

One Who Cares

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Press

A Way of Learning

One Who Care's journey through life is an unexpected reflection of the way of learning we all must follow in our pursuit of spiritual maturity. At the heart of this experience is the realization that the lessons in life must inevitably bring us, as students, to mentorship for those who follow.

One Who Care found her evolution from student to mentor to be a gradual one that came as a natural product of a life well lived. She did not live as a hero, nor did she live as a martyr, but as the beneficiary of many acts of simple kindness by those in her life that found her bravery and sincerity compelling reason to assist her.

This story is one of hope found in recognition of the natural goodness in people. One Who Cares lived in very different circumstances from what you may know, yet there is a sameness in what may be gleaned from her experiences.



Author's Bio

Tom Butler

Tom Butler has been a student of metaphysics since his early childhood. He has also been an avid student of the sciences, and as an engineer, has succeeded in balancing a strong belief in Spirit with a clear-headed dedication to reason. This determination to make sense of the world has given his writing a distinctive ring of possibility and hope. Fundamental to Tom's writing is his belief in spiritual mentorship, from which he knows that the seeker as student must eventually become seeker as teacher. This is evident in his more technical *Handbook of Metaphysics* and in the way he has woven spiritual principles into his novels, making the fantasies he writes valuable tools for those who wish to learn while they are entertained. Tom is certified with his wife Alisa, as a Ro-Hun Therapist, Spiritual Healer and Metaphysician through Delphi University, where he has accepted ordination as a healing minister in the Church of Wisdom.

Background Information:

Electronics Engineer
Retired Communications Engineer and Network Strategic Planner

Tom and his wife currently travel throughout Western United States with a 5th wheel trailer. They are pursuing certification with the National Association of Spiritualist Churches while Tom continues to study and write.



Character Sketch

Cast of Characters

One Who Cares: began life as a frail child christened “Another Girl Damn It” by her father. Her uncle later named her “Morning Glory Of The Mountains”; however, we will come to know her by the name she earned in Whitehome. One Who Cares lived long ago in the high mountains that border a great expanse of desert east of China. Although she eventually gains the maturity and air of authority to earn the title of Grandmam, we first join her in her early teens. Then she was a slight and perpetually frightened girl, reminding one of a doe living too close to a predator.

Old Father: Old Father is One Who Cares’ Uncle, and it is his failing health that provides the reason for her to venture into the city. Old Father had left the clan house to live in the city, but had returned for his last years of life. Because he was sickly, he was assigned to tend the clan sheep along with One Who Cares, whom he mentored in the ways of life. His influence on her is expressed throughout her life, helping to illustrate the teacher/mentor concept of this story. Old Father is referred to but does not otherwise participate in this story.

Three Medicines: is the first medicine seller from whom One Who Cares sought to purchase medicine. He is not a very likable man.

Son of Medicine Grower: better known as Medicine Grower, is the man from whom One Who Cares tried to purchase medicine. He is the husband of Sheman, and the one who first befriended One Who Cares by giving her a place to sleep, and later, by finding her a place to live and work. He joins the story as a young man of strong character.

Sheman: the wife of Medicine Grower, One Who Cares’ first and best friend in the city, and the one who takes her to the healer. She becomes an apprentice to the healer. A little older than One Who Cares, she is impish and strong willed. Her name has been given to her for good reason, as she is not easily bullied by men.

Day Weaver: is the man who first gave One Who Cares work and a home. He is also the man who chooses her to be his son's wife. For this reason, this is the man One Who Cares tricks into believing she has sworn a death oath of chastity. Day Weaver is a good, honest man, save his inclination to return home late in the evening after too much to drink.

Mama: Day Weaver's wife. As is her husband, she is entering her mature years, heavy set and generally of good disposition. She becomes One Who Cares confidant in the Weaver house and is the one who provides the solution of a death oath, and how it may be used to keep her husband from choosing One Who Cares as wife for his son.

Third Son: is the youngest of the Weavers. He proves to be a good friend to One Who Cares, perhaps because they are close enough to the same age that he can feel free to tease her.

Weaverson: Day Weaver's first born. Day Weaver decides One Who Cares should be the boy's wife, forcing One Who Cares to find a good reason why she should not. Weaverson has no further roll in the story.

Wife Of Weaverson: this young lady sees One Who Cares as competition in the Weaver household. When One Who Cares has excessive bleeding from her moon cycle, Wife Of Weaverson insists that she must leave, lest her problem infect the rest of the household. She has no other part in this story.

Song Of Willow: is head of the workers of the Royal Garment Clan household. He is a small man who is many years One Who Cares' senior. This is the man who hires One Who Cares to be Scrapper's apprentice. He makes a pass at One Who Cares, but honorably accepts the evidence of her oath. Later, she takes him to be her husband, and they live many years together until he passes away. Song Of Willow is a likable little man with disarming expressions and a firm management style.

Scrapper: is the head seamstress of the Royal Garment Clan, a guild for producing garments for the great houses of Whitehome. Scrapper is the only person allowed to craft the Queen's cloaks. She is old, cantankerous ultimately likable.

Walker: is one of Scrapper's helpers. He is in the story for one scene.

Feather: is one of Song of Willow's many daughters. Her mother is one of the cooks in the house. She participates in the story as a little girl who introduces One Who Cares to the rules of the Royal Garment Clan house.

Spirit Master: is the healer who teaches One Who Cares to control her bleeding. He accepts Sheman as an apprentice and teacher her a trade that supports her long after her husband has passed away. He is already an old man in the story, and is seen to be a trickster of sorts.

Flower: is one of the workers who assist One Who Cares in crafting garments for the queen. She is the wife of So So, and the mother of First Girl and Last Girl. It is she who sits on One Who Cares' stool of authority when she is away. She is seen as a good mother who has learned

to save her expression of authority for the cutting room, while otherwise remaining submissive to her husband.

So So: is Flower's husband. Although not as gifted as Flower, he also assists One Who Cares. He poses a strong authority figure for his family.

First Girl: is Flower's daughter and who One Who Cares names "Bright Light." She is nearly the same age One Who Cares was when she journeyed to Whitehome. She struggles to gain recognition as something other than the one responsible for her younger sister, Last Girl.

Last Girl: is Flower's youngest daughter. She earns the name of "Kitten" but is described by One Who Cares as "a little dust devil." She is just old enough to walk and be an endless bother to Bright Light and the adults.

The Captain of the Guard: at the Queens request, this man commands a small group of guardsmen who escort One Who Cares back to her Blue Mountain Clan house. He is instructed by the Queen to assure that One Who Cares is well received by her clan. A typical soldier, he is stern and more comfortable playing the part of the warrior than mingling with timid folk.

Too Tall: is the leader of One Who Cares' clan when she returns home. As his name suggests, he is a tall man. He is also a fine person who comes to respect One Who Cares.

Lamb's Flower: is One Who Cares' next oldest sister and one whom she had not gotten along with her before departing the clan house. One Who Cares discovers her to be the matriarch of the clan, and who she must win over before she can remain in the clan house. We meet her as an old lady who balances anger at her younger sister with regret that they had not gotten along, and respect for the bond of family.

Fourth Born: is a child One Who Cares watches over while she attempts to listen to the clansmen discuss their evening business. This boy is into everything.

Gatherer: is Too Tall's first born. This is the young man One Who Cares teaches a new clan song that would honor Old Father.

Clover Flower: is one of the women of the Blue Mountain Clan. She is young, pregnant and supportive when she hears that One Who Cares believes she will soon die.

Two Step: was born with a lame foot. Her father made a crutch for her and gave her the name as a badge of honor. It is little Two Step who is the catalyst for One Who Cares' realization that she must leave the clan to die, lest Two Step follow in her footsteps to seek medicine as she had for Old Father.

Old Priest: is the head priest of the Wooden Peg Temple, the place One Who Cares has chosen for her final moments of life. He too is a healer and is able to pass great strength and energy to ease One Who Cares' pain.



Treatment

One Who Cares

Why This Story: During a personal development session that employed the pass-life regression process, I was asked to remember a lifetime in which I had been successful in love. The first images to come to me were that of a skinny arm extending from a loose fitting cloak sleeve. It seemed that this was my arm. I had a few coins in my hand and I was trying to hand them to a man who stood behind a rough-hewn table. "Please," I begged, "give me the medicine." I could feel my desperation and deep confusion.

Other images replaced this, eventually becoming the story before you now. I will not claim this as one of my past lives. However, I can say the technique that brought the story to me is a powerful tool for visualization. For from it, I have gleaned a clear sense of what One Who Cares would or would not do, what is right for the time she lived, and the lessons she learned while alive. Her success in love was not success in amorous attachment, but in her understanding of the importance of simple kindness and respect for others. I submit this to you, not as a period piece, but as an illustration of these principles as can be seen in a life well lived.

Summary

Old Father is dying. Willing to do anything to save her Uncle and mentor, One Who Cares leaves her clan house and journeys alone on the many miles of mountain trails to Whitehome in search of medicine plants.

The reality that she cannot save Old Father is forced upon One Who Cares. She determines that she cannot live in her clan house without him, and accepts help from a medicine plant vendor in finding work and lodging.

Thus begins One Who Cares' career, first as a weaver's helper, and eventually as an apprentice seamstress for the family who provides cloaks for the queen. Skills in crafting wool into garments, taught to her by Old Father, supports her well in the city, as do his many words of wisdom.

Old Father had frequently warned her that motherhood could be too hard on her frail body. Perhaps it for this reason that she is so determined to resist becoming the bride of the Weaver's first born. In a society that provides few privileges for its women, this is no small feat.

One Who Cares is plagued with female bleeding that gives her reason to seek a healer. The healer teaches her ways to live with this problem, even though in her maturing years, it is this problem that quickens her passage into death.

One Who Cares does accept a husband though. Years after her mates death, she comes to recognize things Old Father would do to help her in the ways she found to mentor the children of the house. This recognition invokes a sense of yearning in One Who Cares for her clan. She returns to the mountain village of her youth, and with a little help from the Queen's guard, regains her place there.

It is years thereafter, that we join One Who Cares as she relates her life story to the holy men as they shepherd her passage into death.

As written, One Who Cares narrates this story. Her narration is unquoted.

A Holy House of a High Mountain Village.

The room is poorly lit, built of wood and mortared stone, made comfortable with ancient tapestries and bright strips of cloth. Soft chanting can be heard in the background as holy men cast a spell of contentment into the room. Three priests sit around a flickering lamp, seeming to hold the meager light against the parchment with their quill as they draw their script. They pause from time to time to hear the old woman's halting words.

The old woman, One Who Cares, is resting on a wooden bench. She is surrounded by priests of the Wooden Peg temple. One of the priests, the oldest it appears, is holding her hands in his and is murmuring a rhythmic chant as he leads the spell of contentment. He rouses her from a moment's slumber, drawing words from the old woman's memory, urgently, for it is clear that she will soon pass beyond her flesh.

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Into the City

It is early winter and even though it is just past noon, the sun can hardly be seen over the naked crags on the other side of the canyon. A skinny little girl hurries down the trail that leads from the high mountain valleys to the desert that flanks the eastern reach of the range. The trail has been carved from the sheer cliff, wide enough for two people to pass side by side or perhaps a pack animal lead by a man. The girl is obviously frightened and very tired from her journey.

There are many things I would rather have been doing that cold afternoon, than hiking on that frightful trail. "Oh, Old Father." I cried to myself as I hurried along the rock strewn trail, "What have I gotten myself into now? You never told me of the fear!"

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."

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One Who Cares makes her way through the deepening shadows until she comes upon a pack train guided by rough speaking trailmen. Old Father had taught her to look like a lame boy by hiding her femininity in her ample cloak. Thus she finds safe passage, even as a girl alone on the trail. In time, she comes upon an overlook that provides her first sight of Whitehome, a grand city hugging the margin between desert and mountains.

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 mortal they would eat next. Nor did the people seem to notice the great stone gods who held the gates open for them to pass. I noticed. I 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.

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Old Father had briefed One Who Cares well. She moves quickly through the immense maze of backways and into the market place. The market is empty! With no alternative, she makes her way to the backway marked with a prone man on straw. This is the place Old Father had said would be safe for her to sleep. She returned at first light to Basket and Keg backway, this time finding the sellers open for business.

Old Father had told me what the medicine seller would look like and how to deal with him. "Find his corner next to the red-faced 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 red-faced 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 fella. 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?"

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One Who Cares searches the backways for hours trying to find another merchant who could sell her the medicine. There are so many sellers in the backway. Everywhere, there are booths full of household goods and foods. Excitement swirls all around her, creating a world she would find wonderful, were she not so desperate. She is finally directed to a man known as "Three Medicines," who should be able to help her.

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 and made room for me when they left. As new people came in, I found myself gradually pushed to the front. Soon enough, I found myself standing in front of Three Medicines.

At first he ignored me, so I reached into my chest pouch and gathered my coins. Then I reached high, near his face so that he could see my handful of coins glittering in the morning light.

He turned his attention to me when he saw my money. "What can I do for you, little boy," he asked without taking his eyes from 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.

Three Medicines 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.

Three Medicines looked closely at my dirty hand holding all of the money I had in the world. He slowly shook 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," Medicine Only For The Rich, as I will always remember him, waved my hand away and turned his attention to a man standing beside me.

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One Who Cares searches the city for other medicine sellers. None will sell her the medicine for the amount of money she can offer. The last one made her plight clear.

"I don't know where you are from little boy," the young clerk said to me. "There has been drought for the past three years and little of the medicine plant you need has been able to grow. You would need . . ." he peered at my handful of coins, ". . . more than twice that amount to buy even a taste."

I 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 my fear. 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 to look past the wet sleeve of my arm. The young medicine clerk had followed me and was kneeled 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 heartbeat quickened as he put a tentative hand on my shoulder. "You look as if you have not eaten for days. Come with me. My wife will feed you."

* * * * *

A New Life

One Who Cares is led to a small courtyard. The place is cluttered with bundles of dried plants and racks where plants are spread for drying. He instructs her to remain there while he continues into the adjoining house to tell his wife what he had done. She hears strident voices, and soon, a small woman in her early twenties enters the courtyard, her husband close behind.

The woman came to an abrupt halt before me. She put her hands on her hips and began to speak to me in terse words about vagrancy and pity. But then she stopped in mid-sentence and looked hard at my cloak. "You are from one of the mountain clans, aren't you?"

I hesitated for only a moment, "Why . . . why yes mistress. The Blue Mountain Clan. We live below 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.

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 stopped long enough to introduce me, "This here is Son of Medicine Grower and I am his wife. You can call him Medicine Grower"

She patted Medicine Grower on his chest and quickly placed a kiss on his cheek. "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 provides One Who Cares a hot bath, a fresh cloak, food and a place to sleep. Because the climate is so mild, the houses of Whitehome are enclosed for privacy more than for protection from the elements. Sleeping pads are most often crafted of straw left over from the previous summer's harvest and the bright cotton fabric provided by the Weaver Guild. These pads are valuable, and it is no small thing to provide one for a guest. So too, is it a substantial offering to provide a spare cloak. These hooded garments are worn by nearly everyone in the community as protection from the elements and a badge of office.

Street sounds filtering through the wall near my sleeping pad were the first thing I knew when I awoke. I opened my eyes in an attempt to determine where I was, but did not otherwise move. 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. Terrified, I held my breath for a moment trying to suppress a cry of alarm. The big toe wiggled slightly and a throaty voice drifted 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 as she stretch luxuriantly. She leaned back in her floor seat, her short cloak falling to either side of colorful blue and red trimmed white cotton britches. Her toe and fingernails 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.

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They talk of many things as they come to know one another. One Who Cares learns that Wife of Medicine Grower is more properly known as Sheman, one who is of strong will and body. It is now that One Who Cares tells of her fondness for Old Father, how he had helped her overcome poor health, and the many things he taught her about life.

Sheman decided she had lost me and gave me a gentle nudge. "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 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 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. There was no time in his life for fancy colors. I can guess how your father may have measured such a skill. Here in Whitehome, on the other hand, we honor pretty colors. Your Old Father would have been a valued worker here.

"What else did he teach you?"

"He taught me why I should 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 began crying, even though Sheman was 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. It felt so good and I felt so safe. I could not remember when a woman, even my mother, had held me as Sheman did that day.

"Will you return home," 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. My sisters will be relentless." I began to cry once again as 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 for a 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." Saying this made me feel much 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 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."

* * * * *

There is a moment of reconciliation between One Who Cares and Medicine Grower as she accepts that he cannot be blamed for the failure of her mission. After she describes her skills and her intention to remain in Whitehome, Medicine Grower offers to help her find a place to live and work.

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. It was so 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 to dry in the air. There was so much activity! Medicine Grower had to warn me many times to watch my step so that I would not be hit by one of the many carts that moved materials up and down the backway.

"Here One Who Cares. This is the door." Medicine Grower told me as we rounded a corner.

"Careful," he said as 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 for me with his friend.

After a few minutes, he returned and beckoned me to follow him into a courtyard that was much larger than his. 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 my hesitant entry into 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 this," 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. Did he mimic my omission? After that, he looked into my eyes for a long moment before touching 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 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."

* * * * *

Like many in Whitehome, the Weaver household is bounded by a clay wall that encloses a courtyard and a cluster of room, themselves crafted of clay and wood. Colorful fabrics are strategically hung as partitions within the rooms, thus affording a sense of privacy without the closeness of hard walls. Bundles of cotton, hemp and wool are stacked in every available corner of the compound, while much of the open sky is obscured by long streamers of freshly dyed cloth, hung there to dry in the breeze. Dying pots, looms and folding racks fill the remaining space in the courtyard.

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 to stand 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 to lead me into the house. She left me standing in the middle of a large room that had many bales of cloth and baskets of cotton. I could see sleeping pads hidden amongst the bundles, and other evidence the entire family shared the one large room for sleeping. 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 tray full 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 with red-rimmed eyes. "And now I must run an orphanage for him!" She sniffed once and lowered her ample self onto a bale of cloth.

I remembered that Old Father often talked to me about how to deal with strangers. "Simple kindness, my girl." He had admonished 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 his advice 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 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.

"Forgive me," she said between sobs. "I am being rude." She sniffed loudly and wiped her eyes.

Wondering what could be so distressing for her, I waited patiently while she collected herself.

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

* * * * *

The Oath

Even as One Who Cares settles into a comfortable routine in the Weaver household, she discovers that she has been chosen to be Weaverson's wife. Old Father had warned that she would probably not survive childbirth and should avoid pregnancy. She knows that, should she be married to Weaverson, her sole purpose in life would be to give him children. Distressed, she has secluded herself to mourn her fate.

"What are you so quiet for One Who Cares?" Mama had come out to the drying court and found me alone in a corner where I was supposed to be 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. "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 tell her the truth? 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 and started to cry again, dodging her arms as she reached to comfort me again.

Frustrated, she put her hands on her hips and looked 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?"

* * * * *

One Who Cares describes what she has learned about Day Weaver's plans for her. When her admission of being just thirteen does not disqualify her as a potential wife in Mama's eyes, she resorts to telling Mama that she has sworn an oath of maidenhood because of the treatment she received from her father.

"You are very young to be taking such an oath." Mama paused for a moment and looked closely at me. "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 knee. "Day Weaver is a good man. No one can say otherwise. He is just 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 my jumble of excuses. "That is all right. I understand . . . your father.

"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!

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

"It is called The Oath of White Snow. Swearing the oath indicates that you have dedicated yourself to live a pure and uncorrupted life." She paused long enough for me to consider what she was saying. "This, my dear One Who Cares, includes maintaining your maidenhood." She laughed lightly like a young girl delighted with herself.

"To prove their devotion, those who take the oath 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 let Day Weaver discover you are wearing a small dagger around your neck and he will think you have taken the oath."

* * * * *

At Mama's bidding, One Who Cares establishes a pattern of carrying water from the public well at the same time of night Day Weaver typically returns home from an evening of drinking. Knowing Day Weaver as she does, Mama expects he will ask One Who Cars to help him. Thus he will discover the small dagger hanging at her breast and surmise she has taken The Oath of White Snow.

While the drying cloth draped above the public area brings bright color in the sunlight, it blocks even the stars at night, making the area around the public well darker than the night. It is a custom there to light a coal pit at the intersections at first dark. However, once the coal is consumed, there is no light until dawn.

I was on my last trip when a dark shadow moved between me and one of the coal pits. My mind froze as spirits crawled up and down my back. I stopped in place, trying to determine what

I had seen when a voice spoke softly near my ear. I clearly heard Day Weaver slightly stumble as he moved close to me. "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 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 an honorable oath. I understand . . . Each to their own way, I always say." He indicated to me that he was able to walk without my support. I could see that he was embarrassed, 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.

* * * * *

A Turn on the Path

Day Weaver finds a wife for his first born. All is well for more than three years until One Who Cares awakes in the middle of the night to discover that something awful has gone wrong with her moon cycle.

"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 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." Her voice had an urgent cast that frightened me even more. "I must know what is wrong if I am going to help you." She continued hovering before me in the small light, her hand extended between us.

"I am afraid." I felt my blood shrinking the skin on my fingers as it dried.

Mama persisted until I brought my hand out and held it for her inspection.

She glanced at my hand. "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 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. He will have 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 as well."

* * * * *

Wife Of Weaverson sees One Who Cares' problem as an opportunity to eliminate competition in the house. Mama is unable to prevent this and Day Weaver finds himself forced to tell One Who Cares she must leave. Offering to help her find work in another house, Day Weaver takes her to the bazaar where the caravans are met by traders and craftsmen from the city.

Mama and I watched as Day Weaver moved among the many people in the bazaar. He was 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 his friends from trading.

He spoke with many men, but in time, he came to one man who listened for a long while. After that, we saw Day Weaver turn toward us and wave, indicating that we should join him. The man he stood beside was a well-dressed little man carrying a stretch of brightly colored cloth. I looked him over carefully as we approached. The sparkle in his eyes told me that I should be happy he was the one I might work for, 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 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 help for her without her approval."

He 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 his question without looking up at the sky. Instead, his eyes narrowed and his ears almost pointed at me in his attention, as he waited for my answer. He was such a fascinating man to watch.

The rest of us looked to the sky as if Song Of Willow had jerked a puppet string. The sky was dark gray with a slight cast of red from the gathering 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 legend 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 thought, and to Song Of Willow I said, "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 you're 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 before running after the strange little man.

* * * * *

One Who Cares is lead to the great house of the Royal Garment Clan, the family charged with the honor of fabricating cloaks for the queen. The house fronts on Mainway, just one building from the inner wall that protects the royal chambers. It is a rambling structure, with many courtyards that proclaims the clan's wealth. One can see that the lower floors, which house workers and shops, serve as foundation for more modern, expansive rooms, which house the family.

One Who Cares is lead into a small room of the lower floor and told to wait. She is absentmindedly playing with her oath dagger when a girl come to the room and stands by the light of the coal pit.

"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 under my cloak. 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 manservant and his responsibility was to keep the household running smoothly for the Royal Garment Clan. Feather assured me that I was now 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 are making fun of me! 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."

I considered 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 expression on her face. "Scrapper has hated every one of them!"

* * * * *

Yet Another Test

An old lady sits in the middle of a large, well-lit room, calmly watching men and women move meaningfully about cutting tables and dress mannequins. She is perched atop of a simple stool from which she easily turns to face first one part of the room then another as she surveys the progress of their work. This is Scrapper, one of four seamstresses employed by the clan, she

alone is permitted to craft the queen's garments. One Who Cares is led to the entrance of this room, and instructed to wait until Scrapper addresses her.

I watched as the old lady quietly spoke directions that were promptly followed by the others in the room. "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 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 for a long while.

"You may step over here by my side, if you would like, young lady." I was so entranced by watching the activity in the room 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 a 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. 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. 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 overshadowed by Scrapper's question. There I was, confronted by a question again. I seemed to go from one test to another in my life.

"You may not care how the maiden looks by herself, but surely her cloak must complement the Empress' garment," I said, stalling for time while I looked around the room for a clue. There, by the door, hung a scrap of cloth by itself on a wall hook. 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 green 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' garment. It does little for her complexion, but it is all I have that she has not already worn. On the other hand, cloth that is the green 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 green silk. Soon he returned with a stretch of the very lightest green with gold threads woven throughout. He held it up for her examination. After this, she looked directly into my eyes and smiled the same sort of warm smile Old Father favored me with when I did particularly well in my lessons.

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

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The Oath Again

Scrapper accepts One Who Cares as her apprentice. During time away from the sewing room, Scrapper admits that her ability to feel colors, as she can see One Who Cares can, has long since left her. One Who Cares explains that Old Father taught her about cloth and colors, and even in his absence, continues to guides her. In turn, Scrapper explains that she has not selected an apprentice from amongst the other workers because they do exactly as they are told, without the sort of imagination and invention demonstrated by One Who Cares. As Scrapper's apprentice, One Who Cares assumes Scrapper's prestige, with attendant duties that bring her in frequent association with Song Of Willow.

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 preferred to let us care for the garment duties of the clan. 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 as were 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 is usual with men, 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 lose 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 down the hallway.

Willow was obviously embarrassed by our encounter and chose to avoid contact with me beyond what was required by our duties. 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 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 offered him the 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. In time, he found his senses and slowly his head while he pushed my hand toward my 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 breathe. "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 as I 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 to speak that you would trust. 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," I told him. "Agreed!" We hugged again, like father and daughter.

* * * * *

The Healer

Some time after One Who Cares begins working for the Royal Garment Clan, she again awakes to find her crotch clammy with thick blood. The first time she had this problem, Mama had gone to Medicine Grower to obtain a foul tasting root that One Who Cares drank as a tea and rubbed on her belly as a stinging paste. She repeats this therapy now, but with little success. Over the next few days, the bleeding and discomfort reaches a severity that forces her to seek help. Panicked, she makes her way to Medicine Grower's house.

"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 had 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 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 this!"

"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 a meaningless song while I drifted off to a deep sleep.

* * * * *

Sheman has talked amongst the old women and has determined that One Who Cares must go to a respected healer who lives outside of the city walls. When they begin, it is the sort of bright sunny day the two women might have chosen to venture out for an adventure, but instead, Sheman finds herself supporting One Who Cares against her growing weakness as they hurry to find the healer.

"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," Sheman insisted. "Soon we will be at the Spirit Master's house and once he has finished with you, you will be able to run all the way home. That is, if you have not grown

too flabby living in that great house." She tugged at my arm as she tried to lead me further up the path.

"You will like this man, I am told," Sheman said, trying very hard to distract me from my pain. "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 now." Sheman pulled at my arm again, 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 focused long enough to realize Sheman was 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 my face from the rough gravel. "You must wake up, Little One."

I watched Sheman through the clouded vision of my numbed mind with a deep fascination. 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 focused determination, as if my arm was the only thing in the world.

I continued to watch Sheman's hands on my arm while the buzzing in my ears and the numbness in my body continued to overwhelm my senses. It was as if I was looking down a long tunnel, and for me, all there was in the world was Sheman's hands on 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 was a scrap of cloth. I found myself leaning against Sheman, 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. For a moment my attention focused so clearly that I could see myself reflected in the man's 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. After a time, he put his hands on my shoulders and gently shook me, as if to wake me 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 near her as she watched the old man. I could see tears in her eyes.

The stranger put his hand on Sheman's head for a moment, and then stood up, shaking his head. "You must eat more red roots, my child," he said to me. "You are a little low on the blood that gives you energy." With that, he turned to leave.

* * * * *

The two girls realize the old man is the healer they are seeking. With her strength renewed by the Spirit Master's touch, One Who Cares easily follows Sheman to the healer's house. He lives on a small, meadow that is sandwiched between a deep canyon and the same trail One Who

Cares had followed on her journey to Whitehome. The Spirit Master does not accept coin in payment, but instead, insists that one of them must teach him something he does not know. One Who Cares offers to tell him how a plant became his cloak. Spirit Master listens to her story with great interest. When she has finished, he feigns great wonder that a lowly tuft of cotton could aspire to such noble work. After this, he insists that Sheman and One Who Cares must join him in drinking a tea he has prepared.

Spirit Master slapped a hand to both Sheman and my knee as he pushed himself to a standing position. "Now, One Who Cares, you must drink some of this awful tea with Sheman and me."

He 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 hut is good to keep the rain away but it does little to 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 fell away into the shadows below.

Spirit Master and Sheman were still talking by the house, leaving me time to think about what had brought me to that place. A crow called from somewhere overhead, pulling my thoughts away from my pain. The warm sunshine on my back soothed my mind further. The sky was a beautiful blue against the white and gray stone of the cliff, itself punctuated by the bright green of small bushes that grew 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 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 close to her nose. Holding it at arm's length, she made an ugly face. "I ask you again. 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. He chanted strange words in a hypnotic rhythm, swaying side to side, forcing us to sway with him. He continued like this for many minutes, making me feel dizzy and lightheaded. Then he dropped our hands and turned to face me. "Sheman, stand near your friend and hold your hands over mine, no matter what I do."

Sheman obediently moved closer to me and waited. As soon as she was there, Spirit Master turned me to face away from the cliff overhang. He put his right hand on my forehead and his left hand 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 as well. 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, also joined my song with a song of his own. As I repeated my song again, other crows joined in. Then a hawk, hovering above the canyon wall, joined the chores with 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. 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 could hear Sheman humming and crying, 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 returned a smile.

* * * * *

Passages

One Who Cares comes away from the Spirit Master's house stronger and on the path to recovery. He has taught her ways of meditation that will help her manage her bleeding. Sheman is much taken by Spirit Master's healing abilities and soon becomes his apprentice. One Who Cares is drawn to the healer, but he ignores her. She finally demands his attention. In response, he tells her that "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."

It took years for me to come to understand that Spirit Master had understood me better than I did myself. At first I tried to forget what he had told me by turning my attention to my apprenticeship with Scrapper. But it was no use. I found myself examining my relationship with others to see if I seemed to clink to them. I could not see what he intended until 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 held shut, her face contorted by the pain, making her look as if she were holding her breath. When I pulled her head into my lap 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 did not realize," I mumbled, peering at the worker through tear-swollen eyes.

"She is dead," I said, speaking the obvious, embarrassed that I may have dishonored Scrapper's memory.

Once again I remembered Spirit Master's words. "I am not your Old Father!"

Yes, perhaps I had only substituted one Old Father for another by looking 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, his fists clinched, his face held in a mask of pain. He stood there without words for many minutes as he mourned 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 they had moved her from the house, Willow found me in the cooking room and sat down beside me at the table. We cried together for a very long time. After that, I took him to my sleeping pad and we became lovers.

* * * * *

One Who Cares finds years of contentment as head seamstress of the Royal Garment Clan and wife of Song Of Willow. She experiences only occasional bouts of bleeding that require more care than she is able to provide through the tools given her by the Spirit Master. She should be happy, but as time passes, she finds herself struggling with a sense of eminent change. As is her custom, One Who Cares has turned to Sheman for comfort and advice.

"So why are you so sad, One Who Cares?" Sheman asked, only a little distracted by the warm sun. "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?" She sat beside me on the footbridge that spanned a little stream in the Royal Garden For The People. She had a flower in her hand that 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 to 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 limb that hung by her head and proceeded to dismantle it as she had 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 have not given him a child. He loves you just the same." Sheman Struggled to her feet with my help, and we began walking 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 when he is gone?"

"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.

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There can be no question that One Who Cares had fulfilled Song Of Willow's expectation that she could be a good seamstress. In fact, the Queen is so happy with her work, she arranges to have the Emperor complement the Clan Master. He, in turn, rewards One Who Cares by providing her and Song Of Willow a sleeping room on the main floor of the house.

The room actually had an opening that overlooked 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. 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 . . . hold me," I whispered to him, secretly urging him to continue.

"No, let me finish this one time. I have been in this house all my life and have never dared 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.

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From Learning Comes Teaching

There is a time of becoming we must all experience, even though some of us may not recognize this transition. This moment comes for One Who Cares years after Song Of Willow's passing, when circumstances conspire to make her recognize herself in the trials of a child, and Old Father in the way she finds to help. The die is cast when Last Girl becomes trapped in a waterway. Unable to rescue her sister, First Girl turns to One Who Cares, whom she knows as

Grandmam, and her parents for help. She leads them on a journey through the clan house so fast and so far that One Who Cares must stop to rest, and arrives much behind the others.

Flower called to me as I entered the courtyard. "Come Grandmam, you must see this for yourself."

"Go find So So, he will want to be here," she said to the worker who had stayed behind to help me.

I visualized any number of terrible things I might soon witness, but nothing prepared me for what greeted me when I joined the others. "Oh dear! Is that possible?" I could not help myself as 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 waterway 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 crying her outrage in chorus with Last Girl.

"Who would have dreamed," Flower said to herself once she regained her composure. She shook her head in dismay and began wading 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.

So So took a few deep breaths to regain his composure once he had Last Girl safely on dry land. He then turned to look back at the grating, a deep scow furrowing his face. After that, 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 also got a big grin on his face. I could tell he wanted to laugh, but that he 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 a little kitten nearly drowned you." He turned to look 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 run here so fast. Do not do so 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 beside her mother to face her father. I could see that she expected praise from her father.

"Why is it that you let Kitten become trapped 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 stretch spools when she went after the kitten. She moved into the water so fast, 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 demanded to know from So So as I brushed past him with an indignant grunt.

* * * * *

One Who Cares is careful not to use the authority afforded by her position without good reason. However, So So's behavior failure to reward his oldest daughter is too much for her to ignore. In One Who Cares' response is the truth of her maturity.

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 and patted So So on his shoulder, as a friendly gesture, on the way to First Girl's corner. He reached up and momentarily held my hand 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 loved had left her.

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

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

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

"No . . . no you have never." She sniffled, 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 from that experience, to take control of my life.

"You see, my little friend," I said to her when I had finished, "there are many ways that you can come to be your own woman, and there are many things you will come to understand about

the people you must live with. Your parents now 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 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 even glancing 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.

* * * * *

At first, So So is furious that One Who Cares has named his daughter, but he soon sees that the Grandmam has thus honored his family. For her part, One Who Cares finds the experience a turning point that forces her to acknowledge the urge to return to her mountain clan for her last years, just as Old Father had in his later years. This future is sealed when Flower discloses that Bright Light thinks of One Who Cares in much the same way as One Who Cares had thought of Old Father when she was a child.

Flower shrugged. "Bright Light 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."

Flower hesitated when she saw the perplexed expression on my face. "What is it Grandmam?"

"Did you say Old Mother," I asked. Did I really want to know?

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

"No, that is not an insult. There was an old man who was Old Father to me. Could it be the same?" My mind was fuzzy with confusion. "Could it be that I have lost Old Father only to become one myself?"

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The Return

It is not long after she gives Bright Light her name that One Who Cares decides she will return to her clan home. There are many tearful good-byes. Sheman suspected this moment was soon to come, but cries nevertheless when One Who Cares tells her. Flower is supportive, probably because she is to inherit the roll of head seamstress. Even the Queen expresses her dismay at the departure of her favorite seamstress. However, she honors One Who Cares by lending her the finest guardsmen to escort her home.

So So stepped up to my horse and handed me a small bundle wrapped in a scrap of silk. "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 first 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, imagining that we might become friends.

It was at the western gate that the Royal Guardsmen met us. I recognized their uniform on sight and viewed the captain with growing alarm as he commanded the caravan to stop. He 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. He handed me a scrolled message and sat beside me expectantly, indicating that I should read it as he waited.

"*My dear One Who Cares,*" The Empress' message began. "*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 to one of his men. A man 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.

* * * * *

One Who Cares' arrival is greeted with mixed feelings by her people. She had not gotten along very well with the sister she now finds the Grandmother of the clan. Her sister makes it clear that One Who Cares is not welcome. Thus it is necessary for One Who Cares to negotiate for her acceptance back into the clan house.

We sat on benches molded into the wall of a small court. There was a table molded into the wall at one corner and a raised coal pit sat in the middle of the court. The pit was 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 a back and armrests. It was occupied by an old woman, who was surveying the court with the unmistakably critical eyes of one accustomed to authority. The sun illuminated fully one half of the court making part of the wall shine with eye hurting white while the other half was, by contrast, very dark. The sky covered the courtyard with the most vivid blue I could remember seeing. My escort sat on either side of me in the shadow, eyeing the clan elders with stern suspicion. The elders, in turn, were arrayed along the other three walls, nervously avoiding eye contact with the guardsmen.

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 after

she had taken a sip, did the others receive their cups, hastily brought to them by two of the children. Once everyone held 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 shared smiles.

The old lady finished her tea and held it 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 to do so.

"Too Tall tells me that you were once known to us as Morning Glory Of The Mountains," the old woman said to opened the conversation.

"Yes, I am of this clan." I had been watching her since she came in, trying to determine if I knew her. In fact, I could not recognize one of these people, even though several were older than I. "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 as she leaning forward in her seat, alert to see my reaction.

"Oh, you do remember me." I was nearly in tears.

The old lady giggled. "I remember your name, but I remember little of you. 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 in their faces. "I want to come home to the clan." There, I said it. I held my breath.

"But you left," was her simple reply. She had still not told me who she was.

"Yes, I know, but I had to find medicine for Old Father."

"You left the clan" the old lady repeated with a blank expression.

I was becoming irritated at the lack of communication. Also, I could see that the captain 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 as she waited for my reaction. Of all of my sisters, she was my greatest nemesis. Father was just as unhappy that Lamb's Flower was not a boy and made her life nearly as miserable as he had mine. However, 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 at my return, she was the poorest possible choice for me. My heart sank.

* * * * *

One Who Cares asks to speak with her sister in private, where she hopes to recover her right as a member of the clan.

Lamb's Flower turned to face me as soon as we were alone. "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 appeared shocked as she sat down hard on a wall seat. She was obviously not used to being spoken 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 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 her quiet little world. 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 all 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 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 come after us while we try to set our memory right in the world. 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 house 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 reached Whitehome and found that I would not be able to purchase 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.

* * * * *

Being Home

One Who Cares gratefully settles into the routine of clan life. She finds many youngsters to mentor and many willing ears for her new ways of working with cloth and colors. Her sister passes away, leaving One Who Cares as the Grandmother of the clan. There is one special young man in whom One Who Cares has taken special interest. She has secretly taught him new stanzas for the clan's oral history that would honor Old Father. It is the unveiling of this surprise that she awaits as she listens to the men's evening gathering.

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 when 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 to drift from rooms along the darkening hallways.

I waited, anxiously watching the darkness move relentlessly toward the distant peaks that stood as torches of bright light arrayed across the small opening of my window. If Too Tall finished his song before the full darkness of night engulfed the valley, there would be time for First Born to sing his song, and thus, earn his right to join the men of the clan as Gatherer, the name his father had given him.

Too Tall had finished. The men were quiet and I looked to the peaks to see that there was still light there. There was time for Gatherer to earn the right of his name.

His little voice drifted down the hallway and through the wall as if he were everywhere at once. 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."

Too Tall's youngest child squirmed around in my lap to see if I had noticed. "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 Gatherer's 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 my lap. Once free from me, he moved to pull the cover away from the doorway so that he could look down the hallway and better hear 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 giggles 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, as well.

"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 to 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 singing a song of remembrance about me.

I could take it no longer! Indicating to Fourth Born that he should remain behind, I 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. Then I saw his big hand swing the hide aside so that I could see into the room. Even now, I feel the warm surprise I felt when I saw that the whole clan had gathered around the fire pit to greet me. Nearly thirty of them, counting Winter Song's new child and discounting Lamb's Flower who had died nearly a season earlier.

"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." Too Tall was pleased with himself.

Gatherer stood before me and reached for my hands. "Come Grandmam, there is a seat for you by the pit. Here, where you can best hear me sing your song."

"The men?" I was nearly in tears.

"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.

Once I was properly seated, Too Tall produced a deep, rumbling chuckle that 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 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 at him in return.

"Once Gatherer admitted 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 at the village gathering 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 crossed the room, careful not to step on any children. He leaned over to 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 allows 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 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 of our clan, everyone responded by slipping into the quiet mind of meditation. We all hummed 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, thankful that I could immerse myself in the group.

Once Too Tall had finished, he pointed to Gatherer who took up the story. Gatherer sang of Old Father and then he sang of me. As he finished singing, tears were in my eyes. 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.

Then, just as the moment came when I must thank them, little Two Step pulled away from her mother and made her way 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 my knee to steady herself. "Gatherer will learn to sing his song better."

* * * * *

To Open the Circle

One Who Cares comes to recognize the many signs her body is giving her as a warning that her transition is near. She is more often in pain from her old bleeding problems, as her healing control becomes less effective. She begins preparing the other women of the clan for her eventual absence.

"You must not concern yourself with me," I explained to Clover Flower who was sitting with me on the wallbench. "Please understand, I have lived a full life and there is little 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," Clover Flower agreed.

"Well then. These are my last days. And Spirit knows I am looking forward to 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, 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. That calmed her and we both relaxed in the warm sun.

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."

* * * * *

The voice within One Who Cares' mind is persistent but she is unable to think of what it might mean. This question is answered when she is confronted with yet another roll reversal that places her in Old Father's footsteps.

"Yes little ones, 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," Two Step finished for me. "Yes Grandmam, we know. But, we have learned most of the wool lessons already."

"Grandmam? Are you okay?" Fourth Son asked, concern in his voice.

I was just putting a stretch down when I was struck by an especially sharp pain in my stomach. I could not help but to winch, the pain was so sudden. "Yes . . . Go! Go practice your combing, little ones. 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 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 that faced 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," I said to the blue sky. "They will behave the same way I behaved when Old Father was dying, won't they?" I listened for an answer in the wind and then closed my eyes. 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.

* * * * *

An Ending . . . of Sorts

The old priest leans close to One Who Cares and listens for her slow breath. He is uncertain if he detects life in her still body, and so, places his hand on her forehead to will vital energy to her. It is his intention to hold life long enough to hear the last of her story. She moves in response to the warmth of his touch, but her eyes do not open.

“This is the only time I have told my whole story,” One Who Cares managed to say. She was careful not to allow her words to push back the sense of disassociation she felt from her body. “I am so happy you have given me this opportunity to share my wonderful life. It is very kind of you.”

The old priest waved his hand in the air between them. "Not kind my friend. We gain something in return, for your story enriches our history."

He returned his hand to her forehead. "Your decision to die out of sight of your clan children is most honorable. I agree your decision may prevent one of the children from looking to the city to find you medicine. 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 delighted cackle echoes into the vaulted ceiling of the temple. One Who Cares looked about at the others, the Scribes and the Spirit Masters, and the faithful ones who joined them from time to time to share in the chants. She looked around at the glow of their brightly colored bodies and felt the warmth that glow carried to her. The sound of their chant began to move her, seeming to lift her from the room, wrapping her in unimaginable warmth as it did. And her pain! It was as if the vibration of the chant drowned her pain into oblivion and released a great pressure from her Soul.

"Oh such great wonder," she managed to whisper as she sensed the ceiling grow bright with the sounds of love. She watched but did not feel the priest's hands touch her with loving caresses. In that moment, she felt the ebb and flow of her Spirit and heard the laughter of young children above her . . . and around her. It was then that she saw Old Father standing before her with his hands held outstretched. She felt the chanting voices move farther behind but not the warmth. She was immersed in the warmth of a new world and in the arms of her angels as they lifted her up to Old Father's side.