally placing it according to Scrapper's quietly spoken direction. Soon, another portion was brought to the mannequin, and then another, as the garment took shape. Stitches were taken here and there, and finally, as my legs began to cramp, the garment was lifted from the mannequin and proudly shown around from one worker to another. Seemingly satisfied at their craftsmanship, all six workers turned and presented it to Scrapper who, with a gracious smile, nodded her head in agreement that the garment was indeed complete.

"You may step over here by my side, if you would like, young lady." I was so entranced by watching their activity that I barely realized Scrapper was addressing me.

"Yes Mistress." I said with a small bow and quickly moved to her side as I was asked.

"This is a garment to be worn by one of the Empress's maidens at the Harvest Honors." She took it from the worker's hands and handed it to me.

"Beyond simple pride in our craft, why should we care how it looks if it is not to be worn by the Empress?"

It was heavy with layers of cloth, and literally sparkled, seemingly with an inner light of its own. I did not dream that a garment could be so fabulously sewn. The cloak was of the finest red-dyed cotton with threads of silver woven throughout, the undergarment glistened of crisp white silk, intricately painted with the clan symbols of Whitehome. Finally, to prove that it was a royal garment, it had a waistband of the finest white rabbit fur I had ever seen.

Holding such a fine garment close to me for the first time was a wonderful experience, but the wonder of the moment was lost by Scrapper's question. There I was confronted by a question again. I seemed to go from one question to another in my life.

"You may not care how the maiden looks by herself, but surely she must complement the Empress's garment." I said, stalling for time while I looked around the room for a clue. There, by the door, hung a scrap of cloth on a wall hook by itself. It was similar in color to the cloak of the garment I held in my arms, only brighter with gold threads rather than silver. An idea rapidly formed to become my answer, "The Empress would dazzle the Fair if the Emperor wore the blue of her eyes."

Scrapper just sat there looking at the garment as if I had not yet answered. The others in the room twittered amongst themselves and waited as if expecting her to reprimand my impunity. Seeing their reaction, my heart sank and my shoulders became too heavy to hold erect. Well, I had tried, I consoled myself.

I watched Scrapper. She smiled! "You are correct, my dear. As you guessed, the cloth on the wall over there is from the Empress's garment. It does little for the Empress's complexion, but it is all I have that she has not already been seen in. On the other hand, cloth that is the blue of her eyes we have, and the Emperor could wear it as a counterpoint to her cloak."

She looked about the room and then asked one of the workers to find a stretch of the blue silk. Soon he returned with a stretch of the very lightest blue with gold threads woven throughout. He held it up for her examination. Finally, she looked directly into my eyes and smiled the same sort of warm smile Old Father used to favor me with when I did particularly well in my lessons.

"Her eyes *will* dazzle if the Emperor wears this color. Thank you, young lady."

Moments later, I found myself sitting across from Scrapper with tea and cheese set out on a small table between us. Once off her tall stool, she seemed much older and less in command, and I could tell that there were things about her body that did not work as well as they may have in her youth.

"Willow told me of your clever description of the dreary sky. You captured his respect with that one, you did." She laughed lightly and patted the table between us to emphasize her delight.

"Old Willow has a golden heart but he has no time for incompetence. He would not have even listened to your weaver friend had he not known of and respected his reputation. You are fortunate to have come to him with such a good friend." She lifted her bowl and sipped tea. "So where did you learn to know color . . . and people?"

I told her about Old Father and how he had saved me from sure death and had taught me the ways of Whitehome. I explained about how I came to be in her house, about the years with the Weavers, and how I wished to be more creative but could not under the rigid rules of the Weaver Guild. Finally, I told her of how combining colors was to me,

like solving pieces of a puzzle, a puzzle that could always be solved once I understood why the puzzle was posed.

"I sometimes think Old Father is by my side helping me see how to look at the puzzle. It is as if he whispers in my ear to remind me to follow the rules for proper thinking and attitude."

I swallowed a small ache of loss at the remembrance of Old Father and continued.

"When I do as he tells me . . . I mean as he told me, I can easily see the whole situation and the colors naturally arrange themselves in my mind in the way they best work together. It is as if they sing and shine with a harmony to reward my efforts."

Scrapper listened to me with great attention and then was quiet for a while after I finished. Finally she sighed, "You remind me of my youth, One Who Cares. I once saw colors like that, but not today."

She thought for a moment, moving an eating stick aimlessly about the top of her bowl as if she were playing a rolling drum to herself.

"No, my ability to see colors has not really left me, but rather, my ability to *feel* colors has left me. I just don't have that spark, that enthusiasm for life like you, that seems to be necessary to be creative, you see. In my time, I must have tried every combination in color conceivable, combinations that I have forgotten today. Once, I would have thought of using the Emperor to carry the Empress's color, but not today. I have simply lost my enthusiasm for the work."

She lifted her eyes away from her rolling drum to look at me. "You appear to have a fresh way of looking at what I have already looked at hundreds of times. I envy you."

I could suppress my question no longer. "Mistress?"

"Yes? Call me Scrapper, my dear. Everyone else does."

"Why have you not had someone come to fill this position before this? I understand you have had many that have come to try, but they were ones that you could not accept. Perhaps one of your helpers may be best to be your apprentice."

I was still unable to accept that I would be apprenticed to this grand old lady.

Scrapper grinned at me and playfully shoved one of her eating sticks across the table, apparently trying to knock my stick away from my bowl. "Those kind people who help me and those others who would work with me, they are all just exactly as they are supposed to be, every one of them is the same with the same answers. However, you have answered our questions twice without preparation, with answers that have sparked our imagination and challenged the common ways."

She picked up a piece of cheese and dipped it into her tea, then she popped the cheese into her mouth and grinned at me.

"None of those others would have dreamed of dipping their cheese like that if they were not alone. Worse, they would have been shocked at my doing so, but you have that look on your face that tells me you would like to try it yourself. Go ahead."

Finally satisfied that I was safe and that I would be permitted to remain in the household for a time, I grinned back at her and flicked her stick back to her side of the table with my finger. The stick hit her bowl and flipped into the air, landing in her bowl. We both looked in disbelief at the stick and then started laughing. We had a very good talk that day. I became old Scrapper's apprentice and made a happy home in the Royal Garment clan's house.

That day has always echoed in my mind as the most eventful and fortuitous day of my life. If the day I joined the Weavers was the day I grew from being a little girl of the

Blue Mountain clan to being a young woman of Whitehome, the day I joined the Royal Garment clan was the day I grew from being an impressionable young woman of the backways to a self-sufficient lady of the craft. The Garment Guild had no restrictions on who could sew the cloth and there were as many women in the trade as there were men. Of course, the woman's work was more highly prized for its superior quality over the men's, but there was room for both in Whitehome.

The first thing I discovered upon becoming Scrapper's apprentice was the prestige that she had. Since she was the Empress's seamstress, she ranked as the most important craftsperson in the house.

"I am old enough now that I should not be required to deal with every little thing that must be settled for my interest." She told me that same evening I became her apprentice.

"Old Willow tries to take care of my needs, but he really does not understand me, even after all these years. You will be my representative whenever there are decisions to be made in the house. You will speak for me!" She nodded her head firmly as if finally solving a problem she had been struggling with for some time. Looking closely at me, she added a thinly veiled warning that I never forgot.

"As long as you learn your lessons and remain in my favor, you will be the second most important woman in your new world. Treat the responsibility with care."

It was as if I had been touched by the Lord of Dreams who permitted me never to wake from the most splendid of dreams.

I did need help adjusting. Scrapper simply turned over the responsibility to me without telling me what I must do to fulfill the role. Willow, that sparkling-eyed scoundrel, explained to me all the essential details of living in the Royal Garment clan's house before I made any serious social blunders. He explained that the Royal Garment clan would agree to provide me a place to live and protection in return for my good service, and that such an arrangement was possible for the duration of my life as long as I remained in good favor with the clan and Scrapper. Good favor, it turned out, was maintained by behaving as any loyal clan member might behave. Well, we were not actually treated like members of the clan, but we were probably some of the better treated clan workers in Whitehome.

All of the time I remained in that house, I only saw the Master once or twice a moon cycle. The Master's younger brother was in charge of making sure Scrapper had the Empress's orders and that she had everything needed to fill those orders. But the younger brother delegated the actual doing of the task to Willow, and spent most of his time sporting about with the Emperor's two boys.

From my viewpoint, the entire household consisted of Willow, Scrapper and the other workers. The clan members were always busy with their social duties and let us run the business. It was a fine arrangement that we were very careful not to sour.

Willow became my guardian of sorts, but not before he discovered my oath dagger and came to understand that I was not available for favors like many of the other women of the household. That was a very trying moment of discovery that I suppose had to happen before he and I could get along. Even though I tried to look as boyish and uninteresting as possible, he knew full well I was a woman and instinctively wanted to bed me. As usual, an evening of drinking brought his manly courage to a peak and he sought me out for his pleasure. Bless Mama and her knowledge of the oath, Willow snagged me to him when we passed in a hallway and my dagger obediently fell from under my cloak.

"What is this?" he asked, as he turned loose of me and fell against the wall. "Do I see an oath dagger?" He did not wait for me to answer. Feigning confusion, he staggered on down the hallway.

Willow was obviously embarrassed by what happened and it took some time after that before he got over the incident. Scrapper told me to ignore his discomfort. She believed he would come around sooner or later, but I could not stand the coldness between us and finally decided to gamble on his good nature. I waited until I was certain that he had not been drinking and found him where I knew we would be left alone, but where we were within shouting distance of the others if I should need help. I strolled up to him in the stretch stacking room, and to his surprise, reached out my hand to give him my dagger.

"I value your friendship more than my oath, Willow."

Willow did not take my dagger, but stared first at it and then at me, his mouth hanging slack. Finally, he got hold of his senses and slowly shook his head while he pushed my hand holding the dagger back toward the scabbard.

"You are a sweet one, and wise for your age. No, I am not so confused today and I know what I am doing."

He looked at the dagger as I clutched it close to my chest with trembling hands. I barely dared to breath.

"You may value friendship more than life, but by what I can see in you now, you would still end up taking your life if I persisted."

He smiled and raised both arms between us. I involuntarily caught my breath and closed my eyes.

"I will trade a big hug for your maidenhood and give you my undying respect, little one."

I let out a squeak of delight and rushed into his arms to share with him a moment of warmth. After a while, he stepped back, still holding me by my shoulders. "Thank you for not following the advice of old Scrapper. I heard her tell you to let me sulk. I wanted to apologize that very next morning, but could not think of a way you would trust my words. You have already become a special addition to this house and I do wish to remain your friend."

I grinned at him sheepishly. "And not my lover?"

"No, not your lover. I will help you keep your oath if that is the way you want it." He gently poked a finger at my nose. "Agreed?"

I giggled and rubbed my nose.

"Old Father used to poke me in the nose, just like that. Agreed!" We hugged again, like father and daughter.

The Healer

It was shortly after I marked my second year as Scrapper's apprentice that I once again awoke in the middle of the night with that familiar aching in my lower stomach and my crotch clammy with thick blood. Despite everything I tried over the next few days, the bleeding and discomfort finally reached a severity I could no longer ignore, and I determined to seek help out of fear for my life.

The first time I had experienced the bleeding, Mama had gone to Medicine Grower and obtained a foul tasting root that she made me drink in a tea and rub on my belly as a stinging paste several times each day until the bleeding stopped. By the time it did stop, I smelled like an old rotting haystack and my soft flesh was green and sore from my belly button to my knees. The problem did finally end and my next cycle also passed without further problem, but I never quite trusted myself after that, and I always kept some of that awful plant nearby.

The problem came back to me three more times while I lived in the Royal Garment clan house. Each time, I feigned minor illness and remained in my room until it passed. This time, it was different. The bleeding showed no sign of letting up and was afraid I was going to die. I did not know what to do and I was afraid to ask for help, especially after the way Wife of Weaverson had behaved when she thought I was sickly and might contaminate the house. Finally, I bundled myself up with all of the spare cloth I could possibly carry and made my way to Medicine Grower's house.

It was midday when I got there and Sheman was alone as I had hoped.

"One Who Cares! You look awful!" Sheman's eyes opened wide with concern as soon as she saw me.

"What is the matter, you were wonderful when I saw you three days ago?" She helped me into the house and onto the same sleeping pad I used so many moon cycles before.

"Remember the bleeding?" I put my head against the wall to feel the cool comfort of the mortared stone.

"It is back, only this time . . ."

I looked at her with tears welling up in my eyes, "It . . . it won't stop!"

I finally collapsed in tears. I was afraid and it felt so good to be with a friend that I could trust.

Sheman sat beside me on the pad, put her arms around my shoulders and held me tight against her warm body. She put her hand under my blouse and on my belly to see how much damage I had done with the medicine.

"You poor thing, rubbing all that horrible weed all over your tender parts." She softly patted my belly as she talked.

"Your stomach is as cold as ice!" She felt my forehead with her other hand. "Yet your face is hot. You are a mess, little one! I think it is time for us to do something about it!"

"Oh yes. But . . . but what?" I continued to cry with complete abandon.

Sheman did not answer me at first, but continued to hold me tight to her and to rock me in a soothing rhythm, softly humming a meaningless tune and stroking my head while

I continued to cry. When I finally stopped crying she got to her feet and turned to the cooking room.

"There, that is better. I will get you some decent tea that will make you feel better and give you back some of your blood."

I woke, I guess it was only a few minutes later. Sheman was gently nudging me to take the tea she held out for me.

"You need this more than you need sleep. Here, drink little one."

"Thank you. You are so kind not to fear my illness."

Sheman winked at me.

"Since you keep insisting on having these spells, I have been asking questions of the older women. I talked to Mama and asked why she knew what to do for you that first time. She said that her mother's sister finally died of such bleeding after many years of fighting it."

She watched me closely to see that I was taking her news well enough.

"There are only a few reports of such a problem and even fewer reports of women dying. There is even a case of a man dying from such bleeding."

I thought about what she had just said and turned my eyes away from my tea bowl to question her words. "A man?"

"Hah! That got your attention! Yes, a man. He failed to be properly attentive to his wife when she was having a spell, so she fed him poisoned tea."

Sheman enjoyed her little joke, even if I did not.

"Well One Who Cares, it seems that we women can occasionally get stuck in the peak of our cycle. Medicine Grower tells me that a medicine trader from an ocean city said the problem was especially severe there. He thinks it has something to do with eating fish since it is so much less common here where we eat mostly sheep."

She looked at me for a moment. "But you eat the same foods everyone else does in Whitehome, don't you?"

I reached out and held her hand for a moment. "Yes, silly. I eat the same as you. It is the weakness that has always been with me. That is why I am so afraid of having children."

We both thought for a long moment and then an especially strong cramp held my stomach and I had to wince and moan out loud.

"What can I possibly do? I am afraid I will die." I pulled Sheman's hand to me and held on with all of my strength.

"I do not want to die Sheman. Help me." I broke into tears again.

"Yes Little One, I will find a way to help you. Only sleep now to conserve your energy." She eased me down onto the pad and covered me with my cloak. Then she kissed me on my forehead and again, hummed that meaningless song while I drifted off to a deep sleep.

"Wake up Little One." Sheman shook me again, "Wake up. It is nearly dawn and we must hurry to be there this day."

She shook me again and then pushed a bowl of rice into my hands as soon as I raised my head.

"You will need the energy for the walk so do not skimp. Drink the tea by your side also. It will return some of your blood." She turned and hurried into the cooking room to prepare food for Medicine Grower's day.

I sat up and looked around the room. Son Of Medicine Grower was sitting across the room from me on their sleeping pad. A worried look was on his face but it quickly turned to a gentle smile when my eyes found his.

"My friend has lost some of her shine since we last shared bread. But you can rest assured that my woman will help."

He stood and wrapped himself in his cloak and, stepping across the room to stand in front of me, he patted my head while pointing at the rice.

"Do as Sheman has said for you will find that this will be a long day."

I reached and took hold of his hand and squeezed it for a moment while I forced a good morning smile for him. However, as soon as he turned to go into the cooking room, I leaned back against the wall and held my stomach while grimacing at my pain. I had not yet moved to eat my food when Sheman returned, took hold of my shoulders and not too gently shook me.

"My stomach hurts so." I blurted out in protest. "Where are you taking me that it is so important that I eat? Why can I not sit for a little longer?" The disgusted look on her face told me I needed more excuses.

"My cloth must be changed." I sniffled and continued to sit against the wall pouting at my food.

Sheman put her hands on her hips and stood over me, still with that disgusted look on her face. "I cannot believe how soft you have gotten being a seamstress, and spoiled. Do you have any other complaints before I drag you up the hill by your ear?"

"Yes!"

"What?"

"If I do not change my cloth, I will be so bloody you will be accused of mutilating my fair body while you are dragging me up the hill."

Sheman slouched in surrender and helped me find clean cloth and impatiently waited while I cared for myself.

"You did not tell me we were going to leave the city. This is a very long way from the house and I am getting much weaker." I turned and looked back down the path to Whitehome. "I am not sure I will be able to make it back."

"Nonsense! Soon we will be at the Spirit Master's house and once he has finished with you, you will be able to run back. That is, if you have not grown too flabby living in that great house." She tugged at my arm and steered me further up the path.

I had not left the city since that cold day when I first came down from the mountains more than five winters earlier. Even though I was concerned about my sickness, that hurried journey back up the trail evoked many strange feelings. One feeling that came for the first time was a very brief moment of curiosity about how my old clan might be. Once again I turned and looked down at Whitehome glistening in the morning sun and then up the trail toward the stark canyon that lead to my lost home. No, I was not curious enough about the welfare of my clan to retrace my steps along that treacherous path.

Mistaking my thoughts, Sheman tugged at my arm again and assured me that the journey was only a little longer.

"You will like this man, I am told. They say he has the kindest voice and a smile that only a god should have."

"Is he a god?" Sheman was such an imaginative and adventurous woman that one could never know who she might be personally acquainted with.

"He may be. Some have said that he has the gift of a god. That is why we seek him out." Sheman tugged at my arm trying to get me to move a little faster.

"Look, the sun has nearly reached the quarter day. There is no time to be weak now."

I could sense her frustration, but my pain was growing and my head was clouding with confusion from the exertion. Every step was followed by a moment of numbness in my lips and face, and my ears were beginning to buzz.

"Little One! Wake up! I can't hold you! Wake up!" I suddenly realized that Sheman was pulling at my arm and trying to get me to stand up. I was lying in the middle of the trail, my face precariously close to the rough gravel, Sheman valiantly trying to protect me from further damage. "You must wake up, Little One."

I watched Sheman with a deep fascination through the clouded vision of my numbed mind. She was beginning to behave like a person who had gotten into more than she had bargained for and did not know what to do.

"Oh, One Who Cares. Did I drag you all the way up here just so that you could die lying on this dirty old trail?" She tugged at my arm with determination as if my arm was the only thing in the world.

I continued to watch Sheman's hands tugging on my arm while the buzzing in my ears and the numbness in my body continued to overwhelm my senses. I knew I must control the numbness, but for the moment, all I could do was lay still, half on the ground, half suspended by Sheman's tugging.

It became as if I was looking down a long tunnel at my arms and hands, and for me, all there was in the world was Sheman's hands pulling at my wrists. But then, Sheman's hands were joined by an old weathered paw of a hand attached to an old man not much taller than she. The stranger took my arm, and without a word, hoisted me into the air and over to a large rock at the side of the trail as if I were a scrap of cloth. I found myself leaning against Sheman with her arms wrapped tightly around my waist, that old man crouched down in front of me looking intently into my eyes.

"There, that is better." He put his hand out and touched my forehead in a firm gesture as if he were cupping my head to test my temperature. It felt good like a hug from Sheman did when we had not seen each other for a long time, and for a moment my attention focused more clearly. I could see myself reflected in his deep brown eyes. He touched my cheek with both of his hands, cradling my head between them in a firm grip that made me want to close my eyes and go to sleep. The buzzing in my ears grew fainter. Finally, he put his hands on my shoulders and repeatedly pushed me away from him and back toward him as if he were gently shaking me to wake up. I did wake up.

It seemed just fine to me for him to touch me so, yet I was a little perplexed that Sheman was letting a perfect stranger be so familiar without challenging him. Instead, she just sat there beside me, holding me in a sitting position against her and watching the old man. Then he reached out and patted her on the head and stood up and shook his head.

To me, he said, "You must eat more red roots, my child. You are a little low on the blood that gives you energy."

With that, he stood and turned to leave.

Both Sheman and I just sat on the rock staring at him in complete confusion. Finally Sheman gave me a quick squeeze and stood to follow him.

"Thank you kind gentleman." I could recognize the coddling tone of voice she always used to get her way with people.

"We are trying to make it to the Spirit Master's house. I am told it is very near here." She waited to see if the man would respond. He continued walking away from us as if she had said nothing.

"Could you help us just a little more? I can pay you."

Truly she was desperate, for the coddling tone had turned to pleading. I must have been in a bad way for her to ask for help from a stranger, even to tell him that she had coins.

He stopped and slowly turned to look us over. Then he focused on Sheman and shook his head. "Coins?" He chuckled and shook his head again. "The company of two fine young women is coin enough if you can tell me something new along the way."

"Huh?" Sheman responded with a confused grunt. "But I am a woman. I know nothing that a man would not know."

For a moment, the old man stood much taller while he shot a sharp glance toward Sheman. "Hah! Save your deceiving for your men folk. I want none of it here!" He shook his head with a disgusted look and once again turned to leave.

Sheman looked over at me for help. "One Who Cares?"

I slowly stood, being careful not to topple over from weakness, but found that I had energy to spare and lightly stepped over to stand at her side. Keeping my eye on the old man's back as he walked up the trail, I nudged Sheman with my elbow and whispered, "Sheman, I feel so much better!" We looked at each other and the realization struck us both at the same time.

"He must be the Spirit Master we have come to see," Sheman whispered in my ear. "My clan knows a little of his ways. They do not follow the same traditions as do the people of the city, or the people of the mountain clans, for that matter."

"Is that why he got mad at you when you tried to flatter his manhood?"

He was getting further away.

"I do not know. Maybe. What shall we do?"

I raised my voice so that the old man could hear me. "I can tell you of a plant and how it became your cloak."

That got his attention. Of course he was listening to our whispering and as soon as I spoke aloud, he stopped to hear my words. He turned with his head cocked a little to one side, apparently favoring one ear.

"How many times has it been told before it comes to my ears?"

I hesitated for a minute to absorb the meaning of his question. Evidently, he doubted that I knew of such things personally.

"It will be told for the first time from my lips to your good ear, Spirit Master."

He chuckled and walked back down the trail to join us.

"What manner of illness do you have that you must come all the way up here to bother an old man like me?"

Sheman stood back a little and watched the two of us talk. Every once in a while, she slowly shook her head, apparently in wonder. Finally, after I had told my story to the healer and while we were following him up the trail toward his house, Sheman nudged me and with whispering tones, asked me how I had known what to say to him.

"I am the one who thought of bringing you here! How is it that you understand what to say to him?"

"Old Father, silly. He has told me many things about such people. He said that if a person follows the path of Spirit, then he will not be interested in coins. He will value knowledge over every coin." I thought about my own words for a few minutes as we

made our way up a rugged trail that forked off the main path. I knew that I would have to make good on my pledged story and hoped that it would be suitable to the old man. He had somehow given me energy, but I could feel my energy waning as we walked and I knew that I would never be able to make it back to Whitehome without more of his help.

Spirit Master's house was hidden where there seemed to be only sheer canyon walls, however as we came closer, we could see that it was at the edge of a small landing bounded on one side by an overhanging cliff and on the other by the steep canyon wall. The landing was little more than a patch of grass surrounded by rock and cut through by a rushing mountain stream. The house itself, was formed by flat rocks stacked in a semicircle near the cliff, a gap in the wall served as a rough entryway and bundles of straw made the roof. As we approached the tiny house, Spirit Master indicated that we should find a place to sit near a fire pit placed just outside of the entryway. As we did so, he disappeared into the house, quickly returning with tea and dry coal. Soon we were watching the coal smolder under an earthen pot full of water while the Spirit Master slowly fed medicine plants into the water and slowly rocked from side to side nudging first me then Sheman.

Finally, when he had finished putting all of the plants into the water, he brushed his hands off and put his arms around both of us in a fatherly hug.

"Now, my little friends, tell me about the plants that become cloaks."

Then he made an exaggerated motion with his head to indicate his preparedness to listen.

Sheman looked around him at me, her eyes wide in concern, as if to say that we were trapped and it was up to me to get us out of there. Feeling a cramp in my stomach and a numbness in my lips, I needed no coaxing to tell my story about how cotton was processed into garments.

I talked for a long time while the water boiled and Spirit Master listened and stirred. Sheman listened as if spellbound.

When I finished with my story, Spirit Master pulled at his cloak and made a big show of looking closely at the cloth as if he had never done so before.

"Who would dream that we wear plants or that a lowly old tuft of cotton could become such a noble thing for Humankind to wear on his back?"

He lightly slapped a hand to both Sheman and my knee and pushed himself to a standing position.

"Now, One Who Cares, you must drink some of this awful tea with Sheman and me."

He held out a hand to both of us and helped us to our feet, indicating that we should step away from the house.

"Go, over there where you can see the stream at your feet and the sky above your head. This rock hanging over my house is good to keep the rain off but it does not let the energy flow as it must for your healing."

"But I am not sick. Why should I have to drink that foul-smelling stuff?" Sheman pleaded to Spirit Master as he scooped the tea into three cups. He ignored her.

I walked over to a level place beside the small stream and looked around to assure that I was out from under the overhanging cliff as Spirit Master had requested. I also checked to see that I was far from the edge of the meadow where the canyon wall slopped steeply into the shadows below.

Spirit Master and Sheman were still talking by the house, leaving me time to think about why I was standing there, but before I could begin, a crow's call from somewhere overhead, pulled at my thoughts and I soon found myself ignoring my questions and enjoying the warmth of the sun on my back. Overhead, the sky was a beautiful blue against the white and gray stone of the cliff, here and there, punctuated by the bright green of small bushes growing from cracks in the rock. The stream giggled a rhythmic chant at my feet as the wind whispered the song of happy angels dancing in my hair. I closed my eyes and hummed a song that Old Father taught me many years ago. It was the one he said that I should always sing to the sheep when they were nervous so that they would know that I was there and that I would always take care of them.

"I will take care . . ." Old Father said in my ear. "I will take care . . ." Old Father said again and put his hand on my arm.

"Oh!" I said out loud as Spirit Master lifted my hand so that he could give me the tea.

He grinned at me and said, "I will take care not to give you too much of the willow bark, lest you grow hair on your chin."

He giggled at his joke and handed a cup to Sheman.

Sheman took it and put it up to her nose. Holding it at arm's length, she made an ugly face. "I ask you, why must I suffer too?"

"I will need your energy as well to make this thing right within One Who Cares." Holding up his own cup and drinking a sip, he made a terrible grimace.

"You see, I drink it as well. We must all be in the same rhythm to share the Spirit." He said, signaling us to drink, "Come, come, drink now!"

We all turned our cups to the sky and drank them dry. It smelled like garbage, but the taste was a musty delight. I could have drank much more.

"You are a trickster, old man!" Sheman grumbled as she turned her cup back down. "This is wonderful."

"Shush now! Hold my hand."

Spirit Master held out his hand for us. We took his hand and joined into a circle. Again, Spirit Master chanted strange words in a hypnotic rhythm, swaying side to side, forcing us to sway with him. This went on for many minutes, slowly making me feel dizzy and lightheaded. Finally, he dropped our hands and turned to face me.

"Sheman, stand on the other side of your friend and hold your hands outside of mine no matter what I do."

Sheman obediently moved to my other side and waited. As soon as she was there, Spirit Master turned me to face away from the cliff overhang and put his right hand on my forehead, his left on the back of my neck.

"Now, Sheman, put your hand on mine and close your eyes. Do what I do."

He gently shook my head and whispered in my ear. "Sing your song again. Sing it so that we can hear it. Sing it until I tell you to stop."

I sang my little song of safety, my head tingling with the feel of Spirit Master's hands on me. The angels returned to dance in my hair and the little stream joined in my rhythm. Spirit Master hummed along with me and soon, Sheman hummed too. We three swayed this way and that as the song took us into different moods. The crow, high on a rock overhead, soon joined in my song with a song of his own. As I repeated my song again and again, the crow was joined by other crows and then a hawk, hovering above the canyon wall, joined the chores with long forlorn screams.

Spirit Master moved his hands down to my throat and eventually to my chest. My body tingled more each time he moved his hands and by the time he had moved them to my stomach, I was literally vibrating with energy and blinded by flashes of light. I could hear Sheman humming and crying at the same time and we all swayed back and forth as one person. I imagined the crows and the hawk swaying with us and I sent out a thought of thanks for their joining me in my time of need. They sent back a smile.

I was nearly shouting my song when Spirit Master put his hands over my stomach and the world erupted into a crescendo of sparks and loud vibrations shimmering up and down my body. I could not move, my body vibrated so!

I heard Sheman and Spirit Master talking with muffled words. I did not move at first, only listened, trying to discover where they were, or where I was. After a few moments, I opened my eyes and saw that I was in Spirit Master's house, lying on his sleeping pad which was close to the rock of the cliff. I reached down and cautiously felt my stomach and between my legs. I felt no tenderness of cramps, nor was I as tired as before. I stood and moved easily to the doorway. "I am better!" I exclaimed with delight.

Spirit Master Quickly stood and moved to my side. "Here, young lady, do not move too fast, the tea will still be in your body."

"Tea?" I let him guide me to one of the sitting rocks. I was startled to see that the shadows were so long across the meadow. "How lovely this place by the canyon is. You have a wonderful place to live here, Spirit Master."

"Huh? You hate the canyon, One Who Cares, what are you talking about?" Sheman was incredulous.

"Oh, I suppose I do not really like the canyon, but this is very pretty here, don't you think?"

Spirit Master grinned at Sheman. "Your friend will be just fine." He handed me a cup of tea. "Here, drink this. It will help clear your head."

I took it and drank it down before I realized how bad it tasted. "Ugh! How awful! First you give me tea that smells like waste and tastes like honey then you give me tea that smells like honey but tastes like waste. Do you enjoy doing that?"

Sheman chimed in, "Yes, he does, can't you tell?"

I grinned and took Spirit Master's old hands in mine. "Spirit Master, what happened over there by the stream? I had the strangest sensation of light and vibration. Was it the tea? Did you numb my mind with your magic?"

"It was the tea . . . and the magic. The tea helped us all to pay attention to what we were doing. The song was to distract you from our doing and to help bring us all into the same path. Spirit in this place comes to me when there is an honest heart and a true need. At the last, you were visited by the great serpent who lives within your own Spirit. I knew then that you would live long and well."

There were tears in his eyes making them shine with kindness. "Many who come to me cannot get past the smell of the tea. Most expect my hands to fix them as if I am a carpenter and they are a broken stool, but they do not understand that their heart must be right to help me help them. Without their genuine desire to help themselves, the healing will not work and they will go away as ill as before, angry at me for not fixing them. Just as I can know when I do not help them, I know that I have helped you." He cocked his head a little. "I helped you help yourself."

He patted my hands. "It is late and you had better get on the trail if you are to make it to Whitehome before dark."

"Can we visit you again some time?"

"Yes, but only if you tell me something new."



Passages

Something truly wonderful happened on that little patch of green meadow suspended at the canyon's edge. That day I felt the wind angels dancing in my hair and heard the sound of thunder racing through my body as the spirits in my belly became my friends once again. It is true that time showed me I was not completely healed, as Sheman had hoped I would be. Mine was not the kind of healing I have heard of when a blind woman can suddenly see or when a crippled man is able to walk again. No, something else happened to me there. A gift. Spirit Master introduced me to an angel within my heart that has since remained with me as a source of comfort and strength, and that I am able to call on to help me overcome obstacles in my life.

My bleeding did slow that day and the pain diminished. The bleeding completely stopped by the next day and did not come back for over a year. Much to my dismay, the next time it did return, it returned with the same severity as before. Once again, I wondered if I might not die. It was different though, because instead of reaching for that gruesome root, I called on my companion angel for help. Together, my angel and I asked Spirit to find the place where the bleeding began and to make it well. I tried to remember the way Spirit Master talked to me and how he touched me with Sheman holding on to his hands, and how both of them had called on Spirit to help me. I remained in my small room and remembered how I felt when Spirit Master guided Spirit into my body. After a time, my body once again tingled with the thunder and excitement of Spirit flowing through me, and the bleeding stopped.

Sheman was so impressed by my recovery and by the simplicity of Spirit Master's involvement with nature that she petitioned him to teach her his way. He agreed to accept her as an apprentice, but not before she agreed to introduce him to Medicine Grower.

"You will be my student if you can first teach me something that I do not already know." He told her in front of Medicine Grower.

Sheman later told me that she was very frustrated with the old man and asked him, "But what could I possibly know that you have not learned, even before I was born?"

"You need not be the teacher, but the vehicle for the lesson." He replied, turning to face Medicine Grower.

"I know much about the medicine plants used when I was young but nearly nothing of the new ways."

Sheman said that she just about gave up on men that morning. It was her good husband who, sensing the importance of this knowledge to Sheman and perhaps realizing how valuable it would be for a medicine grower to have a healer in the family, came to her rescue.

"Of course Spirit Master, I would be happy to share my craft with you . . . while you teach Sheman, of course."

A deal was struck and Sheman began the long process of learning the way of the Spirit Master. Being Spirit Master's student was a great deal of work for Sheman. Each day she traveled the long path to Spirit Master's house to learn from him and recite lessons from Medicine Grower. I did not see her for months at a time because she was

too busy following Spirit Master's directions, finding where Spirit lived or learning of the way people acted when they were ill or any one of a hundred other strange tasks he gave her. There seemed to be no end to the things she had to learn.

I felt sorry for her and told her so on many occasions, but she only laughed and hugged me to her side.

"I have become knowledgeable in both the way of the plant and the way of the Spirit." She would say with a happy smile. "Because of this, I will be able to help many people in Whitehome. The effort is small when I remember the gift I will be able to give those around me."

I tried very hard to maintain contact with Spirit Master after that day. I liked him so. However, he proved very difficult for me to talk with and always seemed to be in a hurry to go somewhere.

"Why are you always in such a hurry?" I once asked him out of frustration while I hurried to keep up with him on the trail.

He stopped and looked long at me, then he sadly shook his head and turned to go on. "Wait!" I demanded.

He turned again and gave me that same long look. Finally he did answer me and made me cry in doing so.

"One Who Cares, you are a mature woman, yet you cling to me like a lamb sucking his mother's teat. I am not your Old Father! So go my child, go and find yourself a husband to give you new todays."

He turned again and hurried up the trail. I could only stand and watch him with eyes filling with tears of frustration.

"How could you be so cruel?" I whispered to his back.

It took years for me to come to understand that Spirit Master had understood me better than I did myself. At first, I turned my attention to my apprenticeship with Scrapper and tried to forget what Spirit Master had told me, but his words became a signpost that returned again and again, forcing me to examine my relationship with others. His words finally came to make sense the day Scrapper suddenly clutched her chest and gasped a cry of fear and pain as she fell to the floor.

I was in the cutting room with her when it happened. At first I was afraid, not knowing what to do, but after a few moments, I came to my senses and rushed to the floor beside her crumpled old body. Her eyes were tightly shut and her face was contorted from the pain, making her look as if she were holding her breath. I pulled her head into my lap in an attempt to comfort her. It was limp like a bundle of cloth.

"Scrapper?" I shook her to wake her up, but she did not respond. "Scrapper. Wake-up! Wake-up!" I could not ignore the truth. My old mentor was dead. I pulled her slight form to me and began to cry as I rocked her in my arms. "Oh Scrapper . . . oh Scrapper" I cried.

"What is it?" One of the workers asked, touching my shoulder to get my attention.

"She is dead. Scrapper is dead." I cried.

"But then why are you crying for Old Father when it is Scrapper who lies on the floor?" Her face had a look mixed between sadness and curiosity.

"Oh. Was I?" I tried hard to regain some self-control.

"I did not realize." I tried to focus my eyes on him through tear-swollen eyes.

"She is dead." I was embarrassed that, in my grief, I had apparently forgotten that it was Scrapper who was in my arms and had begun mourning for Old Father.

Once again I heard Spirit Master's words.

"I am not your Old Father!" Yes, perhaps I had only substituted one Old Father for another when I looked to Scrapper as my mentor. When, I wondered, would I ever grow up?"

I was still sitting on the floor and holding Scrapper in my arms when Willow came into the room and stood over me with his fists clinched and his face held in a mask of pain. He stood there without words for many minutes, mourning Scrapper's death. Then he turned and gave orders that she was no longer living in the house and that her body was to be removed. Once her body was out of the house, he sat down beside me at the cooking room table and cried with me for a very long time. Then I took him to my sleeping pad and we became lovers.

"So why are you so sad, One Who Cares? You have a fine position in the house of a respected clan. You are cared for by a good man. You are healthy. What reason do you have for being so sullen?" Sheman sat beside me on the walkway crossing the little stream that cut through the Royal Garden For The People. She had a flower in her hand which she was dismantling a petal at a time. One petal she gave to the stream; one she ate for the baby still becoming in her belly, and one she offered to me out of love.

I watched a bright, yellow petal spiral down between our dangling legs and fall into the gurgling little waterway below. The sun was warm on my back and the breeze had the smell of freshly crushed pine needles. I was content to sit in the warmth with my friend, yet I was sad.

"I do not know, Sheman. Perhaps I mourn for the little girl I once was."

I reached over and patted my friend on her belly.

"Look at you, you are with child again. At least when I was younger, I could live in fear that I might be forced to have a baby. Now I must face Willow each morning, still as barren as the day before."

Sheman handed me a petal.

"You know that the trouble you had with your cycle must have left you barren. You should be happy to still live. Besides, you do not know that Willow is not barren himself, he is much older than you."

Sheman reached out and pulled another flower from the overhanging limb by her head and proceeded to dismantle it like the one before.

"Do you not have a good life? You have your friends and your work."

"Yes, of course I do. But there is something yet unfulfilled."

"And you think that having a baby will fulfill you?" Sheman tossed the rest of the flower into the stream and held her swollen stomach with both hands.

"This is no fulfillment, my friend. Believe me, I already have one and I know. This is what I must pay for a happy home and for assurance that I will be looked after in my last years."

Sheman reached over and took one of my hands and held it against her stomach.

"The child is kicking me for being so callous," she giggled.

"You have a different way of paying your price for a happy home, One Who Cares. Willow does not seem to care that you give him no child. He loves you just the same." Sheman Struggled to her feet with my help, and we began walking aimlessly on the maze of garden paths.

"What you must worry about is your old age. You will out last old Willow by many years. What will you do then?"

"I will still have my work. I will die on the stool just as Scrapper did. That will be my old age." I was certain about that, yet I was dissatisfied.

I sat on my stool giving instructions. "No Flower, not that big. She may be that big, but we must always remember to make her look smaller." Flower adjusted the section of cloak a little on the mannequin.

"Yes, that is much better." Satisfied, I turned to the newest of my workers. "So So, you haven't learned that stitch well enough to use it on that fine cloth. Please use a stitch that you are more familiar with." I turned back to Flower who was my favorite helper and winked a conspiratorial signal that she should go to So So's aid. She liked So So and eagerly went to his side.

I caught a movement out of the corner of my eye and turned in time to see the cloth being pushed aside from the doorway as Willow hobbled into the room with a greatly agitated look on his face.

"Willow, Love, what on earth moves you so?" I asked with a laugh in my voice.

"The Master has just received a message from the Emperor about your work. He is very excited and wants you to come to his rooms this moment!" Willow was literally bouncing with excitement.

"Now? I have so little time before the Harvest Fair to prepare the Empress's winter cloak."

"Nonsense, you have very good help, the best in all of Whitehome. Does she not, So So?"

So So returned a shy grin in response to Willow's teasing as Flower turned to defend him. I stopped her with a wave of my hand and a smile.

"Well, I suppose I will not be missed if I am only away for a short time, will I Flower?"

Flower grinned back at me and nodded her head in agreement. She was the one who gave directions when I was away and she sitting at the center of the room.

"Go, One Who Cares, I will watch over So So to see that he does not ruin the silk." She winked at me as I turned to leave with Willow.

Once we were out of the cutting room, and away from the other's hearing, Willow stopped me, and gently pushed me against the wall with his body.

"You know I love you, One Who Cares. Whatever he may say, I am always with you. You must not be afraid." He always kissed me so nicely when he tried to prove his support.

I put my arms around little Willow's neck and hugged him to my chest while I gave him a big wet kiss on his bald head.

"I know, My Love. Whenever I need you, you are always by my side. Now let us not keep the Master waiting, or else it may be a poor meeting."

I was a little concerned. The Master of the clan seldom asked to see one of his workers. I had been before him only twice before, once when I became Scrapper's apprentice, and once when I took over her duties after she died. I had no idea what the Emperor might have to say about my work but surely it must be important for me to be called before the Master now.

"There you are One Who Cares. Come in, come in. You too Willow. This will interest you also."

The Master was standing by one of the great balconies of the upper house when we came in. To our surprise, he crossed the room to greet us. Taking my arm, he guided me

to a chair and offered me tea and sweets. Willow remained standing at my side with a concerned look on his face.

"How long has it been since we last talked? Too long, I suppose."

He knew full well how long it had been and I recognized his comment as polite conversation.

"Has Willow told you? I have just been before the Emperor. He has spoken to me about you!"

The Master poked a fat finger in my direction as he grinned with obvious excitement.

"I have been in the royal court for most of my life, yet this is the first time he has talked to me about one of my workers. It is a great honor"

The Master turned to a table with a small metal keg and three drinking cups.

"Here, my loyal workers, drink with me." He poured each of us a fair share of rice wine and handed the cups to us. Then he raised his cup in the air with a gesture of salute.

"Your good work has raised the value of this house in the eyes of the Emperor. He has complemented your fine work for the Empress and has promised that his daughter's next garments will be formed by your hand."

He poured another round and continued.

"I have thought a great deal about how to reward you, and have decided that you and Willow shall move your sleeping quarters onto the second floor. I have selected the room myself and think you will be very pleased. Come!" Without further comment, he turned and walked from the room. I blinked at Willow in amazement and quickly followed him with Willow close behind.

The room actually had an opening overlooking the garden. A thin skin was stretched over a frame and set in the opening so that light and fresh air could enter when it was pushed aside. The room was so big. There was even a private corner where I could sit and talk with my angel even though Willow was in the room. I never dreamed of such luxury.

Willow was also very happy and he found many ways to show me how he felt.

"You have been very good for me to be with." He told me one night while we rested on our sleeping pad in our new room.

"Hush now . . . and hold me."

"No, let me finish this one time. I have been in this house all my life and have never dared to dream of sleeping in one of these rooms. Now, because of you, I live in one."

I rolled over and poked him in the side. "You did to! I bet you dream of sleeping with every one of the ladies who live in this house, even the ones in the Master's clan."

"No, not me!" He turned and squirmed in the darkness to get away from my attacking finger.

It was nearly twenty years after that night, almost to the very hour, that Willow left me a widow. It was not a mournful passing. He had been gravely ill for many days and was in much pain from swollen joints and difficult breathing. He was laying on our sleeping pad when his time came. I held him then, the way I will hold him for eternity, as he shuddered and struggled for a last breath. I watched, curious at the water dripping onto his still face, not realizing that it was I who cried out and moaned prayers to his angels. I remember that I did not want to let them take his limp body from me and only stopped crying when Sheman came to my side to sing a song of his passing. She touched

my heart with her Soul. I slept until the sun shined on my face and I awoke to look up and see that my angel was holding my head in her lap, but it was Sheman who bent over to kiss me lightly on my forehead. I was well, but alone.

"Grandmam? Grandmam want to hold doll?"

"Now Last Girl! You must not bother Grandmam when she is trying to work." First Girl, daughter of Flower and So So, ran into the room to take control of her youngest sister and ushered her and her doll away from my table.

I watched the display of sisterly discipline with a happy interest, glad to have been saved from the little dust devil's attention yet also glad to have them both around to distract me from my routine.

"Flower, you are such a good mother," I said to the now empty room.

A little later, First Girl returned and hesitantly came to my side.

"Grandmam, is there anything I can do to help you?"

"Yes, you could put some more coal in the pit, if you would. I seem to be feeling the cold more than usual, these days."

I shivered a little and pulled my cloak closer to my neck.

After fanning the fresh pieces of coal into red embers, she returned by my side and remained quietly standing at the table, effectively mimicking a shadow in the room until I finally turned my attention to her. "Yes Little One?"

"Grandmam?"

"Yes?"

"Will you have time to tell me about the wool again?"

"Why about the wool? Wouldn't you like to know about cotton for a change?"

First Girl's face wrinkled into an exaggerated grimace and she shook her head determinedly.

"No Grandmam, I already know about plants. I want to hear about lambs again."

She put both of her hands on my arm and nestled her face against the sleeve of my cloak with her great brown eyes turned up to me.

I set aside my work and took her onto my lap.

"Very well, Little One, I will tell you a happy story about the black lamb and her wonderful shepherd.

Life had a comfortable predictability about it that made me feel safe and sure of what the day would bring. There were times though, when that predictability could be shattered and one of the worker's children was usually close by when it was.

What was left of the morning tea was cold, and there were only crumbs where once a great rice cake had sat on the table in the cutting room. I was deeply involved in selecting a new cloth for the Empress's bed cloak, and had asked Flower to see to it that the others had their work clearly marked so that they would not require my direction. Flower did as I asked and the workers were all busy with their assignments and did not require my attention. Such moments were my very favorite, for I was free to consult with my angels to bring into the world such beauty that only they could conceive.

"Grandmam! Grandmam! You must help me quickly!" Flower's First Girl was like a whirlwind delivering chaos to my side.

I could have died of bewilderment at that moment, she came in so fast, and with such noise. I dropped my color patches and stood to face the intrusion before I could come to my senses to understand that it was only First Girl.

"My mightiest gods! I will have your hide if this is not the most important thing you have ever thought of! What!?"

First Girl's eyes were round with fear. As she struggled to catch enough breath to speak, she reached out a hand in my direction and pointed toward the hallway with the other. Flower reached her daughter and grasped her outstretched arm.

"What, my child? You are not supposed to be so noisy while you are in here. What is so important?" Flower demanded as she began trying to coax First Girl away from my table.

Still First Girl struggled to gain control of her voice, she was so out of breath. Seeing her distress helped bring me to my senses and take control.

"Here, take my hand and show me what you want me to do." That was all she needed and, with a sharp turn and a little squeal, she began leading us on a long path through the house.

The house had been constructed a small portion at a time over many generations, each new portion simply attached to the others without apparent plan until finally, it stood three levels high and extended many hundreds of paces along Mainway. My cutting room was in the northern most corner of the second level of the house, and as well as I could tell, First Girl was leading us all the way to the farthest corner of the house on the first floor.

Less than half way through the house, I could go no further without resting. I pulled First Girl to a stop and was nearly run over by Flower and all five of the other workers. "I can go no further at this pace." I panted. "Please, go on with your mother and I will follow shortly."

First Girl hesitated for a moment looking first at me and then at her mother, but Flower stepped forward and took her hand from me, demanding that she continue.

I had stopped in a darkened hallway in a part of the great house I did not know. I suppose my confusion showed on my face because two workers stayed with me to see to it that I found my way. They made a great effort to show how winded they were also, but I could see their concern for my well being and was silently glad for their attention. Ever since the time I fell and hurt my wrist, those who worked with me watched over me as if I was made of clay.

Once I caught my breath, we continued in the same direction as before, hoping we would be able to find the others. We were wandering about in one of the back courtyards, trying to find where everyone had gone, when our head cutter Hands, rounded a corner and waved at us to follow.

"Come Grandmam, you must see this for yourself." And to one of the others with me, "Go find So So, he will want to be here."

I followed Hands, visualizing any number of terrible things I might soon witness, but nothing prepared me for what greeted us when we joined the others. "Oh dear! Is that possible?" I could not help myself and I began to giggle. I heard others snickering behind me.

Flower shot me a stern, reproving look. "I am sorry Flower, but only your little devil wind could get into such a position. It is a little . . . interesting, don't you agree?"

Flower frowned even harder but then the frown broke with a wrinkle at her eyes and she began to giggle. Her giggle quickly turned into a laugh and we all joined her, except Last Girl, bless her heart. She was stuck against the grating that was meant to keep stray animals from following a small water way that flowed from the house, under the wall, and into the street. Even though the stream was small, it was in a deep trench, and the

grating was at the far end of a short tunnel under the wall. Last Girl was pinned against the grating by the water. Her head was safely above the water, but there was no chance that she would make it away from her predicament by herself. A little yellow fir-ball of a kitten, wet and noisily frightened, sat on her head and continuously cried her outrage in chorus with Last Girl.

"Who would have dreamed?" Flower said to herself once she regained her composure. She slowly shook her head in dismay as she started to carefully wade into the stream.

But then, So So came thundering into the court with one of the workers close on his heels.

"What is this?" he bellowed when he saw his youngest child cruelly pinned against the grating.

"What is everyone waiting for? The creek to dry up?" He pushed Flower aside and rushed into the water to save his dear girl, and the poor kitten.

Once So So had Last Girl safely on dry land, he took a few deep breaths to regain his composure. He turned to look back at the grating, then he looked at Last Girl and each of us in turn. We all held our breath as we watched him come to understand how Last Girl had gotten into her predicament. When he did understand, he got a big grin on his face. I could tell he wanted to laugh, but was trying to consider his child's feelings. He knelt down and took her into his arms, then stood hugging her to him. He put his other arm around Flower and pulled her in front of him with Last Girl between them. They hugged the girl until she calmed down and quit crying, all the while, So So talked to her in low tones.

"You will not do that again, I am sure, but it is time that you have a new name to help remind you of the day that a little kitten nearly drowned you." He turned to looked at me and winked. "Last Girl, you will now answer to the name of Kitten."

Kitten squeaked and hugged So So before he handed her over to Flower.

"Mommy, I am Kitten now." Then she turned her head so that she could see me.

"Does that mean that I am not in trouble Grandmam?"

"No sweet one, you are in trouble, and if you are not careful, I am going to think of a special punishment to go with your new name. You made me nearly use up what life I have left trying to get here so fast. Do not do it again."

I gently poked a finger at her wet belly and turned to So So.

"First Girl is the one who told us of this situation. She may have saved Kitten's life."

In my mind, So So was spoiling the little one and ignoring his first born. I hoped to prompt him into naming her, also.

So So looked around and found First Girl standing by the wall trying to dry the kitten. "First Girl?"

"Yes Father." She stepped up beside her mother.

"Why is it that you let Kitten get into that trap in the first place. Is it not your responsibility to watch over your younger sister?"

My heart sank as I was reminded of the darker side of how the male sometime uses power. First Girl sniffled and bravely looked into her father's face.

"We were cleaning old stretches when she went after the kitten. She moved into the water so fast that I had no chance to stop her. I would have gone after her, but when I saw that she would not go under, I remained out of the water so that I could go for help."

She paused for a moment, and then blurted out her defiance. "She will be impossible to watch now that you have named her before me!" she pushed the kitten into Kitten's hands and ran from the courtyard.

"Do you have any more great ideas?" I asked So So and brushed past him with an indignant grunt.

That evening, I asked Flower if I could speak to First Girl before she went to sleep. With Flower's permission, I entered their room. Passing So So on the way to First Girl's corner, I patted him on his shoulder as a friendly gesture. He reached up and held my hand firmly against his shoulder in acknowledgement. I think I could tell that he understood how he might have handled the situation a little better that day.

First Girl was already curled onto her sleeping pad when I reached her corner. "Grandmam!" She exclaimed as soon as she saw me, and sat up to lean against the wall. I stood over her and held a small candle high to better see her. Her little body huddled against the wall reminded me of another little girl who, many years ago, huddled afraid against a darkened doorway when she came to understand that the only person in the world she had love for was soon to die.

I was once small and confused like this one now, I reminded myself. Out loud I said, "Child, may I talk with you?"

"Yes, Grandmam." She patted her sleeping pad. "Please, sit by me."

I carefully lowered myself to her pad and once settled, I patted her small leg. "Have I ever told you of how I came to take a holy oath?"

"No . . . no you have never." She sniffed, trying to suppress new tears.

"Then I think it is time for you to understand that a child will one day be a woman. Come." I propped myself against the wall beside her and put my arm around her small shoulders, pulling her against my side.

I told her only a slightly modified version of how I learned to carry a dagger under my cloak and to take control of my life.

"You see, my little friend," I told her when I was finished, "there are many ways that you can come to be your own woman, and there is much you will come to understand about the people you must live with. Your parents know much that you will learn, and you must love and respect them for that." I looked across the room to So So and Flower now huddled on their own sleeping pad trying not to be obvious about listening to us.

"But because you showed such good judgement today, I see in you more good thinking than I might expect from one as young as you."

I ruffled her hair and tickled her under her ear. "I want you to know that I am proud of you. I sense that you will be a strong person when you are grown, and I want you to understand that you must learn to see the kindness in the hearts of everyone you are near. Simple kindness, that is the answer for you. Show simple kindness to everyone."

I struggled to my feet and prepared to leave her corner. "Thank you Grandmam, that was a nice story."

"It has been my pleasure Bright Light, it has been my pleasure." There, I had named her! I continued out of the room without looking at So So or Flower.

"May the blessings be with you tonight my friends." I said to the darkness of the room as I lowered the door flap behind me. I was delighted with myself that night.

"That was an ornery thing you did last night, One Who Cares." Flower was sitting across from me at the cooking room table, sipping her tea. "First Girl has already refused to respond to her name twice because she said you named her last night."

"You mean Bright One." I held my voice firm.

"Yes, I mean Bright One." Flower gave me in a conspirator smile.

"How is So So taking it? I really do not wish to challenge his authority, but I felt so bad for Bright Light that I felt I had to do something for her. She is his first born and should have been named first."

"So So was furious at first, but I talked to him. He likes you as much as he respects your authority in the cutting room and because you have done so much for all of us, he trusts you." She sipped her tea once more.

"You should have seen her this morning. She was so happy. How could So So not be proud that the Grandmam named his first born for him, once he thought it over."

"Then he will let her keep the name?"

"How can he take it from her without making her hate him? No, he has accepted her name as final." Flower reached across the table and patted my hand. "Thank you for being interested in Bright Light."

"Oh, do not think of it any more. Let it end as a gift given and accepted." I watched her as she sipped her tea again.

"There is something more on your mind. What is troubling you?"

"Oh, nothing really. It is just that . . . Well, it is just that First G--I mean Bright Light came first to you for help yesterday, not to me." She blurted out the last of her concern with a little tear forming in her eye.

"It is nothing." I tried to assure her. "She only came to me because she knows that her noise bothers me most and she wanted to get me on her side to keep me from yelling at her." That sounded like a good explanation. I was pleased with how I handled Flower's feelings and stood to leave the room before more could be said of it.

Flower intercepted me by asking me to stay for another cup. "Please, I guess this is bothering me more than I knew." She sniffed a couple of times to prove her concern.

"Nonsense! There is nothing unusual here. I am the one she calls Grandmam. If I was a weak old lady, she would only call me Old Lady or something equally condescending. No, I am in authority amongst the workers and she knows it. That is why she comes to me first. She knows that I can make things happen." I hated to be so blunt about my authority, but it was true, I naturally became the Mistress of the lower floors when Willow died. That was years ago and I had been in charge ever since. Over twenty years of authority had made me careful how I used it.

Flower pressed her point further. "She thinks of you more as an Old Mother than as the head seamstress, she respects you so. You teach her so much. As far as she is concerned, there is nothing that you do not know."

She cocked her head and looked closely at me.

"What, Grandmam?"

"Did you say Old Mother?" I guess I had a perplexed look on my face.

"I am sorry, I did not mean to insult . . ."

"No, that is not an insult. One of the finest people I knew was just Old Father to me. Now you are saying that your little girl thinks of me as Old Mother much the same way as I thought of my Old Father."

I was a little startled by the turn in the conversation. I felt dazed.

Looking at Flower, I asked, "Could it be that I have lost Old Father only to become who he was? Am I an Old Father now?"



The Return

I will admit, the realization that I was fulfilling the role of Old Mother to Bright Light put me into a dark mood for days. Over the years, I had come to understand my habit of seeking out people to fill the roll of Old Father for me and it was a shock to discover that now, I had become the Old Mother. Somehow I felt that my mind had betrayed me by letting me grow old without my notice. Now, if I was to be the Old Mother for others, who would I turn to to be my Old Father.

At first, all I could think about was how old I suddenly felt, and how tired I had become of doing the same things over and over again, day after day without end. That realization quite naturally lead me to ask myself what I would rather be doing. But there were no answers that made sense to me, and so, my mood grew darker. Then one night I woke from a fitful dream in which I was trying to help a small girl learn how to birth a lamb. Every time the lamb began to emerge from its mother, the little girl would jump up and begin chasing a butterfly, thus scaring the lamb back into its mother. I must have grabbed for that lamb's head while I reached for the girl with my other hand a dozen times. When I finally woke, I was sick and disgusted with both of them.

"My word!" I told the place where Willow used to sleep. "You should have seen that poor ewe!" I dressed and went to find some warm tea in the cooking room.

Try as I did to make the bothersome dream leave my head, it persisted. It seemed that, with each sip of my tea, the dream forced more and more dissatisfaction with my life to come into my mind. Then it came to me. I remembered. I just sat there in the near dark of the cooking room, in shocked amazement. That little girl who wanted to chase a butterfly was me. The dream was from Old Father's perspective. Thinking of it that way caused me to remembered one of the things he once said to me when I refused to learn.

"You will one day try to teach an unruly child just as I am trying now to teach you. Then you will understand what you have put me through this day."

"Why this remembrance of my childhood? Old Father, are you calling me back home?" I listened, holding my breath out of fear that the night might answer my spoken question. There was no answer.

"Old Father, are you showing me that like you, I have run off to Whitehome to chase the brightness of the city and now, like you, I must return to my clan to teach the children?"

Again I listened to the darkness but this time, I heard Old Father's words in my mind. "You can never go back, only return."

"What?" I asked the darkness.

Why would I remember such a thing? Then I remembered Old Father was fond of using that little saying whenever he had a conflict with the clan. The first time he used it, I remembered looking at him with a perplexed look on my face to tell him he was making no sense.

He had only laughed and explained, "You can return to where you were, my little flower, but you can never go back to the way things were before you left."

Then he became sad as he continued, "Things always change. I am different and so is the clan." After that, he said no more but remained quiet with his memories.

I felt a chill crawl up my spine. It was as if I was carrying on a conversation with the dead. I put down my tea bowl and very quietly returned to my room.

Looking back to that night, I realized that Old Father may as well have sent an angel to call me home. That moment of remembrance led me to think of my clan and my life in the mountains, and in time, eventually led me to the decision to return home. Despite the unhappiness born of my childhood in the clan, my memory of that far distant home seemed friendlier than the life I was living in Whitehome. Yes, I had people around me who cared about my welfare, but I knew that they would not consider themselves obligated to take care of me should I not have the good fortune to pass quickly as did Scrapper. Yes, I was surrounded by friends but they were not my clan.

Over the next few days I ask my angels to help me understand the meaning of my decision to return home to the mountains. All of those years I had hardly thought about my clan, except to occasionally muse over what they would think of my success in Whitehome. I expected that my clan would think me dead. They had no way of knowing my fate, just as I had no way to know theirs. But to return home. The idea took a great deal of getting used to.

"Would they let me return?" I asked myself that question over and over again until I finally talked myself into believing that they must. Having left would have made me an outcast, just as Old Father became an outcast when he left. In fact, if it was not for the blood tie all members of the clan shared, he would have remained an outcast.

Old Father once told me, "Your father took me back because he was more afraid of the clan ancestors than he was mad at me."

Yes, they would take me back for the same reason. That, and the things I would be able to teach them about wool and cloth. They would take me back.

I finally understood Old Father's words. I might be able to return, but I would never be able to go back to the relationship I had with my clan before I left. But then, who would want to do that? With that realization came another thing Old Father had told me.

"Your father puts up with me because he wants my coins." I knew that Old Father was right. If they will not take me back out of love, they will take me back out of greed.

Whenever I visited Sheman, I was always shocked at how old she seemed to be getting. But when I watched her move about her house and when we talked, I was equally shocked at how young she had remained inside.

"You always were older than me. So how is it that you look like you are my mother but act like you are my daughter? Am I talking to a changeling?" I asked her.

"No, silly. It is the Spirit I serve. It keeps me young to do its bidding. I cannot heal others if I am unable to go to them. Besides, you and I are not all that old, you just feel old. I can see in your Spirit that you have aged at least a hundred years since last we spoke. What is troubling you, my friend?"

We were like a couple of old lizards basking in the sun against the wall of her courtyard. Medicine Grower had died without being able to hand down his corner shop to either of their two sons. Without that work, the boys had been forced to move to the edge of the city where there was need of people skilled in working with the medicine plants, thus leaving Sheman to fend for herself, something she was perfectly capable of doing through what she earned as a spirit master and medicine worker.

We were quiet for a long moment while I listened to the backway traffic coming from the other side of the wall and mused over my life in Whitehome. I knew Sheman was waiting for me to speak and that I could put off telling her no longer.

"I have decided to return to my clan." I said the words and held my breath. It was the first time that I had said them out loud and they sounded very strange to my ears. Also, I recognized that those words would mean that I was going to leave the best friend I had, forever. I waited for Sheman's reaction.

It came. "I figured you were going to say that." Sheman said without emotion.

"Huh? How did you know?" I was incredulous.

"You have been saying some pretty strange things lately. I just figured saying you are going home was next."

She put her finger up to my lips to silence my protest. Then, assured that I would not speak, she closed her eyes and remained quiet while I waited. It was just as well she stopped me because I was fighting to hold back tears. I did not know what to say that would help her understand why I must leave. After forever, she held a hand to her forehead and the other to her stomach.

"Eyiiii . . . eyiiii . . . eyiiii" She chanted over and over again in a very quiet voice.

I started to cry and tried to hide it from my friend, but she moved the hand that was on her stomach and put it on my forehead. She sat close by my side and held both of our foreheads, sniffed loudly, and continued to chant.

"Eyiiii . . . eyiiii . . . eyiiii"

That did it! I felt the energy rush through my body, and for a moment, my Soul joined with her Soul and we danced the dance of love above the courtyard. We both cried loudly and then we were quiet. Good-by my friend.

Flower was easier. She knew that I would pick her to do my work and was delighted that I would leave so soon.

"But Grandmam. You mustn't leave now. You are still full of energy and have many ideas that you have yet to try for the Empress. Please stay."

"Now, my dear. I know that you will miss my friendship, but you will not miss me long on the stool, for you have earned it for yourself and will be happy sitting there. Just help me prepare my leaving and you will soon be the one who spins on that awful stool."

Bright One was much different. She had only my support to lose and nothing to gain. "Will I remember you when I am as old as you are, Grandmam?"

"Yes, you little piece of sunlight, you will remember me because I will always be thinking of you. Someday I will sit as one of your ancestors to watch over you and your children."

I hugged her to me and for a moment, tried to touch her forehead as Sheman had with me. I gave up the idea when she giggled at my action.

"You must remember to be a proud woman and to pick only the best of the young men for your mate. I will not be here to run to, when you do not like your mother's answers, so you will have to trust her. Do you understand how that will make your life easier in this house?"

I had to coax her, but she finally nodded her head and then began to cry openly. "You will never come back and they will name me anything they want!"

"No, that is not true. I still think of myself as One Who Cares even though everyone has taken to calling me Grandmam. You are Bright One now and that is who

you will remain no matter what other people call you. No one can take your name away from you. Only you can give it up. Do not forget that!" We hugged for a long time.

So So stepped up to the horse that I was on and handed me a small bundle wrapped in a scrap of one of the finest silks. "For the trail, Grandmam. May the blessings of God be with you on your return home."

"Thank you, my friend." I took the bundle and tucked it into my side pouch, all the while careful not to disturb the horse.

Nearly the whole household had come down to the caravan stables to see me off. I waved at them as the caravan master shouted a warning and then a command for the animals to begin. I held on for dear life as my great beast lumbered forward, first one step, and then another, as he followed the blunt end of the animal before us. "Oh my angels!" I prayed to myself while I tried to make soothing sounds in the horse's ear in hopes that we might be friends.

It was at the great western gate that the Empress's men met us. I recognized their uniform on sight and viewed the captain with growing alarm as he commanded the caravan to stop and rode his leather armored horse up to me at a commanding gait.

"Perhaps the Empress had decided not to let me go after all." I thought to myself in alarm. In a way, I was her property and she had shown some anger that I was leaving her service.

"At your service, One Who Cares." The captain said with a salute, handing me a scrolled message. He sat beside me expectantly, indicating that I should read it as he waited.

"My dear One Who Cares." The Empress's message read.

"You have pleased me for so many years, I will show you this kindness, that you will know my gratitude." That was all it said. I looked up at the captain expectantly.

"The cloak!" He shouted at one of his men who promptly rode up to join us and handed the captain a bundle wrapped in fine silk. It was a larger scrap from the same stretch of silk So So had used to wrap the small bundle of food that he had given me. I stifled a small giggle when I recognized the silk.

The captain handed me the bundle. "The Empress has commanded that you should have this."

"Why, thank you good Captain. Please tell the Empress that I am most pleased and gratified that she has shown her consideration." I hoped that would end the discussion with the warrior.

"The Empress has also requested that I escort you to your clan house." He turned and waved at the caravan master to proceed. The caravan master shrugged and shouted at the animals who continued as if they had never stopped. My beast moved forward with six grand warriors of the Empress flanking us. I sighed to myself in resignation.

"Was it just the eyes of youth?"

"Grandmam?" My words startled the captain out of his private revelry.

"The last time I passed this way, I was but a youth seeking to find medicine in Whitehome for a dying friend. The trail seemed so foreboding and unsafe that I have feared passing over it since." I waved my arm to indicate the beauty that lay in every direction along the trail. "But today . . . it is all so beautiful. How could I have been so afraid?"

"What season was it then, Grandmam?" The captain asked in a practical tone of voice.

I thought for a moment. "Spring. Yes, I believe it was Spring."

"Early Spring finds this pass mostly without life save the crows and hawks. If you came in early Spring it would not have been as nice. And, if you were a girl child, alone, you may have had good reason to fear." The captain's words did not tell all he knew.

"Yes, I suppose so." I thought longer. "It was a different season of my life as well. Now, in my Fall, I remember my Spring to be full of fear. If it were not for Old Father, I would not have had a Summer." There was nothing the good captain could say in response to my words so we both remained silent while I continued to admire the wondrous transformation time and experience had brought to the world.

That first evening we made an early camp at the edge of a small step near the canyon wall. I was delighted at the unexpectedly early opportunity to escape my mount and quickly moved to where I could sit on a rock and look down into the canyon's river far below. If I concentrated very hard, I could see a faint haze where I knew the desert to be. There, it was already growing dark from the shadow cast by the mighty mountains we were climbing. Looking in the direction we were traveling, all I could see was the dark shape of gray mountain peaks rising above the canyon still ahead. Peaks silhouetted by a most delicate pink and violet sky. "The sky smiles for me before she sleeps," I mused to myself and turned my attention to watch the hawk's mesmerizing flight through the twilight sky below me.

All morning I watched as the gleaming mountain peaks loomed white in front of me. It was as if our caravan was determined to run into the foot of the very biggest one, yet I knew that we would soon veer south to pass between its steepest wall and the bell shaped bulge to its left. It would be beyond that pass and two others that I would end my journey of so many years and return to my mountain home.

"I pray to the Gods that I will be accepted." I must have said out loud.

"Oh, your clan will accept you, Grandmam."

Chills crawled up and down my spine and I visualized what the well-armed captain might do if his charge was not accepted. "Oh, Captain, never you mind the prattling of an old woman. Of course they will accept me, I just worry that it has been so long." To myself I said, "Oh God, what might I have done?"

"Stop!" I said loud enough for the captain to hear me. He had paid the caravan master and was galloping past me and his men to take the lead on the little trail to my clan house.

"Grandmam?" He asked, turning his horse to move in front of me.

"Please. I would wear this wonderful cloak our Empress has given me, when I am presented to the Clan Father."

"As you wish, Grandmam." He indicated to the other men that they should move away to give me privacy.

I got off of my horse and unbundled the gift cloak. "Oh, Captain. That is unnecessary, I am too old to need that kind of privacy but thank you for the consideration." Truly, what a beautiful cloak it was, and it was not one I had made myself.

"This is a very fine cloak, Captain. Please do tell our Empress how well it looks on me and how grateful I am of her consideration." I felt like an Empress myself.

"I will Grandmam. You do look very nice." He saluted me and turned to lead me and his men up the trail.

"I will wager the clan has never experienced such a visit as they are about to experience now." The captain said jokingly as we rounded the final turn before the gate. The clan house was a loose cluster of mortared rock walls, covered with wood and hide roofs, and surrounded by a newly-patched earth and stone wall. It stood at the margin between a rock cliff and a small mountain meadow, which was bounded all around by nearly barren hills and thickly planted with a wide variety of food crops. I knew that the only way into the meadow was by that wall, and remembered that it once had a tower on the other side of the trail and a gate strung across to completely block passage.

The first sign of life we saw were the dogs, who began barking as they ran to confront us from their sleeping place near the wall. Their frenzied barking brought the attention of children of many different ages, who boil from the gate with loud sounds of excitement. They were obviously just as curious to see strangers by their house as were the dogs. Then came the shouts of men commanding first the children to return behind the wall, and then the dogs to take their place by the men's side.

Our little party stopped in front of my clan house gate as a very tall young man in a rough hewn cloak strolled out of the gate to stand before us. He turned to see that everyone was where they belonged and then, apparently satisfied, turned back to face us.

"How may we help the Guard of Whitehome, Captain?"

"You may help by receiving one known to you as Morning Glory Of The Mountains." The captain swung his arm around in an expansive gesture to indicate me to the young man. I sat frozen on my horse, afraid even to breath.

The young man cocked his head to one side with a perplexed look on his face. "Who?"

"Who, indeed!" I growled, not being able to bear being so passive. I rode up beside the captain and bent over my saddle to look into the young man's eyes. "You were yet unborn when I left the clan house to find medicine for an old dying man of the clan. Who in the house today was an adult before you were born?"

He stiffened his posture and glanced again at the warriors before facing me.

"The Grandmother of the clan lived before me. Perhaps she will remember you."

He considered his next word carefully before he spoke. "Perhaps you and these fine gentlemen would join us for tea. Grandmother will talk with you then."

I looked to the captain, fidgeting with his sward and watching the man with a stern gaze.

"Captain?"

He turned his attention to me and nodded his head in agreement.

"Yes, Grandmam, tea would be welcome."

With that, the young man turned and marched off toward the gate shouting orders at others inside to prepare to receive guests.

"As I remember my people, Captain, they are not an unfriendly bunch to visitors, just careful. Our request to be received would not have been so easily agreed on had it not been clear that we are not robbers." The captain was obviously pleased to know that his authority was helping our mission.

We sat on benches molded into the wall of a small court. In one corner, there was a small table also molded into the wall. A raised coal pit sat in the middle of the court, filled with glowing pieces of coal and a few green roots serving to sweeten the smell.

The only stool in the room sat near the entryway. I was surprised to see that it actually had back and armrests. It was occupied by an old woman, who was surveying the court with the unmistakably critical eyes of one in authority. The sun illuminated fully one half of the court making part of the wall shine with a nearly eye hearting white while the other half was, by contrast, nearly black. The whole scene was covered above by the most vivid blue I could remember seeing. My escort, still in field cloaks, sat on either side of me and nine elders of the clan, in darkly stained leather cloaks, sat around the wall where I could clearly see them. I felt over dressed.

The tea was ritually served, first to me, then to the captain and his men, and finally to the old lady on the stool. Only after she had raised her cup in salute to the captain and me and had taken a sip, did the others receive their cups, hastily brought to them by two of the children. Once everyone had their tea, I raised my cup to the old lady and wished that her house would know peace and good crops. We sipped our tea and smiled at each other.

The old lady finally finished her tea and held it out for one of the children to refill. That was the cue for the rest of us to finish our first tea and a signal that the ritual was over. The captain and his men watched me and gratefully downed their tea when I indicated to them that it was okay.

"Too Big tells me that you were once known to us as Morning Glory Of The Mountains." The old woman abruptly opened conversation.

"Yes, I am of this clan." I had been watching her since she came in, trying to determine if I knew her but, in fact, I could not recognize one of them, even though several were older than me. "I have a very long story to tell of my leaving and now, my return. But before I tell my story, I must know who it is I am speaking to."

"You do not recognize me, Another Girl Damn It?" The old lady asked me, teasing me with the name my father had given me at birth. She had a broad grin on her face was leaning forward in her seat expectantly.

"Oh, you do remember me." I was nearly in tears and the old lady was starting to giggle to herself.

"I remember your name, but I do not remember you nor do I recognize your face. It has been many years and many other memories have crowded you out. What is it that you want with us now?" The old lady lost her smile, replacing it with a stubborn look as she leaned back into her seat.

I looked at each one in the court and measured the kindness on their faces. "I want to come home to the clan." There, I said it. I held my breath.

"But you left." The old lady had still not told me who she was.

"Yes, I know, but I had to leave to try and find medicine for Old Father."

"You left the clan." The old lady simply repeated without emotion.

I was becoming irritated at the lack of communication and recognizing the captain's restlessness, felt a growing sense of urgency. Clearly he had the urge to settle the matter in his way. "Who is it that speaks for the Blue Mountain Clan?" I asked with authority in my voice.

"Lamb's Flower." The old lady answered in an even tone.

Lamb's Flower, my next older sister, stared unblinkingly at me, waiting for my reaction. Of all of my sisters, she was my greatest nemesis. Father was just as unhappy at her not being a boy and made her life nearly as miserable as he had mine, only she had been absolutely healthy and needed no help from anyone. Old Father found it very hard to relate to her and there was only an uneasy truce between them. Of all the possible

people to guard the clan's door when I tried to return, she was the poorest possible choice for me. My heart sank.

The captain leaned away from the wall to better look into my eyes. "Are you all right Grandmam? You look ashen."

I put a hand on his shoulder and gently urged him to return to his rest.

"I have much to tell you, but I could be better understood if I could tell you in private."

I knew she could not deny me every opportunity to return before she cast me away. Clan bonds were very strong and she, as clan leader, was bound to protect those bonds. She could do almost anything she wanted, but she had to go through the proper motions first.

She nodded and abruptly stood. We all scrambled to stand with her. She indicated that I should follow and quickly left the court with me close behind. Once we were well away from the court and in a more private place, she turned and grinned at me.

"You are not welcome to stay, but you are welcome to tell us your story."

"No! It is not to be that way. I am of this clan and I will stay."

Lamb's Flower got a shocked look on her face and sat down hard on a wall seat. She was obviously not used to being talked to in such a way. I continued.

"Like Old Father before me, I can bring a great deal of help and new ideas for the clan."

"The clan does not need any new ideas and we do not need your help. Why can you not remain in Whitehome where you have lived these many years? Why do you insist on returning to this quiet place to upset our way of life?"

"Is that it? Is that why you do not want me to return?" All of the sudden it made perfect sense to me. It was not that she did not want me to return, it was that she did not want new ideas to contaminate the quiet little world she was used to. Even worse, because I would be the only one who would be able to teach my Whitehome ways, I would become a challenge to her authority.

"Very well my sister. Let me try to answer your concerns this way. I have been very successful in Whitehome and I have accumulated a great deal of understanding about new ways of working with cloth. As a dowry of sorts for you to bring me back into the clan, I will give you this cloak that the Empress has given me, I will teach the clan new ways to treat the wool, and I will give the clan most of my coin."

Lamb's Flower continued to sit without saying a word or showing a sign that she had heard me. My aggressiveness was obviously not going to work so I tried the only other approach I had available to me.

"Lamb's Flower, I apologize for sounding so demanding. It is just that I want so very much to live my last days amongst my own people. Look at us, you and me. We are old and very near the end of our time. We must do what we can to help those who have come after us while we try to set the world right in our memory. Please let an old woman play with her clan children and sleep in the house of her birth."

Lamb's Flower cocked her head a little to look up at me. She still had a frown on her face, but there was a softness in her eyes that was not there before.

"You are much different than I thought you might be. You were such a little mouse when you left. We all assumed you died on the trail. Such a senseless gesture, running off to Whitehome for a man who would be dead before nightfall."

"Did he die that soon?" A memory I did not really want to know.

"Yes, at sunset. I ran down the trail after you hoping to stop you but you were gone." She had tears in her eyes when she looked up at me. "I blamed myself for being so hard on you. Old Father's last words were to admonish all of us for being so hard on you just because you were sickly. He said we made you afraid to live in the clan without him to help you." She sniffed once.

"Is that true?"

After all of these years. "No, sister." I lied, "I only wanted to save him. When I got to Whitehome and found that I would not be able to get the medicine plant, I simply could not face returning with nothing. After that, one thing seemed to lead to another until nearly all of my life had passed."

"I hope your story is more interesting than that." Lamb's Flower said with a laugh and a sniff.

"Oh, it is, I promise!"

"I am the Grandmother of the clan now. I have worked very hard to maintain the respect of the clan. You will not challenge me?"

"I have had all of the authority I care for, thank you. I only wish to sit in the sun with little children crawling about pestering me."

"We have the children for that, alright." She thought for a moment. "If I say that you are disrupting the clan with one of your new ideas, will you accept that and keep quiet?"

I dared not let her think that I had reservations. "Yes, sister, I will." I took off my cloak and handed it to her.

She hesitated, knowing that taking the cloak sealed my return. She took the cloak.



Gathering after the evening meal was part of the men's daily ritual. Even though the women were not permitted to join, it was understood that we were all nearby tending to our evening chores and listening to their conversation. It was important that we did listen, because it was during that time that many of the affairs of the clan were discussed and plans were made for the future. Occasionally one of the men would even address something, a request or a compliment, to one of the women. This sort of behavior always produced a chuckle among the men and more than one giggle drifting from rooms along the darkening hallways.

Since my sister had died, I had become the clan's Grandmam and was exempt from the evening chores, which left me free to retire to my room in privacy. There, I was able to relax with my thoughts and admire the distant, snow-covered mountain peaks from the little window the men made for me when I had taken the room. From my room, I could just make out the men's voices on the other side of the wall where they gathered in the great room. I was normally satisfied with hearing bits and pieces of what they said, but that evening was a little different, and I was frustrated for not being able to hear more.

"Hush, my child!" I whispered to little Fourth Born whom I had agreed to watch over since his brother was with the men for the first time.

"Why are you whispering?" He nearly shouted in response.

"Your brother may sing tonight. Do you not want me to hear his song?" Fourth Born was yet a few years from caring about such things, and chose to find ways for me to understand his indifference, while I continued to strain toward the muffled sounds.

The mumbling sounds quieted and I recognized Too Tall's voice as he began singing his favorite portion of the clan's song. If he did not foul it up, as he sometimes

did, there would still be time before the dark for one more verse of the song. The song was important to the clan, since it told of the clan's history and reason for being. It was very long and few men were able to remember all of it. So, each adult male of the clan was responsible for a portion which he memorized and handed down to his oldest son, thus perpetuating the Spirit of the clan. Singing the song was so important that it was considered a right of passage for the boys. Once they were old enough to remember and sing their father's part of the song without error, they were permitted to live and work beside the men.

I waited, anxiously watching the darkness swallow the meadow floor and move relentlessly toward the distant peaks which stood as torches of bright light arrayed across the small opening. Too Tall sang his song.

"Why can't First Born sing his song now?" Fourth Born had given up trying to distract me and resorted to being interested in what I was interested in.

I pulled him onto my lap and braced him up against the cool wall where he might better hear the voices.

"Because, Little One, there is no hurry among the adults for a child to join them. They are not anxious to share their privilege with a youngster, so they make him wait. But if Too Tall manages to finish before the peaks are dark, perhaps your brother will finally get to sing. Then he will be able to answer to the name his father has given him.

"When will I get a real name like First Born has?"

"He is Gatherer now, not First Born."

I could barely make out his little face but I knew he was scowling his indignation at being left out of the men's world.

"No, he is not! Not until he sings! I bet he can't remember anyway. He is going to forget all . . ."

I headed him off before he could finish with a friendly, firm pat on his bottom. "You are not being fair to your brother! He has been the very best friend to you and you have good reason to be proud of his growing up."

Fourth Born leaned against me and mumbled something I could not make out. I had him on the run and decided to finish the lesson.

"I once sat in this room with Gatherer on my lap just as I am sitting here now with you. He was nearly the same age you are now and he was in just as much of a hurry to become a man as you are."

I could see Fourth Born cock his head and I knew he was having a hard time understanding what this had to do with him.

"Between then and now, he has had to learn many important things that have taken all of his time. If he does sing tonight and is accepted among the men, then he will have to be able to do a great many things that he was not able to do that night when he sat on my lap." I nudged Fourth Born. "Do you understand what I am saying? You have many things to learn before you can sing, and you need the time it takes to grow up to learn them."

He indignantly mumbled something about already knowing those things.

"Do you remember when Not So Smart got his name?"

"Yes." In a very quiet voice. Even the children felt uncomfortable talking about Not So Smart.

"Too Tall gave him that name when he let the grain room catch fire. It was his responsibility to take care of that grain, but he did not know enough about taking care of the grain in the hot days, and let it get too hot and dusty in the room. The clan could

have lost the house if it had been the big grain room and we would have all starved. Not So Smart is lucky that he is still permitted to live in the clan house after that fire. Don't you agree?"

"You mean Gatherer might make a mistake like that?"

"Only if he has not learned his lessons. You see, he has had time to learn them and I believe he will be very good at his work." I hugged Fourth Born. "You will be good at your work too if you give yourself time to learn it properly."

Too Tall had finished. The men were quiet and I looked quickly to the peaks to see that there was still light there. Enough light to still provide some illumination to my little room. It was time for Gatherer to earn his name.

His little voice drifted down the hallway and through the wall as if he were everywhere at one time. Such a beautiful voice, clear and certain, without the gruffness of full manhood.

"Two born to the clan . . . two for the same work . . . two for the same wife.

"Only one to stay.

"Old Father left for the city.

Yes! I had put young Gatherer up to including Old Father into the clan's legacy. I held my breath, barely able to keep myself from running into the great room to see how the men were receiving the unexpected song.

"Far from the clan . . . past the great horned peak . . . into the city.

"Old Father sacrificed for the clan."

"That is not the song First Born was supposed to sing." Fourth Born knew his clan's history well enough to know that he was hearing something new.

"Hush my child! I must hear it all." I was delighted to know that we had managed to keep our little secret even from his youngest brother, a child, I had often threatened to name, "One Who Knows Everything."

"But he will be in trouble!" Fourth Born was concerned, and struggled to get off from my lap. Once free from me, he moved to pull the cover away from the doorway and stood in the coal light, looking down the hallway and carefully listening to the sounds coming from the great room.

"Grandmam, you taught First Born that song, didn't you? He will not be in trouble if you taught it to him . . . will he?"

"Yes, I taught it to him as a surprise for the men. And no, I do not believe he will be in trouble." I heard giggling and thought it must be from the women in the other rooms along the hallway. Obviously some of the other women were enjoying my challenge to the men, too.

"She lives . . . she follows his path . . . she returns where Old Father returned.

"Grandmam shows the way of the world to the clan."

I stood and walked to the doorway so that I could stand beside Fourth Born. What had I heard Gatherer sing? I had not taught him to sing about me. Surely, he would get us both in trouble if the clan thought I put a youngster up to sing a song of remembrance about myself.

I could take it no longer! Indicating to Fourth Born that he should remain behind, I hesitantly moved down the hallway to the passageway which opened into the great room. I stood in front of the bear hide hanging across the doorway, trying to hear what the men were saying to Gatherer, but there was no sound.

"We have decided to begin prayers early this evening, Grandmam. Please, do come in." Too Tall's voice boomed out from the other side of the hide and his big hand reached

through to swing it from in front of me. The whole clan was seated or standing around the fire pit. Still nearly thirty strong counting Winter Song's new child and discounting Lamb's Flower who died nearly a season ago.

"We have been waiting for your curiosity to bring you, Grandmam. You are not as curious as we expected, and we were hardly able to keep our silence."

Gatherer stood before me reaching for my hands. "Come Grandmam, a seat for you by the pit. Here, where you can best hear me sing your song."

"The men?" I was nearly in tears. It had always seemed to be such an uneasy peace between me and the other elders. Now that I was the oldest, there was less tension, but still I could never tell if they accepted me or only tolerated me. So naturally, I was concerned about who was tricking who, and who was going to get in trouble for it.

"The men, my dear lady of the city, knew what you were up to from the beginning." Too Tall's voice boomed across the room to me.

At least he and I liked each other, of that I was sure. Too Tall was the leader of the clan in every way but age, and what he thought was good or bad was usually accepted by the clan as the way things were to be.

Once I was properly seated, Too Tall produced a deep, rumbling chuckle which collected everyone's undivided attention. When he was sure that he would be heard, he began to explain.

"Gatherer came to us nearly a season ago, just after your sister passed. He was asking many questions about Old Father and about why Old Father was not in the song. Obviously, that sort of question coming from a child demanded some questions in return."

I looked over at Gatherer to see how he was accepting the revelation to me that he did not succeed in maintaining secrecy after all. He returned my gaze with a sheepish grin. I grinned in return.

"Once Gatherer explained that he was asking the questions to help you compose a song for Old Father," Too Tall was saying, "we all considered and decided that you had a very good idea. Time has shown Old Father to be an important part of our clan and we had good reason to sing of him. Besides no one else will have city people to sing of in the village this fall. Only our clan.

"The problem is, none of us remember Old Father, and none of us have any idea what his given name was." I had to shake my head. I could only remember him as Old Father.

Too Tall smiled his understanding and continued. "We told Gatherer to continue his lessons with you but not to tell you we knew of your surprise. We thought it might make a fun thing to fool you while you were fooling us." He grinned broadly and looked around at the others in the room who also grinned in agreement. "Then Gatherer brought us yet another part to the song. He told us of how he thought of you and how helpful he believes you have been for the clan."

Too Tall waded through clan members to cross the room, careful not to step on any children, and stood in front of me. He leaned down and put a hand on my shoulder and gently kissed me on my forehead. "That got us to thinking." He continued. "We realized that you have given us so much more than kindness and patience for our children." He stood and looked around at all of the approving smiles in the great room.

"You have taught us to think and to respect others who can think. You have taught us to treat the wool so that it will get the highest price in the village. That is allowing us

to have the coin we need to help trade for better foods and materials to help the clan survive the winter."

I just sat there, in the middle of the room, staring at Too Tall as he walked about the room. I had no idea . . . Well of course I always believed they should be thankful for all I did for them, but I naturally assumed I would die without once ever hearing the clan thank me.

Too Tall began singing the opening phrases of the clan song. As was the way in our clan, everyone responded by slipping into the quiet mind of meditation and began humming a chorus that invited the angels to join us and to sing with us so that we might have their blessings. As the elder, I lead the chorus and was thankful that I could immerse myself in the group. That helped cover my embarrassment, and also reassured me that I was not dreaming in the night.

Once Too Tall had finished, he pointed to Gatherer who took up the story. He sang of Old Father and then he sang of me. When he finished singing, tears ran down my face. I sniffed loudly and tried not to look at any of the others in the room, fearing they would try to comfort me. I felt so wonderful in that moment. I wanted the feeling to last.

Then, just as the moment came when I must confront the clan to thank them, little Two Step pulled away from her mother and made her way over to me. Every member of the clan watched and held their breath as she hesitantly took a small step forward . . . and then quickly followed her foot with the wooden crutch her father made to help compensate for her birth-damaged foot.

"Grandmam!" She said loudly and with dramatic poise. "You mustn't cry now!" She held on to my knee to steady herself with her free hand. "Gatherer will learn to sing his song better in time."

The entire clan roared with laughter and I stood, picking Two Step up and danced in a small circle with her as if she were a doll, the clan clapping a rhythm for us as we moved. I stopped in front of Gatherer and presented Two Step to him. "How do you explain such praise, Gatherer?"

"Why I do not know, Grandmam. I suppose I will have to take lessons from a certain critical child of the clan." He laughed again and reached out to take his young cousin.

"How do you know?"

I did not want to look into Clover Flower's eyes because I knew that I would see unwelcome pity there. Instead, I concentrated on pulling at the handful of wool I was combing. "I just do. It is no surprise, really, I know my body. I have always had a problem of sorts with my female parts and any relief I got over the years was due to the help of Spirit. Now, I guess I am just getting old and Spirit has decided to let me pass on." I pulled hard at a knot in the wool.

"But surely you could find a Spirit Master . . ." She was persistent.

"No. No Spirit Master. It is not for an old woman to ask Spirit to help her when there are ones like Two Step and Not So Smart who have so much more to live for and contribute to the world. No, I will not ask to be saved from something that is just part of old age." I had to stop pulling at the wool while my eyes cleared of the tears that were forming there.

"There, you see? You are crying. You do want to live." Clover Flower had turned herself on the wall bench so that she could look directly at me.

"No, you mistake my tears. I am only crying because of the wonder I feel at having lived this life. Do you never stop and think of how wonderful it all is?"

"Well . . . I guess I do sometimes. But I have never cried for it."

I decided Clover Flower was still a little young to have the necessary perspective on life to evolve tears of joy.

"My young friend. Once, many years ago, I nearly died because of the bleeding during my moon cycle. Then, I asked a Spirit Master to help me. He did and, in doing so, gave me many good years of life." I gently patted Clover Flower on the hand she held on the bench between us. "Now I feel that there is something else that has gone wrong with me that is, somehow, associated with that bleeding. Only this time, I do not bleed in the same way and I have other warning things telling me to prepare."

"Surely you can find something that will help you. I heard you cry out the other morning. This is giving you pain."

"Yes, it is, but not so much that I cannot stand it, nor does it hurt all of the time. I have seen others in this way, and I know there comes a time when they wished for death."

Clover Flower had a horrified look on her face. I was beginning to regret having tried to explain why, lately, I had been so slow to move. I probably should have put it off as a part of old age.

"You must not concern yourself with me. Please understand, I have lived a full life and there is little else left that I wish to do. After all, I came back to the clan to spend my last days in happiness, did I not?"

"Yes."

"Well then. These are my last days. And, I am looking forward to finally being with Old Father again." I closed my eyes and smiled at the sun. Yes, I was looking forward to being with my good friend and teacher once again.

"But what of the children?"

"Huh?" I asked, shaking my head and looking about. There was only the two of us sitting on that wallbench, just outside the house. There, the wall was thick and especially high. No one would have heard our conversation and no one other than Clover Flower was there to speak.

"What, Grandmam. I said nothing else." Clover Flower had a look of growing concern on her face.

I patted her hand again and assured her that hearing voices was just one of the sure signs of old age and that she could ignore me. That calmed her and we both relaxed as the sun warmed us.

That was my favorite place to sit in the mornings. The sun found that wall first and quickly warmed it to a cozy comfort. The wall tended to deflect the ever-present breeze away from the bench and I could sit there in relative comfort on some of the coldest mornings.

We watched the clan move out toward the fields and waited to see the crows follow like so many black flags fluttering in the wind behind the people. Clover Flower was with me that morning because she was nearly due to have her baby, and remained with the old ones like me so that we could watch over her. I let my eyes close again, thinking how nice it was to have someone with me for company.

"What of the children?"

"What?" I sat upright and looked around in confusion. Was my mind betraying me before my body could finish me off?

"What is it, Grandmam?" Clover Flower put a hand to my forehead to see if I was feverish.

Her hand blocked the view of my surroundings and so I brushed it away impatiently. "I am not a child with a fever!"

Clover Flower held her bundle of wool to her chest and looked down at her lap, keeping an eye on me through the hair of her brow. I immediately regretted my sharp words.

"Forgive me Clover Flower. I heard a voice and was afraid your hand might prevent me from seeing who spoke."

Clover Flower looked around. "I see only the two of us within hearing." Suddenly her eyes brightened and she reached to put her hand on my arm. But, apparently remembering my reaction when she touched my forehead, she stopped herself and pulled her hands back to her chest. "Grandmam! Do you think it is Spirit?" Her eyes were wide with wonder.

"Spirit? No . . . no I do not think Spirit is interested in talking to an old woman." But her words helped me focus my attention, and I decided that it was time that I was alone with my thoughts. I began gathering my wool-working basket. "It is only my old ears, my child. I hear words in the wind, in the stream, in everything that would make sounds. Perhaps I should return to my room for some rest."

"What of the children?"

"What of the little dears? They are all well enough." I grumbled an answer to the darkness which lived in the corners of my room. I had only just settled down on my sleeping pad and closed my eyes when the voice returned to the inside of my head.

I lay there with my eyes rolling about trying to see all of the room at once. Yet there was only the sound of the faint breeze pushing the window covering against the frame, and my old heart pounding, and my old lungs wheezing.

"What of the children?"

I had drifted off to sleep when the voice returned to my mind. Then I knew. The voice was my angel's voice within. Never before, had I heard her thoughts so clearly as I did that day.

"Forgive me, my angel." I said to the dark ceiling. "I have not given you proper attention this day." I was quiet for a time, obediently listening to my mind. But my angels were silent.

"Will you teach me like you taught the others to work with color, Grandmam?" Little Two Step sat across from me in the sunny court where the clan finished the wool for market. I was wringing out the last of a stretch, freshly stained a delicate blue from clay the men had brought me from the river.

"Yes little one, I will be teaching you the color as soon as you have learned how to comb the wool. You know the path . . ."

". . . must be taken a step at a time. Yes Grandmam, I know. But, I have learned most of the wool lessons already. Grandmam? Are you okay?"

I was just putting the stretch down when I was struck by an especially sharp jab of pain in my stomach. I could not help but to winch, the pain was so sudden. "Yes . . . Go! Go practice your combing, little one. I will be all right."

Two Step and Too Tall's Fourth Son came over to me and each held one of my hands. There was almost an instinctive desperation in their eyes and in the way they held

on to my hands. Fourth Son looked at Two Step with a frown on his little face. Two Step put her other hand out to him and also held his hand while she looked up to my eyes. Grandmam, we will take care of you if you are hurt."

"What of the Children?"

"I know you will, my child. Now both of you go back to your work. I will be all right."

I found my way to the wallbench facing the fields but it was in the shade and seemed cold. So, I picked my way up to the top of the first rock overlooking the house and wedged myself between three boulders and the sun. Once again in private, I permitted myself to think about the question that would not go away. "What of the Children? They will behave the same way I behaved when Old Father was dying, won't they?" I asked the wind and then closed my eyes and listened, but there was no response.

I opened my eyes again and made sure that I was alone and out of hearing from the house. I cried. I cried for a long time. That was the first time I really came to face my dying and the pain I felt in my old body. Pain that I could not afford to show the clan.

You know, this is the only time I have told my whole story. It has been kind of fun, telling of my life to people as careful to listen as all of you have been.

The oldest Holy Man, one even older than me, reached out a hand and waved it in the air between us.

"Not just kind of us, for we get something in return, we get some of our history from your words. Many have come as you have, to die among us. To die among us and to be at peace with their world."

"Your decision to leave your beloved clan to die out of sight of the children is most honorable of you. From what you have told me, you probably are saving one of the children from running off to the city to save you just as you did for your Old Father. From what you have told me, such foolishness appears to be a clan trait."

The old man's face cracked into a smile and his cackled delight echoed into the vaulted ceiling of the village holy house. I looked about at the others, the Scribes and the Spirit Masters, and the faithful ones who joined us from time to time to share in the chants. I looked around at the glow of their brightly colored bodies and felt the warmth they gave to me. The sound of their chant began to move me and to lift me, wrapping me in unimaginable warmth. And my pain. It was as if the vibration of the chant drowned the pain into oblivion and a great pressure was released from my Soul.

"Oh such great wonder." I managed to whisper. The ceiling grew bright with their sounds and I watched but did not feel many hands touch me with loving caresses. In that moment, I felt the ebb and flow of my Spirit and heard the laughter of young children above me . . . and around me . . . and saw Old Father standing before me with his hands held outstretched. I felt the chant move farther behind but not the warmth. I was immersed in the warmth of my world and in the arms of my angels lifting me up to Old Father's side.

Afterwards

One Who Care's story deserves to stand on its own merit and for that reason, I wanted you to come to know her without introduction or explanations. However, now that you have read her story, I would like to explain a little about how I came to know of her and how it is that this story came to be written.

One Who Care's story comes from instructions given by a facilitator who was trying to help me better understand what makes me think the way I do. When this occurred, I was mentally relaxed (some would say I was in a meditative state) and the facilitator was taking notes and guiding my visualization with suggestions. Her initial instruction to me was to "Go to a lifetime during which you successfully experienced love." In response to that direction, and with a great deal of encouragement from my facilitator, I described One Who Care's lifetime.

Now, don't get ahead of me. I am not saying that this is necessarily a story about one of my past lives. What I am saying is that I believe I remembered One Who Care's life as a good example of a lifetime that answered my facilitator's request. Double talk? Who knows for sure, but let me explain.

The explanation is a complex one that requires that you give at least tentative acceptance to a number of critical assumptions. You should also understand that these statements are not being presented as facts for you to believe. This is a hypotheses that provides an explanation that is consistent with a number of metaphysical concepts but is not necessarily supported by science or religion.

Perhaps the best way to explain is to tell you a little about how this particular facilitated session unfolded. My wife, Alisa, and I are interested in a wide range of New Age concepts. We are not just *interested* in the New Age world view, we are nearly *immersed* in it. As an example, I have just finished writing a book, *Handbook of Metaphysics*, published by The Christopher Publishing House in 1994 (ISBN 0-8158-0485-7), and Alisa is learning "alternative" gardening methods which go somewhat beyond organic gardening to explore possible interactions with Spirit in the garden. Our interests in these more subtle manifestations of Spirit are complementary and we tend to lead one another a step at a time along the trail of self-discovery. So, when Alisa read of Chris Griscom and The Light Institute of Galisteo near Santa Fe, New Mexico, and decided that she wanted to attend a four day process of facilitated self-exploration that is available there, I quite naturally agreed.

Because of scheduling conflicts, we did not succeed in making contact with the Light Institute, but we did succeed in finding and scheduling appointments with two ladies who once worked with the Institute. Within a few months of Alisa's determination to explore this new step on our path, we were driving into Santa Fe for a week long vacation.

Once in Santa Fe, we made contact with our facilitators and arranged our first meeting for the next morning. Basically, we were asking these people to apply their experience and understanding to guide us in a process of self-discovery. Some call such sessions "Intensives" because there is a great deal of personal effort and sometimes, discomfort involved in the process. The assumption is that we are the product of experiences and attitudes we held in other times, either in this life or another. In these sessions, we were trying to honestly examine things within ourselves that we had

apparently decided not to remember or that we could not recognize as being of any significance to our present state of mind. The psychological processes involved are fairly well known and there is little controversial about the idea of self-examination. I suppose that licensed psychoanalysts would not argue the effectiveness of self-analysis so much as they would argue that it is dangerous to attempt it without trained guidance. (Remember that participation in a process such as this is a personal choice. Please make it an informed one.)

In a typical session, I was comfortably laying on my back on a cot. The lady who guided me, sat at the head of the cot and began the process by applying light pressure with her hands to specific points on my face, scalp and neck. I believe that, under ideal conditions, both she and I should have been in a light meditative state of consciousness--deeply relaxed but not asleep. This preparation took about five minutes, after which, the facilitator continued the session by guiding me in a visualization exercise designed to help me achieve a goal that we agreed on before beginning the process.

Exactly what the goal is for one of these sessions is dependent on the individual. In my case, I was interested in coming to understand why I am so determined to control my personal environment. I am much less spontaneous in emotional reactions to my environment than I would like to be, and I believe my insistence on defining everything in the world has prevented me from being more successful in working with Spirit. To me, this facilitated method of introspection appeared to be--in deed proved to be--well suited for helping me discover why I am so structured.

In my case, there did not appear to be anything about the sessions that would directly help me become more spontaneous, at least not in the sessions themselves. But, the experience has given me an understanding of my emotional make-up that I have not been able to achieve through other avenues. That understanding has the potential of helping me achieve change, but it remains for me to actually make a change.

As for how it works, these sessions depend on the assumption that a specific pattern of touch to acupressure meridians on the head, face and neck has an influence on the flow of spiritual energy within the subject's body. Also, there is a possibility that the facilitator provides additional influence on the subject's aura through her desire to help; at least this seemed true of my facilitator.

The technique also uses the concepts of past lives as a mechanism to formulate a reason for the subject's current behavior. You do not have to believe in the concepts of past lives to participate in this process, but it does help if you behave as if you believe in them. By behaving as if something is true, you permit yourself to test or try out a belief system without having to fully accept it. The objective is to "remember" why you might think or act the way you do. As an example, you might remember a lifetime during which you had too many green apples, thus beginning a practice of avoiding green fruit. Whether or not you remember an actual past life, a past event in this life, or you are simply imagining a plausible event which caused you to avoid green apples, does not matter so long as you find a way to live with green apples.

My point is that this process often depends on the subject's ability to remember a past life to help understand the present. You need not believe in the process to gain the benefits, but it is beneficial to behave as if there is such a thing in order to help your mind create a structure within which it may create an answer to your question. Past lives are very handy for that.

I am behaving as if it were true that when my facilitator asked me to remember a lifetime during which I successfully experienced love, I accessed the life records of One

Who Cares. It seems as if I saw and felt things that she experienced. When I wrote her story, I was able to remember what I saw during the facilitated session and was able to judge how the story should unfold from that memory.

Did I remember one of my past lives? I do not know, but I do have a theory. The systems of belief that teach about levels or planes of existence, also teach that there is a place where Soul's records are stored. It is said that people who are spiritually mature or at least in the correct frame of mind, are able to gain access to their Soul's records or the records of others. Perhaps the facilitated sessions permitted me to access those records to provide answers or examples that helped me understand the answers to my questions. The record of One Who Care's lifetime may or may not be a record of one of my lifetimes. It is, however, the record of an incarnation that helped me better understand love.

One Who Care's story deserves to stand on its own merit without the explanation you have just read. On the other hand, your having the explanation may give the story the added dimension of just possibly being a true story of a person who lived thousands of years ago somewhere east of china.