

Here's what Advance Readers Are Saying About **RIVER MOTHER: *the Face of the Sphinx***

From the start, prophet-leader River Mother's voice is distinctive, especially as she narrates her own birth in a striking stream-of-consciousness poem: "a river / of pain / is splitting / my body / I am crying / against / the light." At the Spirit Caves, the adolescent River Mother connects with her animating spirit, Mafdet the Cheetah Goddess. She learns that spirit-filled existence is "the way of feeling, not thinking and words." After puberty hits, she sleeps with Runs Like Cheetah and bears a son, Ghost Hunter. After escaping a prophesied massacre, the young family sets off by canoe so that River Mother can proselytize the way of the Mother Goddess, who in many riverside villages has been downplayed in favor of Sun God Ra. Like an Old Testament prophet, River Mother preaches anywhere she's welcomed. **After she foretells a terrible flood caused by the eruption of Mount Aetna (circa 6000 B.C.E.), the survivors, thinking her a goddess, transfer her image onto a large cliff face—the origin of the Sphinx... An esoteric...historical tale that may appeal to fans of Carlos Castaneda or ancient Egyptian history.**

Kirkus Reviews

"This book will cast its spell as soon as you start reading. It has something for everyone. I raced through it once, and then settled down for a reread. *River Mother* gets my vote. I would recommend it to anyone

River Mother's birth compels us into the mystery that is her life and her journey through this time. The walls are very

thin between *River Mother* and the forces that speak to her and guide her; and although she has competent teachers and helpers her own senses must be unfailing as she opens to her calling.

The danger, treachery, and surprise in this story keep us moving right along with *River Mother* as she narrates her story. Her fears and loves and friendships are at the front of the action, and there is no lack of character in those that surround her.”

Scylla Liscombe, Poet, Dancer, Artist

“I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in prehistory. Spring himself took a fabulous journey of self discovery while creating this book. He does an excellent job of sharing this journey, and enabling us to participate in it. Correctly read, the book (in the tradition of Castaneda) will alter how you perceive reality. I devoured the book in two days.

Originally drawn to preliterate cultures for their spiritual knowledge, Spring immersed himself in the prehistoric world of *muthos* (the use of myth and tales to explain reality) in prehistoric Africa, where he portrays prehistoric people who were not only not less conscious than we are (with our *logos* consciousness) but people who had direct contact with the Gods: *‘Preliterate cultures relied on voices and visions to give them directions. They took these to be from the Gods and Goddesses. Many of these directives arrived of their own accord, but others arrived as the results of shamanic practices which I believe were far more developed than those employed by even our most highly developed western psychics.’*

A prize-winning poet, Spring (writing out of a small apartment in Cozumel, Mexico) takes you on a mythical journey you will never forget. You will be enchanted not only by the journey that *River Mother* takes but by the people she meets like her shaman teacher, *Monkey Mother*, and *Mafdet*, the Cheetah Goddess.”

Jim Anton, Publisher, Muse Press

“It’s been a year now since I read the E-book version of **RIVER MOTHER: *the Face of the Sphinx***, enough time to have it permeate my mind and body and become a part of my psyche: I am *River Mother* and *Baby Man* and a cheetah, dark and light. I am the jungle and the desert and the river. I can’t shake it, not ever. It keeps getting deeper and gaining more resonance as the days and nights go by. I’ve been there it seems. Maybe I have or maybe not. RIVER MOTHER is now a part of me and Justin Spring gets my gratitude and admiration for giving me this priceless experience.”

Joan Adley (Adora), Poet, Intuitive, Healer

“Wow! I couldn't put this book down! I have always dreamed of being an Egyptologist, I absolutely loved everything about this book! The adventures of *River Mother* took kept me on edge waiting for the next obstacle she had to overcome! I am fascinated with Ancient Egyptian History, so my favorite part was of *River Mother* restoring the balance between the Mother Goddesses and Ra.

There was never a dull moment starting from the beginning. Every character was specific and the story played vivid pictures in my head. **This is DEFINITELY a book I will recommend to everyone!!**

Ashley Kedward, High School Student

“What is astounding about RIVER MOTHER: *The Face of the Sphinx* is the ease with which the author pulls you back into a world of prehistoric Nubian hunter-gatherers. That world, however, is hardly the dangerous, subsistence level world portrayed by our archaeologists. This is not to say that tribe members didn’t feed themselves by hunting and gathering, but those same tribe members also lived in a world filled with courage, art, music, poetry, spirituality, love, humor, savagery and companionship. Maybe the best way to describe the prehistoric world of *River Mother* is to say it was a Garden of Eden constantly being visited by powerful and unpredictable Mother Goddesses, wild animals, and the violent treachery of males from both inside and outside the tribe. I’ll leave it to you to find out how *River Mother* survives all this and winds up as the face of the Sphinx in Giza. **This is a hell of a tale but also one of the few novels I’ve read about the Mother Goddess period that feels both intuitively and historically true.”**

Christopher Hickey, Writer, Biographer Alice Hickey

“First off, let me say I am a painter not a writer so my experience with *River Mother* came primarily from the visual imagery that unfolded in my mind as I read the book. That imagery swept me into a prehistoric world of Nubian hunter-gatherer tribes dominated by spiritual and natural forces. Unlike our world—where everything is kept in

separate boxes—their world had no boundaries. Their waking and sleeping hours were filled with Mother Goddesses, lions, crocodiles and everything else under the sun.

But what made their world truly different from ours is they trusted their intuitive/psychic perceptions of those Mother Goddesses, lions and crocodiles just as we trust being guided by reason. Because of this, *River Mother* covers some very strange territory, yet **the author's highly visual storytelling has the effect of transforming *River Mother's* story into a full color movie that sweeps you up and takes you with it like the wide Nile itself. I might add that it is beyond me how the author could have possibly imagined all this without somehow psychically tapping into the very heart of this ancient time. This is a look at history thru a very different lens, and yet, somehow, it all rings true."**

Dennis Alesandro, Painter, Sculptor, Musician

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RIVER MOTHER

THE FACE OF THE SPHINX

JUSTIN SPRING

For Scylla

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**Note: This E-book version corrects any existing Kindle
and PDF typographical errors**

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AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

RIVER MOTHER: *the Face of the Sphinx* is the story of an extraordinary Nubian female shaman and leader of a hunter-gatherer tribe in Nubia between the second and third cataracts. The story is set in the Proto-Egyptian Mother Goddess period c.6000 B.C. and is told by *River Mother* herself. She begins by describing her birth and early life followed by the shamanic training and prophetic visions that eventually drive her to journey to the Nile delta where her spiritual beliefs are challenged by the somewhat different beliefs of Semitic tribes immigrating into the delta from the north.

She rises to that challenge by becoming a great visionary leader whose impact on the spiritual and physical lives of the delta's inhabitants eventually brings them to honor her as a living Goddess by carving *her face* on a rocky outcropping on the Giza plateau—an outcropping that was gradually transformed over the next 3500 years into what we now know as the Great Sphinx of Giza. Although *River Mother* is a fictional character, I should point out that her story is not a fantasy. It is rooted in the known artistic, cultural, weathering, and historical facts of that period, many of which point toward the likelihood that:

1) The face on the Sphinx is the face of *someone like her*.

and

2) *Only* the face was carved initially.

While *River Mother's* story can be read as a good adventure story set in an extremely distant, mysterious period, it also can be taken as a metaphoric representation of what happened when hunter-gatherer tribes from Nubia and the Semitic Levant intermixed in the Nile delta during the period 6500-3200 B.C.—thereby producing a preliterate Proto-

Egyptian culture with distinct racial, spiritual, and social characteristics that eventually gave birth to literate Dynastic Egypt with its belief in the immortality of the Pharaoh's soul as well as many other related spiritual/psychic beliefs and practices, most noticeably the mummification, burial, and journey of the Pharaoh to the afterlife to become one with *Osiris*.

One of the implied themes of RIVER MOTHER is that Dynastic Egypt's spirituality, and its obsession with the immortality of the Pharaoh's soul, grew out of African—and specifically Nubian—preliterate spiritual concepts. Our failure to recognize this has left us with an incomplete picture of how important black African spiritual beliefs and practices were in the evolution of both Proto-Egyptian and Dynastic Egyptian spirituality.

The Mother Goddess cultures in this story are essentially the same cultures that dominated the beliefs of all preliterate hunter-gatherer cultures throughout the world until around 4000 B.C. Unfortunately, many archaeologists have been slow to acknowledge their existence despite the undeniable evidence presented by archaeologist *Marija Gimbutas* and *Riane Eisler*.

In addition, many have been equally slow to acknowledge *Julian Jaynes'* decisive insight that the consciousness of preliterate peoples was much different from ours in that they were constantly being guided by voices originating in the right side of their brains that they took to be the directives of the Gods. The reason for this, he says, is that preliterate consciousness lacked the mind space used by modern, literate humans to plot future, alternative actions. According to Jaynes, that mind space evolved sometime around the time writing was invented.

The preliterate hunter-gatherer tribes from Nubia and the Semitic Levant in 6000 B.C. were Mother Goddess cultures.

These Mother Goddess beliefs drive *River Mother's* story just as they drove the emerging Nile delta Proto-Egyptian culture that eventually formed the foundation for the spirituality of literate Dynastic Egypt (c. 3200 B.C.).

But let me get back for a moment to some of the specifics of *River Mother's* world. As a young girl, her entire world in 6000 B.C. would have consisted of the area between the second and third cataract on the upper Nile in Upper Nubia. Hunter-gatherer tribes existed in this area for tens of thousands of years. The spiritual life of these tribal cultures was dominated by the Gods—in particular the *Mother Goddesses*—as were all preliterate tribes throughout the world at this time. Although we usually associate the Mother Goddess period with preliterate eastern European early farming cultures, this is only because that is where the initial Mother Goddess archaeological studies and the groundbreaking Mother Goddess work of poet Robert Graves (*The White Goddess*) were focused.

However, since we now know that the human race began in Africa, we can only conclude that the first, most natural and most powerful supernatural presence in 6000 B.C. would have been the Great Mother, i.e., the Mother Goddess. My own sense of it is that the various Mother Goddesses absolutely dominated these early hunter-gatherer tribes.

While very little is known about Nubia c. 6000 B.C., we do know that the area between the second and third cataract was the only part of the Nile valley that was inhabitable between 10,000-7000 B.C. because of the continuous wild flooding of the Nile River caused by the snow caps melting on the tops of mountains throughout Africa during that time. Around 5000 B.C., this area between the second and third cataract gave birth to what is known as the *Pre-Kerma* culture, an early herding culture, and then around 2500 B.C., to a city (*Kerma*) of 10,000 with extensive

agricultural/herding/trading activities. It is about 750 miles south of Giza.

I have chosen this area as a likely birthplace for the female Nubian shaman I call *River Mother* because the *Kerma* area was obviously a place that began to develop beyond the hunter-gatherer stage at a very early date. It was a place on the move. While the earliest current archeological indication of repopulation of the Nile delta is dated around 6000 B.C., my own feeling is that hunter-gatherer tribes (who leave almost no archaeological trace) from both the Levant and Nubia were probably moving into it as early as 6500 B.C., if not earlier. We must remember that the Mt. Aetna tsunami of 6000 B.C. would have wiped out all evidence of an earlier immigration.

Thus, while the Nile delta and valley was essentially unpopulated during the “wild Nile” period of 10,000-7000 B.C., I believe it began to be populated by Semitic tribes from the Levant to the north and Nubians from the south around 6500 B.C. Both groups were Mother Goddess cultures, but with different characteristics and interests. The complete absence of any previous indigenous cultural groups makes it relatively simple to deduce what these Semitic and Nubian immigrants contributed to the racial, physical, cultural, and spiritual characteristics of the Proto-Egyptian culture which *River Mother* became a part of when she traveled to the Nile river delta c. 6000 B.C. There were *no other sources*. It’s as simple as that.

In writing this book, I chose to focus on the spiritual, artistic and highly psychic interests of the immigrating Semitic and Nubian cultures, but more importantly, on the spiritual, artistic, and highly psychic interests of the Proto-Egyptian culture to which the immigrating Semitic and Nubian tribes gave birth. I did this because I believe the Proto-Egyptian culture not only gave birth to the *face* of the Sphinx, but also

eventually determined the spiritual characteristics of the Dynastic Egyptian culture that emerged around 3200 B.C.

Unfortunately, archaeology is limited in studying these non-physical interests. Only art can truly open the door to *the soul* of that culture—its magical essence. Yet, despite my non-physical focus, the knowledgeable reader will see that *River Mother's* journey accurately reflects what we *do* know about the physical aspects of the Proto-Egyptian period.

I have tried to recreate the atmosphere of that time in part by having *River Mother* speak in as simple and straightforward a way as possible. (The reader must remember that *River Mother's* story is being *spoken* by her, as writing wouldn't be invented for another 3000 years.)

In order to give the reader a sense of the nature of her speaking, specifically how straightforward and basic it would have been, I have done a number of things:

- 1) I have tried to not use words derived from the Latin, e.g., *emulate*, *imagination*, *inimitable*, *precipice*, etc.
- 2) I have eliminated modern contractions such as “didn’t,” “isn’t,” “hadn’t,” etc., replacing them with the more basic “did not,” “is not,” “had not,” etc.

The way *River Mother* tells her story also reflects two important characteristics of preliterate stories.

- 1) Preliterate stories were always episodic and straightforward: *This happened, then this happened, then this happened*. This is true of *River Mother's* story. There are none of the subplots that we see in modern novels.
- 2) The characters in preliterate stories exhibit very little of the kind of internal reflection you see in a modern novel. This is true of *River Mother's* story.

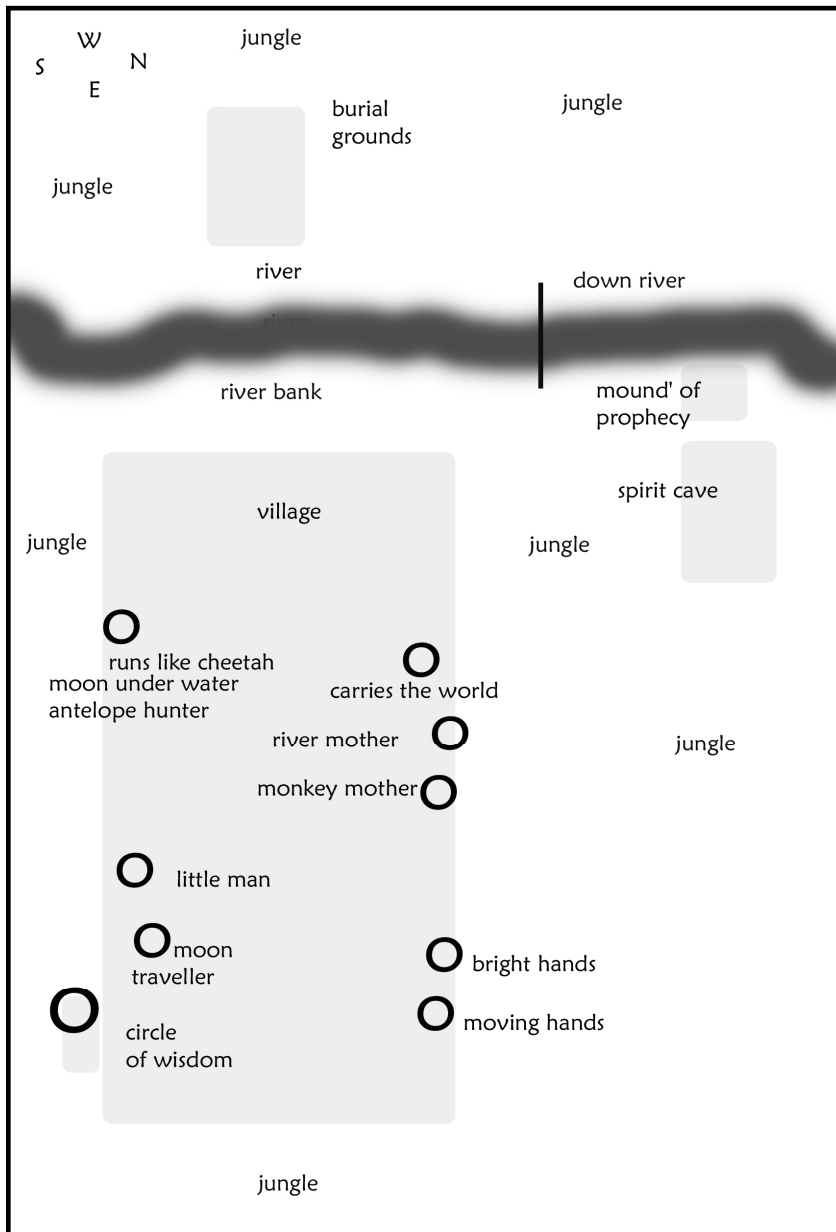
Julian Jaynes explains this lack of internal reflection by saying that the mind space needed for introspection was not present in our preliterate consciousness. He illustrates this by pointing out that there are *no* introspective characters in *any* preliterate stories, the most notable example being the absence of introspective characters in *The Iliad*, Homer's great preliterate epic. By taking all these characteristics into consideration, I think I have given the reader an accurate sense not only of the preliterate texture of *River Mother's* story, but also what she might have sounded like. If you would like to hear an example, here is a reading by Ayala Dayo of the first four chapters of RIVER MOTHER:

(<https://youtu.be/uz9T5QT7yqA>)

Some might think that a very crude pidgin grammar would be more representative of 6000 B.C., but pidgin is a modern barter language and hardly provides a solution as it is extremely limited in its ability to express emotions and ideas. Preliterate people use it only when they are communicating with outsiders in a trading situation. When they are speaking to each other, they always use their more expressive native tongue. I say this as someone very familiar with the problems of using pidgin. (See MIRRORS, <http://www.box.net/shared/416ck7oxym>)

The use of a pidgin would also suggest that early humans were strangers to sophisticated thought—which is a modern prejudice and hardly the case. The spiritual practices of preliterate cultures are the primal cradles in which all of our modern religions rock. For those who would like to delve further into the spiritual, artistic, and social aspects of these Mother Goddess cultures, there is an extensive Afterword that should satisfy most of your desires.

Justin Spring, Mexico 2014



MAP OF THE VILLAGE: UPPER NUBIA, THE CATARACTS

RIVER MOTHER SPEAKS

I am *River Mother*—the Daughter of *Mafdet*, the Cheetah Mother Goddess.

This is the story of my early life as I remember it.

Few human beings remember their births.

You could count them on the fingers of one hand.

I am one of those fingers.

So let me start there—at the moment of my birth.

Chapter 1: *I REMEMBER MY BIRTH*

There are
fingers
scraping
my
face
my eyes
are
eating
your
eyes
a river
of pain
is splitting
my body
I am crying
against
the light
I am
curling up
like a leaf
torn from a tree
I AM ME, I AM ME,
is what I remember
thinking
I AM ME.

Chapter 2: *THREE SUMMERS*

I was sitting under a large palm when my grandmother called to me from the riverbank, “Come here, *River Baby*.” She and my mother were standing in a small shallow pool in the mud of the river bank.

My grandmother’s name was *Monkey Mother*. When I reached the pool, she took my hand and bent down to speak to me. Her eyes were shining like moon water. She placed her mouth against my ear and whispered, “Lie down, baby.” Her voice sounded far, far away. I laid myself down in the black, shallow water and looked up at the bright blue sky. Suddenly, without saying a word, the two of them grabbed my wrists and ankles and lifted me up and flipped me over like a stretched hide.

I could see myself in the dark pool. My eyes were shining. I had the strangest thought—that the eyes looking back at me did not belong to me. Right then, I heard a voice inside myself: “*Listen to me, little one—your eyes no longer belong to you. They belong to the long scar winding down the center of your face and body.*”

My grandmother and mother held me there for a few moments then they flipped me over again so I was once more looking at the bright blue sky.

My grandmother whispered in my ear “Remember what you saw in the dark pool, *River Baby*.” Then the two of them dropped me on the river bank and began sweeping the pool clean with stalks of grass.

Then my grandmother sat me up and held my head so I could not move it. She looked at me like she was very far away and told me she had brought me to the pool because she wanted me to see what *she* had seen the day I was born.

“You were born on the day when *Ra* stays longest in the sky. I knew it was an omen, but I did not know what kind of omen. When you finally came into the world,” she said, “your face was veiled with skin and I knew then you were going to be a great leader. I split the veil with a flint and scraped it back. Your eyes were looking straight at me like they were speaking to me. You screamed and it coiled up inside me like a snake. I grabbed the flint and carved a winding river down the center of your face and body.”

“Why did you do that?” I asked my grandmother.

“My hand became possessed. I could not stop it.”

“What does the river scar winding down my face and body mean?” I asked.

“It means you are going to be a great prophet.”

I looked at my mother. Her head was bowed. She had been silent until now. Without looking at me she whispered, “Your name is no longer *River Baby*. That is the name we gave you until it was time to tell you your true name.”

“When is that going to happen?”

“Now,” she whispered. Her eyes were dark and shiny.

“Why now?”

“Because you are being reborn as I speak.”

“How do you know?”

“I can feel it. So can your grandmother. You could feel it too if you did not ask so many questions.”

My grandmother nodded. I tried to stop, but I could not—

“What am I to be called?” I asked.

“*River Mother*,” she said.

“Do you mean my children will be rivers?”

“No. It means your children will be river things.”

“You mean water?”

“No. Not water.”

“You mean fish?”

“No. Not fish.”

“What then?”

“No one knows that.”

As soon as she said that, I felt another body enter my body.
“Who was that?” I asked my mother.
“Who you really are,” my mother said.

Chapter 3: SIX SUMMERS

I played with all the children in our tribe, but my cousin *Runs Like Cheetah* was my favorite. We were always laughing and running.

His father was called *Antelope Hunter*. He was also my uncle. He hunted with a cheetah and was the greatest hunter in the village. His eyes were large and dark without any white. They were like an animal's eyes.

He always spoke to me when I visited *Runs like Cheetah* and asked how my mother was. Then one day, he did not say anything to me. He just followed me with his eyes, like he was hunting me. It scared me. I knew something had changed in him but I did not know what. After that, I did not go there any more. I waited for *Runs like Cheetah* to visit me.

Runs like Cheetah and I were the same age. He was strong, but I was just as strong. When we wrestled, sometimes I would throw him down and sometimes he would throw me down. But what I liked about him best was he was always laughing.

He could run like the wind. We would start out together but I would soon fall behind and then I would see the high grass dividing around him and then I would see him on a far away hill running and running.

One day he said to me, "I like to run more than anything."
"What about laughing?" I asked him. "Do you like laughing more?"

"I like them both best," he said laughing.

"Then why not run and laugh at the same time?"

"If I am walking, I can laugh, but when I am running like the cheetah, I cannot."

"Why not?"

“I do not know. I just cannot. I asked my mother why this was so, and she said, ‘*When you run like the cheetah, you are no longer a boy. You are a cheetah. Cheetahs are fast, but they cannot laugh. Only the human people can laugh.*’ She began making faces and soon we were both laughing so hard we could not stop. I love her more than I love running when we are laughing together.”

The mother of *Runs Like Cheetah* was the leader of our tribe. Her name was *Moon Under Water*. She sat at the head of the Circle of Wisdom. She was also my mother’s sister. After I had become *River Mother*, she told my mother to always place me in the shadows beyond the Circle of Wisdom whenever it met.

I would sit in the shadows with my mother and listen. It was always the same. *Moon Under Water* would listen to each of them but say nothing. She would listen to the mothers. She would listen to the hunters. She would listen to the healers. She would listen to the makers. To each of them she would listen.

When they had all finished speaking, she would turn to each of them and speak to them, one after the other, and each of them would listen.

She would tell them that she had heard the truth, or that she had not heard the truth.

No one argued with her.

To those from whom she heard the truth she would either say “Your truth is good for all of us. We will take your truth and listen to it within ourselves,” or she would say, “Your truth is only for you. Take it within yourself and follow its path.”

To those from whom she had not heard the truth, she would say, “You have wandered from the path of truth. This is not good for you. It is not good for the tribe. There is *darkness* in your heart. It is blinding you, causing you to lose your way. If you allow the *darkness* to stay, it will enter the heart of the tribe. We cannot allow this to happen. You must tame the darkness, or the tribe will do it for you.”

Then she would leave the circle. Each time she passed me in the shadows, she would look at me as if she were asking a question.

I asked my mother, “Why does *Moon Under Water* always look at me like that?”

“She is waiting.”

“Waiting for what?”

“She is waiting for you to catch fire.”

Chapter 4: NINE SUMMERS

Runs Like Cheetah kept looking at me like he knew a secret about me. He could not stop laughing. Finally he said, "How can you be *River Mother*? You are just a little girl. You do not even have breasts."

He cupped his hands on his chest, pretending he had breasts. "Look," he laughed, "Even I have breasts, look at them move," and he started to walk around moving his hands up and down like breasts.

I pulled his hands down and said, "Breasts do not matter. My children will not be children like you and like me."

"What will they be then?"

"River things."

"You mean water?"

"No, not water."

"You mean fish?"

"No. not fish"

"What are they then?"

"No one knows."

"When will they be born?"

"I do not know."

"How can you be a mother then? Mothers know everything. You do not even know what your children will look like, or when they will be born."

I did not know what to say. He suddenly began looking at me again like he knew something and said, "Let me look between your legs, maybe I can see what the river things will look like."

Just then, a shadow entered me and placed my hand hard against his chest. He stopped laughing.

A fierce voice spoke through me. It said, "*River things cannot be seen. They are things of the spirit.*"

“Did you hear that?” I asked.

“Yes,” he replied.

He was frightened. I took his hand and placed it down against my belly where the scar ended. He tried to pull his hand away but I held it tight. “Keep your hand there,” I told him. “Can you feel where the scar ends?”

“Yes, I can feel it.”

“Close your eyes,” I told him. “Now take your finger and follow the scar up my body very slowly until you feel it stop just above my eyes.”

I closed my eyes and waited for his finger to move. I could feel it begin to rise up, following the winding scar. He was trembling. Finally, he stopped, just above my eyes.

I opened my eyes. “Did you see anything,” I asked.

His eyes were still closed. “How could I? My eyes were closed.”

“Did you feel anything?”

“Yes, the scar felt alive, like it was moving.”

“That is how river things feel,” I told him. “When it is time, they will swim up and be born just above my eyes.”

“How do you know this?”

“I can see it in my mind,” I said.

“Can I open my eyes now?”

“Yes, Open them and look at me.”

He tried to look away. He was still trembling.

“Look at me,” I said, “Do not be afraid. What do you see?”

“Someone who looks like you but is not you,” he replied.

“That is what *River Mother* looks like.”

I was on fire.

Chapter 5: ELEVEN SUMMERS

One day, *Runs like Cheetah* was nowhere to be seen in the village. I became worried. I missed him. I missed his laughter. My mother knew everything. I asked her where he was.

“*Runs like Cheetah* has left the village,” she told me. “He will not be coming to play anymore. The time has come for him to become a hunter. He is learning from his father. He is living with *Antelope Hunter* on the grassy plain near the river, where the antelope are. He is learning about hunting with cheetahs. It will take many moons.”

Antelope Hunter had stopped speaking to me when I was six summers. It was clear he disliked me but I did not know why. He would follow me silently with his eyes, like he was hunting me. I did not like being near him. He scared me the way a savage animal would.

At night, he kept his cheetah in a large cage of sticks under a tree just outside the family’s hut. But during the day, *Antelope Hunter* would take him out of the cage and hold him in his arms and sing to him and feed him the way a mother would her baby.

My mother told me the all the hunters spoke of him as the greatest of hunters because he had tamed the cheetah to hunt antelope. They knew their spears and arrows were useless against the antelope. Antelope were too quick, too fast. Only the cheetah could run them down and kill them.

My mother told me that taming cheetahs and teaching them to hunt was very difficult. Many other hunters had tried and failed. Some were almost killed by the cheetahs. It took years. There were secrets she said.

“What secrets?” I asked her, “Do you know them? Mothers know everything.”

“Only *Antelope Hunter* knows those secrets. Soon, *Runs like Cheetah* will know them.”

“Are the secrets what he sings to the cheetah?”

“I do not know. No one does, not even *Moon Under Water*. What he is singing is in a special tongue that only he and the cheetah know. Some say the *Cheetah Goddess Mafdet* taught him.”

“Do you believe that?”

“Yes. *Moon Under Water* told me it is so. She told me it happened when *Antelope Hunter* decided he would only hunt with cheetahs. He was a young man then and had just found a male cheetah cub next to his dead mother. She said *Antelope Hunter* knew nothing about training cheetahs and the cheetah paid no attention to him. Then the *Cheetah Goddess Mafdet* came to him in a dream and told him she would teach him how to speak to cheetahs—but he would have to give up his eyes.”

“What do you mean *give up his eyes*?”

“He would lose the white surrounding his pupils.”

“Is that why his eyes are like that?”

“Yes. *Moon Under Water* says when *Antelope Hunter* woke up and looked at her, she screamed because his eyes were the eyes of an animal. ‘Is that you?’ she asked, and he answered, ‘Yes. it is me, but I have changed,’ and he began singing to the cheetah in his cage.”

“What happened then?”

“The cheetah sang back.”

Chapter 6: TWELVE SUMMERS

My mother's name was *Carries the World*. She had very large hands, larger than any of the men. She was twice as tall as *Monkey Mother* who told me that it took her a full day to give birth to my mother: "Her head came out very slowly and then her neck and then her long body and arms and then her long skinny legs kept coming out like they would never stop, and then I saw how large her hands were. I was amazed. I put them together like a basket and said to her, 'Your name will be *Carries the World*.' I placed you in her hands the day you were born, little *River Mother*, and you looked so small—like a seed—that I told your mother, '*The World has finally arrived*.' And we both laughed. And then we both cried."

Monkey Mother was a great shaman. If you crossed her, she would strike like a cobra. No one escaped her stick. Not even the great hunters. They always kept a wary eye on her.

But it was her eyes I learned to watch. When they suddenly became dark and shiny, I knew she was about to speak like a knife.

Her eyes looked like that when she took me aside one day at the end of my twelfth summer. She looked at me and said very slowly, like she was remembering something, "Your mother is waiting for you down by the river. Go there."

I hesitated for a moment. I was afraid. She whipped her stick across my legs. It hurt so much I cried. She snapped, "What are you waiting for—a kiss?"

I raced down to the river to my mother and told her what had happened.

“It is the way it has to happen,” she said. “I must speak to you first—it is the way. It is time for you to put away the things of a child. It is time for you change.”

“But I am still a girl. I have no breasts and no bleeding like the others.”

“I am not talking about breasts. You are not going to change that way, not for another summer. You have too much man in you.”

“What do you mean, ‘*I have too much man in me.*’?”

“The man in you is still resisting the change. He is very strong. He knows it will be the end of him.”

“What are you talking about? I am a girl. Who is this man in me?” I asked.

“You were born with the spirit of a woman and the spirit of a man. Your grandmother saw it when you were born, and so did I. We knew you would be a great leader one day. *Moon Under Water* has seen it too. That is why she has been watching you. She was waiting for you to catch fire. That is what happens when the two come together.”

“What happens to the man?”

“He becomes a part of the woman, like her shadow.”

“What happens then?”

“I just told you. The woman catches fire.”

“But I have already caught fire,” I said.

“I know, but not enough. The man in you has become a shadow, but he is still resisting.”

“When will he stop resisting?”

“When he grows tired of being a man. Listen to me. Your grandmother has been watching your dreams. She has seen the spirits gathering around you since you caught fire. Your fire attracts them like moths. They are waiting to come in.”

“When will they come in?”

“When the opening in you is large enough.”

“When will that happen?”

“Soon.”

“Where is this opening?” I asked.

“It is just above your navel.” She put her finger in it and pushed hard.

“Did you feel anything,” she asked.

“Your finger. It hurt.”

“No, besides my finger.”

“I felt dizzy.”

“That is where the opening is. The opening is very small, but it never closes in women. The Shadow of the Eye of Creation will fall on the opening soon. The Shadow will connect you to the Eye of Creation, the source of all life. The Eye of Creation is everywhere. It cannot be seen or touched. It would be like trying to touch the sky—the sky is there but not there. It cannot be done. When a girl is about to become a woman, the Shadow of the Eye of Creation falls on the opening and widens it. Then the spirits fly in.”

“What spirits?”

“The spirits of the Great Mother, the Mother who stepped out of the Shadow of the Eye of Creation to give birth to us all.”

“Are the spirits of the Great Mother the ones that make us bleed like the moon?”

“Yes.”

“Does this happen to boys?”

“It is not the same. There is an opening in boys, but the opening is smaller than the opening in girls and widens just a bit. It is tiny, like an ant hole.”

“What happens then?”

“The spirits of anger and desire come through. They must come through for the men to carry the seed of creation within them.”

“What happens then?”

“The opening closes and the men go about their business.”

“Do they know what has happened to them?”

“Yes, but they remember like a blind man remembers waking. No more questions. Close your eyes. What is going to happen to you is more important than becoming a woman. That will happen of its own accord, like the sun rising. What is going to happen to you now is far more dangerous. In seven days, the Shadow of the Eye of Creation will fall on you.”

“What will it feel like?”

“Like a shadow made of light. It will always be with you.”

“How can a shadow be made of light?”

“There is no way to explain that. All I can tell you is that it feels like a shadow made of light.”

“What will happen when it falls on me?”

“It will cause your opening to widen. That is the role of the Shadow. All that we can ever see, or feel, or know, is the *Shadow* of the Eye of Creation. The Eye of Creation itself is beyond knowing. It is too bright—and too dark. That is all I can tell you. We know the Shadow it is about to fall on you because we have seen spirits gathering around your opening. They know the Shadow is about to fall on you. When it does, your opening will widen and the spirits will fly in.”

“Are they the same as the spirits of becoming a woman?”

No. I just told you it is not time for you to become a woman. The spirits that are gathering around you right now are the Spirits of Knowing.”

“What do you mean by *knowing*?”

“They are the spirits of wisdom. They are both dark and light. The spirits of light will allow you to see things others cannot.”

“What are the spirits of dark then?” I asked.

“They are spirits that kill, that injure.”

“Can I stop them from coming in?”

“No, you cannot. No one can. They are bound to the spirits of light. They cannot be separated.”

“What am I to do with them when they come in?”

“You must learn to balance them. Keep them at bay.

Tomorrow, you will leave with your grandmother to learn this.”

“Where will we go?”

“To the Spirit Caves—do you know where they are?”

“Yes. When I was swimming with *Runs like Cheetah* the river current took me around the far bend one day. He told me to look up and I would see the Spirit Caves.”

“What did they look like?”

“They looked like two eyes and a mouth high up on the river cliff.”

“That is where you are going with *Monkey Mother*. She will teach you the ways of knowing.”

“How long will I stay up there?”

“Until you come down,” she said.

Chapter 7: SPIRIT CAVES, DAY 1, THE SHAMAN'S SECRET

It was still dark when Monkey Mother woke me the next day. She kept tapping on my shoulder with her stick, "Wake up, wake up, the Spirit Caves are waiting for us."

"But it is too dark, I cannot see."

"We need the darkness. We must travel before the sun comes up, before it wakes."

I felt around in the darkness for the hanging fruit. She hit my hand with her stick. "No fruit. No fruit." She rattled a pouch in front of my eyes. "Only monkey meat," she whispered, "only monkey meat."

She tied herself to me with a thin cord of hide and dragged me through the darkness to the path leading to the river. If I did not keep in step with her, the cord would pull me. It was black dark outside. No moon. I could not see anything except high up when the blackness gave way to the white stars.

"The river, the river," *Monkey Mother* kept saying. I could not see anything. All I could hear was her voice a few feet ahead of me. When we reached the river, she jumped into a dugout.

"Get in, quick," she whispered and tugged on the cord. She pushed the dugout and we began drifting down river. It was black everywhere. Only the sound of the water beneath us and the white stars above us broke the dark tunnel. Then, suddenly, *Monkey Mother* began paddling to shore. When we hit the river bank, I could see the white stars above the dark cliffs.

"Get out!" *Monkey Mother* whispered. I was lost. I had never been to the cliffs, only seen them from the river. *Monkey Mother* pushed through the brush and began

climbing very quickly. “Faster, faster, let your feet see, not your eyes,” she whispered.

I tried to keep in step with her, but I kept stumbling in the darkness. Every time I did, the cord would pull me forward. *Monkey Mother* never stopped climbing. She was like a demon. One minute I would be in step with her—and then the next minute I would stumble and the cord would pull me forward. “Let your feet see, let your feet see,” she kept whispering back to me.

Then, suddenly, we were in step. She moved, I moved. It just happened. I knew we were high above the river, because I could barely hear it moving. We were on a small path, pressed against the side of the cliff. There was just room for our feet. I knew we would both die if either of us slipped. “Be careful *Monkey Mother*, I am afraid I will slip.” She turned her head to look at me. Her eyes were shining in the darkness. “The spirits are guiding me,” she whispered, and with that she took two steps and so did I. It just happened. I went to touch the cliff, but it was not there. My stomach dropped. I did not know what was happening. *Monkey Mother* turned to me. I could feel her breath on the side of my face. “This is the Cave of the Mouth,” she whispered, and she suddenly pushed me like a tumbling doll into the dark mouth—and then the cord around my waist pulled her down right on top of me.

I sat up and began to stretch my arms. As I stretched them out in back of me, I hit something hard with my hand. I turned around in the darkness and began to feel around where my hand had hit. Whatever it was, it was big—and felt like legs. “*Monkey Mother*,” I said, “there is something big and hard right in back of me and it has what feel like legs.”

“It is a statue of the Goddess *Mafdet*. It was carved by the Giants when they carved out the mouth and eyes long, long ago. In the morning you will see it is different from *our*

statues of *Mafdet*. Our statues are small and show her standing upright with a cheetah's head and a woman's body. The Giants carved her as a full size running cheetah with a woman's head. Some call the carving the Spirit Mouth's Tongue, because of where it was placed and the way it lunges forward."

"But why did the Giants carve *Mafdet* that way and not our way?"

"No one really knows why. Maybe they carved her running to signify her fierce speed in defending *Ma'at* from the Serpents of Disorder. They did this by stressing the quick, animal side of her nature."

"But why did they place the carving here—in the front of the mouth—like a tongue?"

"No one really knows. Maybe they placed it like a tongue to signify that the Spirit Caves was the place where the Goddesses spoke to them. But those are only guesses. Only the Giants know the real reasons why and they are all dead. Be quiet now and rest. No more questions."

The two of us lay there, listening to the night animals. "We must go deeper into the darkness," she whispered, and stood up, pulling me with her. The cave bent one way, then the other way, like a winding river. I knew that even after the sun rose, no light would ever find its way here. We kept going deeper and deeper into the dark cave until she finally sat down, pulling me down with her.

"*Monkey Mother* I cannot see anything, how can we live here?"

"You will learn how to live here. You must learn because the Spirits of Knowing like the darkness. Let your *body* see, not your eyes."

"But how can I see with my body?"

"You have already done it. Remember when we first climbed up here in the darkness?"

"Yes. I kept stumbling. I could not see anything."

"But I did not stumble, did I?"

“No. You seemed to know exactly where you were going.”

“Why do you think that was?”

“I thought it was because you had been here before.”

“That helped a bit, but the real reason was I was *seeing* with my body. It means using your body in a slightly different way. Some shamans call it *feeling* with your body, but I do not like that. It is not exact enough. *Seeing* is more exact—to see is to know every detail about something.”

“But how can I learn to do this?”

“You already know how to do it. Remember when we were halfway up the cliff, you stopped stumbling?”

“Yes my feet and hands seemed to know where to go.”

“That is because you began *seeing* with your body. It can happen all by itself, especially with someone like you. You were so desperate your body changed so it could *see*. All you have to do from now on is remember what that *felt* like and your body will *see*.”

“But *Monkey Mother*...”

“No more questions. Your mother has already told you much of what I am about to tell you, but I am going to repeat it and then add something else because it is important you understand why you are here. Do you know why you are here?”

Yes, I am here because the *Shadow* of the Eye of Creation will fall on me in seven days.”

“Yes, that is part of the reason. Tell me, what will the *Shadow* of the Eye of Creation feel like?”

“Like a shadow made of light.”

“What will happen when it falls on you?”

“It will cause my opening to widen. That is the role of the *Shadow*. We can never see, or feel, or know the Eye of Creation. The Eye of Creation itself is beyond knowing. It is too bright—and too dark. All that we can ever see, or feel, or know, is the *Shadow* of the Eye of Creation. When it falls on me, my opening will widen and the Spirits of Knowing will fly in.”

“Yes, that is true. You have listened well to your mother. And what are the Spirits of Knowing?”

“They are the spirits of wisdom. They are both dark and light. The spirits of light will allow me to see things others cannot.”

“What are the spirits of dark?” I asked.

“They are spirits that kill, that injure.”

“Can you stop them from coming in?”

“No, I cannot. No one can. They are bound to the spirits of light. They cannot be separated.”

“What are you to do with them when they come in?”

“I must learn to balance them. Keep them at bay.”

“Very good, little one. Now, one last question—do you understand everything you have just told me?”

“Yes and no. Most of the time I was just repeating what my mother told me.”

“That is a wise answer, little one, because you cannot truly understand what you have just told me until you *feel* the Shadow fall on you and the Spirits of Knowing enter you. Then you will truly understand what they are. Until then they will just be words. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, *Monkey Mother*.

“Do you understand what a shaman is, little mother?”

“Yes, *Monkey Mother*, a shaman is someone like you.”

“Yes, that is correct. But do you understand what a shaman does?”

“A shaman does what you do.”

“And what is that, little one?”

“Swat people with a stick when they misbehave.”

Monkey Mother gave me a quick, stinging swat across the feet with her stick and said, “This is not the time for jokes, little one. You are twelve summers—you know what shamans do.”

I do not know what made me tease her like that, it just came out, but I was not going to do it again. I could still feel the sting of her stick. I said to her, “Shamans speak to the Goddesses. They balance the Circle. They know things others do not.”

“That is better. But those are just words. Are they not?”

“Yes and no. I have seen you do these things, so they are not just words.”

“So you have. But they are still just words. What shamans really do is *live in two worlds*: they live in *this* world and they live in the Other World. Do you know what the Other World is?”

“Yes, it is where the Goddesses and Gods live.”

“But again those are just words, are they not?”

“Yes and no. You forget I am *River Mother*. Voices have spoken through me.”

“I do not doubt that at all, little *River Mother*. At times, those from the Other World do speak through us, or to us. When they do, we always *hear* their words clearly—but we cannot always be sure what the words really *mean*. You must always remember that. Do you remember my telling you that *part* of why you are here is for the *Shadow* to fall on you and the Spirits of Knowing to enter you?”

“Yes, I remember. You told me that just a few moments ago.”

“Do you know what the other part is?”

“Yes and No, My mother told me you would teach me the ways of knowing here, but she did not say what they were.”

“That is because they are ways of knowing only a shaman knows. Those ways make up what is called the way of the shaman. When you were born there were signs you would be a great shaman. But as you will learn, little one, such signs can be misleading—the Goddesses sometimes fool us for their own unknowable reasons. In the next seven days, I will test your gifts. I already know they are strong—I can feel them—but I must be sure. Some of the things I am about to tell you may be already known by you, but not as clearly as a shaman must know them.

“It is true” she continued, “that sometimes the Goddesses choose to enter our world in a clear way—in a form like a human, or a form like an animal, or a form that is part human and part animal. And it is also true that they sometimes choose to speak to us—or through us—in a clear

way, as they have sometimes done with you. Otherwise, the Other World is invisible to us. The only exception to this is when we dream. When we dream, our spirit bodies are freed from our physical bodies and then we can see those who live in the Other World. You are aware of all of this, are you not?”

“Of course I am, *Monkey Mother*. But you should know I can also actually enter my dreams, and not just look at them as most people do. It just happened to me one night, of its own accord. *Benu*, the grey heron God, appeared in my dream and I remember wanting very much to speak to him, I was almost aching to do so, and then suddenly I was next to *Benu* in the dream. I tried speaking to him, but I could not because he kept disappearing, or changing. Everything in the Other World was like that. After entering many of my dreams, I saw that if I fixed my total attention on something, it would not waver or change as much, or suddenly disappear, but it was still like looking down through a fast-moving river and trying to see something on the bottom.”

“Tell me, little one, what was it that you wanted to say to *Benu*?”

“I cannot really remember now, because as soon as I found myself next to him, I was so startled I forgot what I was going to ask him. Anyway, by that time I wanted to know something else, which was why everything kept changing and disappearing, but I never got to ask him that either because he disappeared.”

“As you know, little one, *Benu* took part in the creation of the world—so if you had spoken to him he might have told you some of the things I am going to tell you. They come from the creation stories only shamans know. These stories are about the nature of the Other World. They were first told by the shamans of long, long ago. Those shamans did not call it the Other World. They called it the Dream, not only because it moved like a dream—but because they eventually came to the conclusion that it *was* a dream.”

“How could that be? The Goddesses and Gods are all-powerful. They move mountains. How could they be a dream?”

“It does seem impossible, does it not? But you should also know that those same ancestor shamans spent lifetimes travelling to the Dream. The stories say they travelled deeper and deeper into the Dream trying to understand it. It is a dangerous journey and some lost their lives because they unwittingly moved out of the Shadow and exposed themselves to the Eye of Creation. But those who survived eventually concluded that the Dream was being dreamed by the Eye of Creation and that the Dream, like the Eye of Creation itself, had no beginning or end.”

“But how could the Goddesses and Gods be so powerful if they are but a dream?”

“You must remember that the Dreamer is the Eye of Creation. Anything is possible. You should also know this: those same shamans also came to the conclusion that the Dream lives in the Shadow of the Eye of Creation, which is why we can journey there and speak to the Goddesses and Gods.”

“But if the Other World is a dream with no beginning or end, what are we?”

“This is going to surprise you, little one, but those same shamans eventually decided that *this* world, and everything in it, is also being dreamed by the Eye of Creation.”

“But our world is real. It was created by *Mut*, who created herself and then the world.”

“That is the story we tell ourselves *now*, but the stories of the shamans of long, long ago say it is not so—that the Dream has always existed, and that the dark, primal waters and *Mut* were a part of it. The stories say this is because the Dream is a world without time—past, present, and time-to-come exist together. The stories go on to say that when the Eye of Creation created the dream called *us*, the dark, primal waters and *Mut* appeared in the dream called *us*. That was the beginning of the story of Creation that we have today.”

“But how could we be a dream. I can feel you, you are real. I can *kick* you.”

“Indeed you can, little one, but according to the stories we are a dream nonetheless. That is the mystery. But if you think about it, we are no different than the figures in *our* dreams who think the ground beneath their feet is real. But we know it is not.”

“Do humans—and the world—go on forever and ever, like the Dream?”

“The ancestor shamans say that humans and the world have an end and a beginning, just as you and I do. I know all this may be difficult for you to understand at first, little *River Mother*, but I believe it to be the truth. In Time to Come, as you journey more and more to the Dream, you will come to believe it as well. It is inescapable.

“It seems, however,” she continued, “to be a truth that was easier for the humans of long ago to hold in their minds than it was for those of us who came after them. That is why later humans began to call the Dream the Other World, and to see it as something like *this* world and the Goddesses and Gods as something like us, but eternal and more powerful. It was a simpler, more solid explanation. You could kick it as you like to say. Do you understand?”

“Yes, *Monkey Mother*, I understand.”

“Good, because it is a truth you must always remember if only to remind you how awesome the mystery of our existence is. But you must never reveal it to ordinary humans, no matter how close they are to you. That is why it is called the Shaman’s Secret. Do you understand?”

“Yes, *Monkey Mother*, I understand. But what good is the Shaman’s Secret if I can tell no one of it?”

“It is good only for you. It is to remind you that even the most powerful shamans are like dust in the presence of that mystery.”

“But I must tell the Shaman’s Secret to the shamans I teach, right?”

“Do not be so stupid. Yes, of course you must—or you will have failed in your task. But enough of this—there are other things I must tell you. You know some of these things already—but some of them you do not. It is the other half of the Shaman’s Secret.

“By now, because of who you are, you know that the Other World is invisible to ordinary humans when they are awake—unless those from the Other World choose to come into this world.

“If these visions are of a Goddess or God, they usually speak to us in the form of an animal or human. But sometimes these visions will simply show us something—like a mountain or a river—and that will be all. And sometimes only a voice enters this world. We see nothing.

“And you also know that all humans can see the Other World when they are dreaming. But shamans can do something more than see their dreams—they can *enter* their dreams and journey through the Other World—just as you did when you entered your dream of *Benu*.

“But shamans have also learned how to journey through the Other World when they are not sleeping. To do this, shamans must enter their spirit bodies when they are awake. This is done by stopping thinking. I am going to show you these ways over the next days.”

“Is that the other half of the Shaman’s Secret, *Monkey Mother?*”

“No, these are just ways of entering your spirit body when you are awake. They can be done by anyone, but not as well, or as easily as a shaman. But even shamans, no matter how powerful, can ever know with absolute certainty the *meaning* of what is being shown or spoken to them by those from the Other World. It does not matter if that message takes place in a vision or in a dream, or in a journey to the Other World. Shamans must always take care that they do not become so vain that they start to believe they understand these messages with absolute certainty.

“Shamans,” she continued, “must always try to *feel their way* towards the truth of these messages. This is because the Other World is not a world of certainty like ours, where a rock is a rock, and where the meaning of something is sharply carved with words. The Other World is a world of *feelings*, not *words*. When those from the Other World try to share those feelings with us, their *meaning* may be unclear. Thus, a vision of a mountain may not be about an actual mountain, but of something huge we must overcome in our lives, or something we desire which is out of our reach. Shamans must *feel their way* towards the truth of what they are seeing.

“Likewise, if we hear a voice from the Other World that says, ‘*You will become like another,*’ what are you to make of this? Does it mean you are going to adopt the habits and mannerisms of someone else, or does it mean you are going to be in love with someone, or does it mean you are going to take the position of someone—a leader, for example. Shamans must *feel their way* towards that which is true. This is the other part of the Shaman’s Secret: shamans know that while the tribe may believe them to come back from the Other World with messages that are clear and certain, shamans know this is not so—that the messages are almost always unclear and uncertain. Thus, shamans must act accordingly and take great caution when sharing messages from the Other World. Do you understand this, little one?”

“Yes and No. Are you saying we must always mistrust the Other World?”

“No. We must trust those from the Other World. Without them we are lost. While it is true that those from the Other World *can* be deceitful at times for their own unknowable reasons, they are almost always truthful. We must always remember that those from the Other World do not *speak to each other* with words—they speak with *feelings*. They have no words. Does this surprise you? If so let me tell you that sometimes they do not even appear in the forms we have

come to know, but as light, or heat, or colors that have feelings.

“It is only,” she continued, “when they wish to *tell us* something that we *hear words*—or when they wish to show us something that we *see a portrayal* of it. You might say that those in the Other World have to use words and *portrayals* from *our world* to share their feelings with us—because the Other World is not made up of things, but *feelings*—and the past, present and future of those feelings are always equally present. You might say those feelings are not at all steady, but more like wildly flickering flames.

“That is why messages from the Other World do not always convey with absolute certainty the feelings they are trying to share. Let me give you an example of this. Imagine the feeling you want to share is like the flickering flame I just described. And let us imagine that words are like clay you must shape around the fire’s ever-changing, flickering flames to capture its truth. It would be almost impossible to exactly capture it, would it not?

“But the most important thing for you to understand about the Other World being a world of feelings is this: the only way humans can bring themselves into harmony with the Other World is by *feeling its truths* and then *imitating them* in this world. Shamans must lead their tribes in this effort because it is the shamans’ task to bring their tribes into harmony with the Other World. This is why the shaman’s way must always be the way of *feeling*, not *thinking* and words. It is also why shamans must master their spirit body, because the spirit body is a body of *feeling*, not *thinking* and words. But for someone like you, little *River Mother*, this is hardly worth talking about, am I not correct?”

“Yes *Monkey Mother*, you are. I know you are aware that I am always moving between my spirit body and my physical body. I can feel your awareness. This moving just happens of its own accord, like my eye blinking or a gecko changing colors. It is so quick it is sometimes hard for me to know

which body I am in. It is almost as if my two bodies were one.”

“Yes, that is how it is with you, little *River Mother*. I saw this the moment your mother gave birth to you. When I scraped the veil from your face and your eyes looked at me, I knew right then you would be a great shaman.”

“What was it that you saw in my eyes, *Monkey Mother*?”

“Now is not the time, little one.”

“I am sorry *Monkey Mother*, but it *is* the right time.”

I could tell by her silence that *Monkey Mother* was taken aback by my directness and for a moment, sitting there in the darkness, I was sure she was going to swat me again. But I was wrong. She said very softly: “I saw in your eyes that you were already moving in and out of your spirit body. Your spirit eyes were fierce and seemed to know who I was. I had never seen that in a newborn baby before. It frightened me.”

I could sense she was still holding something back, so I asked her, “What else did you see, *Monkey Mother*?”

“It was not what I saw, little *River Mother*, but what I *felt*. I felt your eyes were trying to eat my eyes and I became so frightened my right arm suddenly became possessed and grabbed a flint and carved a winding river down your body from the top of your head to just above your sex. I knew right then, as I looked at the bloody river I had carved, that you would be a great shaman—that you would move mountains.”

“But how did you know that?”

“I realized that it was *your eyes* that had somehow possessed me and made me carve that bloody river down the center of your body. Only a shaman greater than I could have done that. It was your way of announcing who you really were. That was when I looked at your mother and a voice spoke through me saying, “*Her name is River Mother.*” Your mother understood immediately. She nodded to me and I

placed you in her hands. Her hands were so large and you were so small you looked like a seed, but I could already see the mighty tree you would become.”

“When will I become that mighty tree, *Monkey Mother*?”

“It is happening now as I speak to you and will continue during the days you spend here. When you leave the Spirit Caves, you will no longer be a sapling, but a mighty tree spreading its branches over our village.”

Suddenly, I cannot really say why, my teasing got the better of me and I blurted out, “But *Monkey Mother*, how can I possibly live in this cave if I am a mighty tree? There is no room here.”

Right then, out of the darkness, she swatted me on the feet so hard I screamed.

“This is no time for jokes, little one. You will not grow correctly unless you listen to what I am about to tell you of the Other World. If you truly want to become a mighty tree, and not a knotted twisted mass of roots and branches, you will have to stop your nonsense.”

“Yes *Monkey Mother*, I am sorry. Sometimes I just cannot help teasing you.”

“I know it is your way of reminding me who you really are, but I do not need any reminding. I have known it from the day you were born, just as I have always known it would be my task to help you become who you really are. Do you understand me, little flapping monkey lips?”

As she said this, I could hear her flapping her lips like a monkey and it was so funny I could not help laughing and then she started to laugh and soon we were both sitting in the darkness laughing and flapping our lips like monkeys until *Monkey Mother* said to me, “We must be quiet now, The Spirits of Knowing will be coming for you on the seventh day. Here, have some monkey meat.”

We sat in the dark for hours. After a while, I could hear the faint singing of birds from outside the Spirit Mouth. I knew it must be morning. I told Monkey Mother I had to relieve myself. “Hold it in,” she said. “You cannot go alone. I have to go with you.”

“But when will that be?”

“When I have to go. You must wait until I have to go, then we will do it together,” she said.

I waited and waited. Finally *Monkey Mother* said. “Take my hand and walk closely alongside me—your right side against my left side. Here, let me use the cord and bind you tightly against me.” We went further back into the darkness. Suddenly, her left hand tightened around my right arm. “Do not move, she whispered, “not one step.” I felt a light breeze drifting up the left side of my body.

“Where are we?”

“Look down.” she whispered.

Below, to my left, I could see a small faint light at the bottom of a long dark hole that went down and down. The breeze was coming up from there.

“You must never come here alone,” she whispered, “It is too dangerous. If you fall in, you may not be able to make it back. Now, feel around the edge of the hole with your left foot. Can you feel the edge?”

“Yes I can feel it with my left foot.”

“Good. Stay as you are. I am going to turn to face you. You will feel me when I do it.”

“I can feel you turning,” I said.

“Good. Keep your left foot fixed at the edge and turn to face me. Now, do it.”

As soon as I turned to face her, she grabbed my hands.

“Hold my hands as tight as you can. Both of your heels should now be on the edge of the hole. Are they?”

“Yes, right on the edge.”

“Good. Do not move your feet. I want you to squat when I do. It is a long way down but I will keep you from falling. Now, squat,” and we both did.

“The breeze feels good,” I said.

“I know,” she cackled.

When I had finished, she said, “Now you must do the same for me.” She pulled me up and we changed places. She grabbed my hands. “Hold my hands as tight as you can, and squat when I do. You must keep me from falling. If I do,” she cackled, “your mother will never forgive you—now, squat.”

Afterwards, I asked her why we could not just relieve ourselves in the cave and not have to hang over the dark hole, that it scared me.

“This is a spirit cave,” she whispered, “not an animal cave. The spirits want the darkness to be clean. They want nothing but darkness. I want to show you something else,” she said, and started walking deeper into the cave.

I heard the sound of water bubbling and asked *Monkey Mother*, “Where is the sound of water coming from?”

“From a spring—way, way back. It is where you will come to drink and bathe. You cannot go there alone either. I must come with you. The water spirits can be dangerous for you.”

“Why? I like water. I am the *River Mother*, remember?”

“That is exactly why they are dangerous,” she snapped.

She took me to the spring. I could hear it spilling into a pool right in front of me.

“Cup your hands,” she snapped. Then she pulled my hands forward. The water was very cold. I drank and put my hands out again, but missed the water. She moved them slightly to the side and they began to fill with water. I drank again but could not find the stream again. *Monkey Mother*

moved them the other way and I felt the stream filling my hands.

“The water is hard to find, is that not so?” she whispered.

“Yes, but I do not understand why,” I replied.

“It is because your body knows the water spirits are dangerous. Your body wants to get away.”

She was right. I could feel my body leaning away each time I drank.

“Too bad your hands are not as big as your mother’s hands,” she said to me. “If they were, you would only have to fill them once.” She could not stop cackling. She took me back to where we had been sitting. “Here, have some monkey meat—and be quiet.”

By and by, the bird song stopped. Everything grew quiet. I knew the sun must be setting. *Monkey Mother* took my hand and brought me to the cave entrance. There was a thin crack of red sunlight just above the horizon. It was blinding. Then it sank into the darkness, leaving only a low red glow.

Monkey Mother reached into her pouch and took out some blue powder.

“When I tell you to sit down,” she said, “Do not squat. Cross your legs like I do.” She sat down and crossed her legs. Her back was perfectly straight. She yanked on the cord. I sat down next to her and crossed my legs.

“Here, stick out your tongue—I am going to put this blue powder on it. When I do, close your mouth—but do not swallow.”

She placed the blue powder on my tongue. It was very bitter. I closed my mouth and waited.

“Look at the red glow,” she whispered. “When it begins to move, spit the blue powder out.” The red glow began getting bigger and smaller like it was breathing. I spit the blue powder out and waited.

“Keep looking at the red glow, do not blink.’ she whispered. “The world will begin calling to you soon. When it does—let yourself go to where it is calling you.”

I kept looking at the red glow and then my eyes drifted very slowly down to the river and then I felt like the river was coming up to look at me. I could see its tiny dark ripples moving right in front of my eyes. Then I was in the river and the river was all around me and then, somehow, I was the river. I had no arms or legs or face or body. I was the river and the river was me.

I could feel what the river felt—it was feeling happy and sad at the same time—and then I sensed another feeling but it was hiding from me like a secret and then I could feel myself racing over the rocks and rapids and then I could feel myself becoming wide and deep and slow—moving, always moving. Night turned into day turned into night. The sun and moon rose and fell upon me. I could hear *Monkey Mother* whispering in my ear. She sounded like the bubbling spring in the back of the cave and then I was suddenly back at the cave with *Monkey Mother* watching the red glow slip down into the dark mouth of night.

“Where did the spirits take you,” she asked me.

“They took me to the river where I became the river for days and nights under the sun and the moon.”

“That is good, little River Mother. What did the river smell like?”

Her question startled me. Then I remembered. “It smelled like my mother,” I replied.

“What else did it smell like?”

“It smelled like you, *Monkey Mother*, it smelled very old.”

She cackled and slapped her thighs.

“You have done well little River Mother. The spirits must like you.”

“Why would they not like me? I am *River Mother*. Or have you forgotten?”

“No more questions,” she replied, and stood up, yanking me with her.

“This was your first day at the lip of the Cave of the Mouth. You will come here with me for five more days and do as I tell you. On the seventh day you will come alone, at this time, when the red glow is sinking into darkness.”

“Why must I be alone on the seventh day?” I asked.

“This is the place where your opening will widen for the Eye of Creation. When it does, the Spirits of Knowing will come in. As the seventh day gets closer, you will begin to feel the Spirits of Knowing hovering around you more and more, wanting to come in. On the seventh day, when the opening widens and they finally do, it will not be easy for you. You will lose your mind. You will change. You will see things others cannot see.”

The night animals began to howl. I walked back inside the cave with *Monkey Mother* and sat down in the darkness with her.

Chapter 8: SPIRIT CAVES, DAY 2, THE SUN

The next night, I went with *Monkey Mother* to the lip of the cave. The sun had just slipped beneath the horizon leaving a dull red glow. I sat down with her and we crossed our legs.

“What is the blue powder you are giving me?”

“It will help you speak to the spirits.”

“Do you mean the Spirits of Knowing?”

“No. The Spirits of Knowing will come later. These are other spirits.”

“What are their names?”

“No more questions,” she said. She then put some blue powder on her finger, placed it on my tongue, and told me to stare at the red glow until it began to move.

When the red glow began to breathe in and out, I found myself moving towards it. Suddenly, I was at the edge of the world where the sun had just disappeared. I looked down over the edge but could see nothing. I knelt down to look closely at the edge. It was dark and crumbly with roots hanging out of it.

I grabbed the longest root, held on tight, and threw myself over the edge. I hung there, turning and turning in the open air. I could see the bottom of the world. The long, dangling roots went on forever.

Then I saw the sun and the moon in the distance, hanging beneath the bottom of the world like the long fish who hang in the river shallows, waiting for prey.

The sun was closest to me. I could feel its warmth. It drew closer. It was very warm. I began to hear a low hum. It sounded like a mother humming to her baby.

As the sun grew closer, the hum became louder. Now it sounded like the hum of men in the hunter’s circle. My skin began to tingle. It felt like grass seeds were trying to sprout

up through it. I became afraid of what would happen if the blades of grass broke through. The sun moved closer. I could hear a slow, deep voice like a drum saying “*Slave*” over and over.

I knew the voice meant me. I had seen slaves from other tribes. I would never be a slave. Never. I began climbing up the long root like I was on fire. I took one last look at the sun and pulled myself back over the edge. I lay there exhausted. I could hear *Monkey Mother* whispering in my ear. She sounded like the bubbling spring in the back of the cave and then I was suddenly back at the lip of the cave with *Monkey Mother* watching the red glow surrender to the darkness.

“Where did the spirits take you?” she asked me.

“They took me to the edge of the world and then underneath it. I saw the sun and moon hanging beneath the world.”

“What happened then?”

“The sun hummed to me like a mother and then it hummed to me like the drums in the hunter’s circle and then it began calling me “*Slave*.” I ran from the voice and the sun. What does this mean, *Monkey Mother*?”

“It means you will never be a slave. What did the sun smell like?”

I had to think for a moment. “First it smelled like my mother and then it smelled like men.”

“Did it smell like me?”

“No. Your smell was not there.”

“You have a good nose. It will help you find your path.”

“What path is that, *Monkey Mother*?”

“No more questions,” she snapped. She stood up and yanked me to my feet like a doll.

I walked the winding path to the back of the cave with *Monkey Mother* and sat down with her in the darkness. Outside, I could hear the night animals begin to howl.

Chapter 9: SPIRIT CAVES, DAY 3, THE MOON

The next night, I again went with *Monkey Mother* to the lip of the cave. The sun was just slipping beneath the horizon leaving a dull red glow. We sat down and crossed our legs. She put some blue powder on her finger, placed it on my tongue, and told me to stare at the red glow until it began to move.

When the red glow began to breathe in and out, I found myself moving towards it. Suddenly, I was at the edge of the world again. As before, the edge of the world was dark and crumbly with roots hanging out of it. Again I grabbed the longest root and threw myself over the edge and hung there, turning and turning in the open air.

Again I saw the sun and the moon in the distance, hanging beneath the bottom of the world like the long fish who hang in the river shallows. This time, the sun was far away. The moon was much closer. The moon kept changing as it does every night, but much faster. Over and over, the moon was dark then light then dark. The moon moved closer. I could feel my belly moving in and out as the moon went through its changes. Over and over, my belly felt dark and empty and then full of light and then dark and empty again. Suddenly I became the moon. We were one. The changes I had felt in my belly disappeared completely. I could feel only the moon's emotions—they felt like the truth feels: clear and beautiful.

I pulled away from the moon and became myself again. Once more, I could feel my belly moving in and out as the moon went through its changes. Over and over again, my belly felt dark and empty then full of light and then dark and empty again.

I let the moon pull me in. I suddenly became the moon again. The changes I had just been feeling in my belly

disappeared. I could feel only the moon's emotions. Again, they felt clear and peaceful. I remember thinking I belonged here. I would have stayed the moon forever but for *Monkey Mother*. I could hear her whispering like the bubbling spring in the cave. Suddenly I was back at the lip of the cave with *Monkey Mother*, watching the red glow surrender to the darkness.

"Where did the spirits take you?" she asked me.

"They took me to the edge of the world and then underneath it. I saw the sun and moon again hanging beneath the world."

"What happened then?"

"The moon moved very close to me. I could feel its changes in my belly. Then I became the moon. I could feel the moon's emotions. They were clear and peaceful. I wanted to stay there. What does this mean *Monkey Mother*?"

"It means you belong there."

"How can I belong there? The moon is in the sky."

"You do not have to go to the sky. The moon is within you. It is your center. Your belly is where the truth lives. By the way, what did the moon smell like?"

"It smelled like you when I was born and like you smell now."

"What did I smell like when you were born?"

"Like spring water."

"Oh, is that so? What do I smell like now, old?"

"No more questions," I snapped. I tried to stop from laughing but I could not. She cackled and slapped her skinny thighs.

"You have a good nose," she said. "It will help you find your path."

"What path is that, *Monkey Mother*?"

She suddenly stood up and yanked me to my feet. "No more questions," she said, and we both laughed.

We walked back inside the cave and sat down in the darkness. I could feel the moon rising inside me.

Chapter 10: SPIRIT CAVES, DAY 4, THE GUARDIANS

I again went with *Monkey Mother* to the lip of the cave. It was the fourth night. The sun was just slipping beneath the horizon leaving a dull red glow. We sat down and crossed our legs. She put some blue powder on her finger, placed it on my tongue, and told me to stare at the red glow until the glow began to move.

When the red glow began to breathe, my eyes began moving down towards the river. A beautiful cheetah came out of the brush. Then a second, larger cheetah appeared next to her. They began to drink, but there was something about the way they kept nodding their heads and looking at each other that seemed almost human. I could not take my eyes off them. Suddenly, I was in the water standing in front of them.

They both stopped drinking and looked at me. They were laughing under their breath.

“Cheetahs cannot laugh,” I snapped.

They looked at each other, “You are right,” they both said, “cheetahs cannot laugh.”

“But you are cheetahs. And you are laughing.”

“But we are not cheetahs, little one. That is why we can laugh,” they said together.

“Are you *tricksters* then?”

“No, we are not *tricksters*. Not really. At least I do not think we are.”

“What are you then?”

“We are Guardians.”

“What are you Guardians of—*laughing*?” I was getting angry.

“No, little one, *Laughing* does not need Guardians. Laughing is its own Guardian, did you not know that?”

“No. I did not. What are you guardians of then, if not of laughing?”

“We are guardians of *River Mother’s* path.”

“But I am *River Mother*.”

“We know.”

“But I have no path for you to guard.”

“That is because your path has not appeared yet.”

“When will it appear?”

“When the time is right.”

“When will the time be right?”

They looked at each other and then back at me and began laughing again.

“The time will be right when you are ready.”

“But when will I be ready?”

“When you are ready.”

“That is no way to answer.”

“It is the only way we can answer you, little *River Mother*.”

“Why is that?”

“Because no one knows when you will be ready, not even us.”

Then the two of them stepped forward. The larger one placed his head in my right hand. The smaller one placed her head in my left hand. Their heads felt like the heads of children.

“Patience, little *River Mother*, patience,” they whispered.

Then they circled me tightly with their bodies and began to purr. The purring went right through my body into my heart. I have never felt as warm and safe and sleepy as I did then. I was slipping away into sleep when I heard *Monkey Mother* whispering in my ear like water. I was torn between the warmth of the cheetahs and the sound of the water—and then I was suddenly back at the lip of the cave with *Monkey Mother* watching the red glow getting darker and darker.

“Where did the spirits take you?” she asked me.

“They took me to the river bank where two cheetahs—a male and a female—were waiting for me. They were

beautiful. They told me they were Guardians of *River Mother's* path.”

“What happened then?”

“I told them they must be *tricksters*, because I was *River Mother* and I knew of no such path. I told them if I had a path, I would know it.”

“Good for you. What happened then?”

“They told me my path had not appeared yet, that it would appear when I was ready.”

“Did they say when you will be ready?”

“No. They told me no one knows when I will be ready, not even them.”

“What happened then?”

“They put their heads in my hands and whispered for me to be patient and then they circled me with their bodies and began purring. I felt so warm and loved and safe I wanted to cry.”

“What did the cheetahs smell like?”

“They smelled like *Runs Like Cheetah* smells.”

“Did they smell like me?”

“No. Your smell was not there.”

“Did you smell anything else?”

“Yes, but I had never smelled it before. I liked it and I did not like it. I think it was the smell of things to come.”

“You have a good nose, little *River Mother*. It will help you find your path.”

“When will that be, *Monkey Mother*?”

“When you are ready,” she cackled and began slapping her thighs. Then she stood up and yanked me to my feet. “No more questions,” she snapped.

I walked to the back of the cave with *Monkey Mother* and sat down with her in the darkness. I remembered the warmth of the cheetahs around my body. I tried to remember the sound of their laughing, but I could not. They were too far away.

Chapter 11: SPIRIT CAVES, DAY 5, RUNS LIKE CHEETAH

I went with *Monkey Mother* to the lip of the cave. It was the fifth night. The dull red glow of the sun was slipping beneath the horizon. We sat down and crossed our legs. She put some blue powder on her finger, placed it on my tongue, and told me to stare at the red glow until it began to move.

When the red glow began to breathe, my eyes began moving down toward the river and then I was winding like a snake down the river past the near bend and then the far bend and then, suddenly, I was at the bank of the grassy plain where the antelope lived.

Runs like Cheetah appeared out of the trees. He did not see me. He was taller and more muscular than when he had left the village. I watched him lead his father's cheetah to a large shade tree and place the cheetah in the cage of sticks sitting beneath it. Then he laid his body down next to the cage and closed his eyes. After a while, his breathing slowed and I watched him fall into a deep sleep.

I went to his sleeping body and stood there until his spirit body began to form. His spirit body recognized me. He looked the same as he had looked before he left the village. I was very comfortable with his spirit body. He laughed and said, "You should not be here, but I knew you would come sooner or later. My father does not want you here. He says you confuse the cheetahs, that they cannot hear him singing to them."

"I do not confuse the cheetahs, I confuse your father. He is afraid of me."

"My father is a great hunter. He is afraid of nothing."

"I am not afraid of anything either, but I am afraid of your father. Our fear of each other binds us together. There is nothing we can do about it."

“I have missed you, *River Mother*. Playing with cheetahs is not the same as playing with you.”

“I know. I missed you too. I missed your laughter.”

He began to laugh as only he can laugh. “Living with cheetahs is not all bad, *River Mother*. It can be very exciting. When we first came here, my father told me he would teach me to hunt with two cheetahs. He said if I succeeded, I would be the greatest of hunters.

“One day he woke and told me the *Cheetah Goddess* had come to him in a dream and told him she had placed two cheetah cubs beneath a giant ebony tree deep in the forest towards the rising sun. He went alone into the forest with only his spear and a large basket. He was gone for many days.

“When he finally emerged from the forest, he was badly cut. I rushed to him, wanting to know what had happened, but he waved me off. He put the basket down, reached into it, and pulled out two cheetah cubs—a male and a female. They were beautiful.”

“Where are they now?”

“They are in a cage way over there, behind the Acacia tree. They have to be kept in a separate cage far from my father so they can hear only me and the sound of my singing. Come I will show you.”

We went over to the large Acacia tree and there, in the shade, was the cage. The cheetahs were not cubs anymore. They were both as big as dogs. *Runs like Cheetah* approached the cage and began singing softly to them. The cheetahs began singing back.

“See,” I said to him, “I do not confuse the cheetahs. They hear your singing and they are singing back to you.”

“You are right, *River Mother*, but my father will never understand. All he knows is that when you are near, the cheetahs cannot hear him singing.”

Runs like Cheetah opened the cage and let the two cheetahs out and held one of them under his right arm and one under his left. He smiled and asked me to tickle them under the chin. When I did, they purred so wildly *Runs like Cheetah* burst out laughing, “Enough, enough, you will ruin them for hunting. Here let me show you something.”

“Each cheetah,” he said “must always be held under the same arm—the male under the right and the female under the left. It is the same when I walk or run with them, the male must always be on my right and slightly ahead, the female on the left and slightly behind.”

“Why is that?” I asked.

“So they will always hunt that way—the male on the right side of the prey and the female on the left. It is natural for cheetahs to hunt in pairs, but it is best if they always favor different sides of the prey. The larger male is taught to always lead and to always attack the right side of the antelope. The female is smaller, quicker, and will always hunt to his left. When the male gets close and lunges, he will always lunge at the right side of the antelope. He has been taught that way. He seldom misses.

“But the antelopes” he continued, “are very quick. Sometimes they sense the male lunging at them and will dart to their left. It is too late for the male to correct—he is already in the air. But the antelope will only be free for the blink of an eye, because the female’s jaws will already be in the air to his left, waiting for him.”

“Do they hunt like that now?”

“Yes, but only small animals. They are too small to hunt antelope.”

I knew *Runs like Cheetah* would become a great hunter, but the two cheetahs seemed uninterested in his stories about them. They kept looking at each other and then at me, as if puzzled by me, or my smell, and then suddenly, they began to sing.

He laughed. “They like you, but you must go. I can hear my father in the brush.”

“I will go but I will always be your friend,” I whispered to him.

The cheetahs began to sing again. “And we will always be your friend, always,” he whispered back. As soon as he said that his spirit body descended into his sleeping body.

I knew it was time to leave. I let go and I was suddenly back at the river bank, lying in the grass, waiting for his father to come back. When he did, he began sniffing around the cage of his cheetah. He knew I had been there. He woke up *Runs like Cheetah* and asked, “Has *River Mother* been here? I can smell her.”

Runs like Cheetah laughed, “No, father, she has not been here. I was dreaming of her—maybe that is what you smell.”

I lay there on the river bank remembering how good it felt to be with *Runs like Cheetah* and then I heard *Monkey Mother* whispering in my ear like water. I was torn between being with *Runs like Cheetah* and the sound of water—and then I was suddenly back at the lip of the cave with *Monkey Mother*, watching the low red glow disappear.

“Where did the spirits take you?” she asked me.

“They took me to the river and then past the far bend where *Runs like Cheetah* is living. He was sleeping but his spirit body rose up to greet me.”

“What happened then?”

“He told me he missed me, and then he showed me the two cheetahs he is training to hunt together—a male and a female—they were beautiful. I tickled them and they purred for me.”

“What happened then?”

“He began to sing to them and they began singing back. He told me the cheetahs liked me very much.”

“What happened then?”

“He told me that he and the two cheetahs would always be my friends, always. And then his father came back, sniffing around for me, but I was already on the riverbank watching, and then I heard you whispering in my ear and I came back.”

“What did *Runs Like Cheetah* smell like?”

“What do you think? He smelled beautiful.”

“What did the cheetahs smell like?”

“What do you think? They smelled just like him—they smelled beautiful.”

“Did you smell anything else?”

“Yes, I smelled his father. We are bound to each other. He smelled like death. It was horrible.”

“You have a good nose, little *River Mother*. It will help you find your path.”

“Why does *Mother Death* have to smell so horrible, *Monkey Mother*?”

She stood up and yanked me to my feet. “No more questions,” she snapped.

I walked to the back of the cave with *Monkey Mother* and sat down in the darkness. I remembered the smell of *Runs Like Cheetah* and then I tried to remember the sound of his laughing. It was far, far away.

Chapter 12: SPIRIT CAVES, DAY 6, THE CHEETAH GUIDE

On the sixth night, I went again with *Monkey Mother* to the lip of the cave. We sat down and crossed our legs as the red glow of the sun began slipping beneath the horizon. She put some powder on her finger, but this time it was black.

“Why is the powder black?” I asked.

“This is our last time together. The black powder will help you find what you must find before the Spirits of Knowing come.”

She placed the black powder on my tongue. It was very bitter. My tongue swelled up. I wanted to vomit. I tried to spit it out but her hand shot up over my mouth.

“Keep it on your tongue, and do not spit it out until I slap your face,” she snapped.

I could feel myself splitting in half. One half of me was looking back into the dark cave and the other half was looking straight ahead at the red glow. I wanted to vomit. Right then, she slapped my face and I vomited. She began rubbing the vomit on the soles of my feet.

The red glow began to breathe heavily, like it was dying. Then it disappeared completely. It was so dark I could not see my own hands. Suddenly, something pulled me into the darkness. I felt like I was attached to a cord pulling me against my will. Then the pulling stopped. I could hear something ahead of me but I could not see a thing. I heard a voice to my left, “Over here, little *River Mother*.”

The voice sounded familiar. “Are you the Guardians?” I asked the darkness.

“No.”

“Who are you then?”

“Guess,” the voice cackled.

“*Monkey Mother* is that you?”
“Yes, it is me, *Monkey Mother*.”
“What are you doing here?”
“I forgot to tell you something?”
“What was it?”
“I cannot remember. But it was important.”
“This is no time for jokes, *Monkey Mother*.”
“I am not joking. I cannot remember.”
“Where are you?”
“Right next to you. I have been waiting for you.”

Her voice was coming from the right. I reached out and grabbed for her throat. She was not there.

“I am on the other side, over here,” she whispered.
“How could that be?” I snapped back. “Your voice is on my right.”
“You were split in half, remember? You still are.”

I suddenly remembered being split in two, but in the darkness that followed I had forgotten because I could not see a thing, not even my own hands. It was only when *Monkey Mother* reminded me that I recalled half of me was still facing forward and the other half backward.

“What am I going to do, *Monkey Mother*? I will never find you. I will go crazy.”
“You do not have any choice. Get used to it,” she said.

Her voice was still to my right. I took a chance and reached out to my left. Nothing.

“No more tricks,” I cried. “Put me back together.”
“I cannot. It was not me who split you,” she said. Her voice was on my left now. “It was the black powder that split you. Only you can put yourself together.”
“How do I do that?”

“Only you know that. It will come to you. You are going to be reborn.”

“But I am already born. I am *River Mother*, remember?”

“I know you are already born,” she cackled back, “I was there, remember?”

I realized her voice was back on my right.

“Did all this happen to you when you were a girl?” I asked.

“Yes. I was not prepared for it at all.”

“What did you do?”

“What do you think? I put myself back together as fast as I could.”

“How did you do it?”

“I listened to my shaman, just like you should be doing instead of asking questions.”

“I am listening.”

“The black powder splits you in half,” she said. Her voice was on my left now. “But you have only one mind. It goes back and forth like a very fast mouse between the half facing forward and the half facing backwards.”

“Like a mouse?”

“Yes, a very fast mouse. You may hear me on your right, but your mind does not know if it is hearing my voice from the half facing forward or the half facing backward.”

“What you are telling me is my mind is useless.”

“Yes. That is what I was supposed to tell you, but I forgot. Sorry.”

“You should be.”

“I am. Really. Let me show you. Where am I right now?” she asked.

“Your voice is on my right. But how did you move? You were on my left before.”

“I did not move. The mouse did. Where am I now?”

“Your voice is back on my left. You must have moved.”

“Wrong again. The mouse moved, not me.”

“This is crazy. I feel like I am losing my mind.”

“Listen to me. You have to forget about trying to figure out where you are. Or where I am. Or where anything is. If you do not, you really will lose your mind.”

I did not like what *Monkey Mother* was telling me. I had never felt so helpless.

“I do not know what to do, *Monkey Mother*. You have to help me.”

“Listen to me very carefully,” she said. “This is going to be tricky because the mouse moves very quickly.”

Her voice was on my right side. “Quick, reach out to your right,” she whispered.

I did. Nothing was there.

“Quick, reach left,” she snapped.

“I got you!” I screamed. “Right by the neck!”

“Good. Hold on tight. Do not let go no matter what. And do not try to figure out if I am on your right or left. The mouse will drive you crazy.”

As soon as she said that, her neck began to get longer and thicker and then it began to move like a snake. I was terrified. I pulled my hand back from her neck. Suddenly there was a dim light around us. A large black cobra was on my right, weaving back and forth, hissing at me.

“Ah, little *River Mother*, there you are,” the cobra hissed. The cobra’s hiss sounded like *Monkey Mother*.

“*Monkey Mother*, is that you?”

“Yes, it is me, *Monkey Mother*.”

“But you are a cobra.”

“I know. Am I not beautiful, the way I can weave back and forth?”

“Yes, you are beautiful. But what I want to know is how you could be *Monkey Mother* when you are a cobra?”

“Because I am both. Listen to me. Look at my eyes. Do not look away, no matter what.”

The cobra’s eyes began to get larger. I could see myself in both of the cobra’s eyes, as if I were twins. I looked like I was going to scream.

“Listen to me, little *River Mother*,” the cobra hissed, “Do not be afraid.”

“But I am afraid,” I screamed.

“Now is not the time, little *River Mother*. Look deeply into my right eye.”

The cobra’s right pupil became huge. I felt like I was being pulled into a dark tunnel. I became horribly confused as to what was left and what was right. Right then, something inside me snapped. I could not think or remember anything.

Suddenly, something began taking possession of me. There was nothing I could do to stop it. The cobra backed away. I looked down at my body. I had the body and long legs of a cheetah. I looked back into the cobra’s eyes. My face was the face of a cheetah. Something made me look down at my furry underbelly. I was a cheetah but a *male* cheetah.

Before I could say anything, the cobra hissed: “You have a lovely long tail, little *River Mother*. And long beautiful legs as well. I do not know who is more beautiful, me, or you.”

“I was not thinking about how beautiful I am *Monkey Mother*. I was thinking about my body.” I suddenly realized my mind was working. My voice was different too. It sounded like the singing sound cheetahs make. I was about to ask why I was a male cheetah when the cobra hissed, “Little *River Mother*, do you know where you are now?”

“Yes I am just below the Spirit Cave, by the river.”

“You are not lost anymore, are you?”

“No. I am not. My mind is very clear.”

“You can tell left from right now, can you not?”

“Yes, you are just to my right.”

“You have a good nose for the truth, little *River Mother*. Now listen to what I must tell you. I had to stop your *thinking* so your Spirit Guide could appear. From now on you and your Cheetah Guide will be inseparable. When you summon your Cheetah Guide, he will come to you and become one with you, just as you are now. When you travel to the Other World, he will come to you and become one with you, just as you are now. When you are in danger of your life, he will come to you and become one with you, just as you are now. When you are dying, he will come to you and become one with you, just as you are now. Do you understand?”

“Yes. But why is my Cheetah Guide a male and not a female. I am *River Mother*, a female.”

“Fate had made it so.”

“But *why*?”

“Fate never grants answers, only paths. What you should be asking yourself is *this*—does my Cheetah Guide *feel* correct—am I comfortable in his body?”

“I am. It feels like my own body.”

“It is your body—your *other* body. It is who you really are. Once your Spirit Guide appears and becomes one with you, there is no going back. It can never be changed.”

“Did you know my Guide would be a male cheetah?”

“No. I was as much in the dark as you. If it helps, my Cobra Guide is also a male. I did not find that out until much later though. It is harder to tell with cobras.”

“How did you find out?”

“I had summoned my Cobra Guide to guide me in a dream and just as we had become one, a female cobra approached me. I could not control myself. I began madly entwining myself around her body. That is how cobras mate. Did you know this?”

“Yes. *Runs like Cheetah* told me this is so.”

“He is a busy boy, your *Runs like Cheetah*.”

“He is a boy. He cannot help it. Tell me *Monkey Mother*, can others see my Cheetah Guide?”

“What kind of question is that? Have *you* ever seen my Cobra Guide?”

“No, not until now; I only saw *Monkey Mother*.”

“Forgive me for being so sharp with you. Your question was not stupid. When you are dying, your Cheetah Guide will appear to others. Some will see it, others will not. Otherwise, your Cheetah Guide is invisible to others, but they will sense its presence, some more than others. Do you understand?”

“Yes. Will my Cheetah Guide come to me tomorrow?”

“Yes, but you must summon him. Without your Cheetah Guide, you will not survive the Spirits of Knowing.”

“How do I summon my Cheetah Guide?”

“By *seeing* your Cheetah Guide with your spirit body—it is like *seeing* with your human body. Just as you must change the attention of your human body, you have to change the attention of your spirit body.

“Some shamans,” she continued, “say you can change that attention by letting your spirit body *hunger* or *desire* your Spirit Guide, but those emotions are too desperate for me. *Seeing* is a better way to describe what you must do because it is calmer, more patient. It is a more complete knowing of the presence you are summoning.”

“But what do I do once I have summoned him?”

“You must allow him to possess your spirit body.”

“I do not understand.”

“The shaman’s power is so great in you that your spirit body is like a second skin for you. I have watched you go back and forth between your body and your spirit body in the blink of an eye and not even notice. They are almost the same for you. You have been using that spirit body on the journeys you have been taking and not even been aware of it.”

“I am not that unaware, *Monkey Mother*.”

“Forgive me for exaggerating. It is so easy for you I am envious at times. I know you are aware there is a difference. Perhaps I should have said you never give your spirit body a second thought.”

“Why should I? For me, the two bodies are almost the same.”

“I realize that. But for your Cheetah Guide to become one with you, you must *see* him with your spirit body and let him possess it.”

“How do I do that, by using the black powder?”

“The black powder is not needed anymore. The black powder helped you to let go of *this* world by stopping your *thinking*. The blue powders were different. They were very weak. You really did not need them, but I had to make sure.”

“Sure of what?”

“Before any journey to the Other World, your *thinking* must stop, if only for a moment, before you can become your Spirit Body. That is the way it works. For you it happens naturally, in the blink of an eye. But I had to make sure it happened each of these days. I used the blue powders for that. I had to make sure each of those journeys took place because each of them led to this journey, where you became one with your Cheetah Guide.

“In the journey you just took to meet your Cheetah Guide, I used the black powder to stop your *thinking* completely before you became your spirit body. I had to make it impossible for your spirit body to *think*. That way, your spirit body would be defenseless, completely open. My Cobra Guide did the rest for you when you looked in his eyes. Do you remember?”

“How could I forget? It was like being born again.”

“Yes. That is what happened. But to summon your Cheetah Guide from now on, you must *see* him with your *spirit body*. Your spirit body has a memory of him. As soon as you *see* him, he will become one with you, just as he did today.

You will no longer be *River Mother*, you will be both, but your spirit body will look like a cheetah, not *River Mother*. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I understand, but how do I become *River Mother* again?”

“The same way I become *Monkey Mother* again. I *see* her with my *spirit body*. Not with my eyes or mind. If you *see River Mother* with your *spirit body*, it will happen. Today, however, it will not be easy for you because you are still split from the black powder. When you come back to the lip of the cave, you will be confused and helpless. I will be there to help you until you become whole. Now, quiet your mind, and try to *see* your physical body with your *spirit body*.”

I quieted my mind and began *seeing* myself with my *spirit body*—and then I heard *Monkey Mother* whispering in my ear like water and I was suddenly back at the lip of the cave. *Monkey Mother's* arms were around me. I had never been so tired and confused. It was like a sickness. Half of me was still looking forward and the other half was still looking back at the dark cave. It was terrible. *Monkey Mother* whispered, “Lie down and close your eyes.”

I laid my body down beside hers and fell into the sleep of the dead. When I woke up, *Monkey Mother* was still sitting next to me, stroking my arms and face. I looked at her and realized I was whole again. “We must go to the spring,” she snapped, and she yanked me to my feet. We walked to the back of the cave and sat down near the spring in the bubbling darkness.

“There are things I have to tell you,” she said. “I want you to know what has been happening, because one day you will have to pass on the shaman's ways, just as someone passed them on to me. When you were born, I saw immediately that you would be a great shaman. You almost devoured me with your eyes, the way great spirits do. I saw you were

already swimming in the Other World with no effort at all. I knew there was little I could really teach you except how to make the powders.”

“But you have not taught me that yet. How is it done?”

“Now is not the time for that. This is what you must know: when you were born, I thought I would never have to use the powder with you. It is better without it. I thought you would be able to journey to the Other World and find your Spirit Guide the way children wander through the forest and find fruit.

“I was wrong,” she continued. “As you grew, you began asking questions. They never stopped. You began to swim in the river of *this* world as though you wanted to possess everything that exists. You wanted to know everything. I realized then that you would be a great leader as well as a great shaman, but I also knew that the membrane between this world and the Other World would thicken for you. When you came into this world, that membrane was no thicker than a gnat’s wing. I saw that for you, just turning your gaze toward the Other World would bring you there. Only the greatest shamans can do that. Then, as you grew, I saw the membrane was growing thicker. I became afraid it would grow too thick.”

“What journeys are you talking about?”

“I am talking about the journeys you have been taking these last days. You will take one more tomorrow.”

“You mean when the Spirits of Knowing enter me?”

“Yes. Eight days ago, your mother and I saw your opening was about to widen.”

“How could you tell?”

“Now is not the time for that. I can assure you the signs were unmistakable. That is why I came to you in the middle of the night and swept you into the Spirit Caves. I knew that in seven days the Spirits of Knowing would enter you whether you were ready or not. And I knew if you were not ready, you would not survive.”

“You mean I would die.”

“It has happened. Most likely you would become like an animal, confused, unable to speak or think. I could not take the chance. I knew your membrane had thickened but I was not sure how thick it had grown. I decided to test its thickness by giving you some blue powder.”

“What does the blue powder do?”

“It stops your *thinking*, but only for a moment. I gave you a strong taste of the blue powder the first evening, when you became one with the river.”

“Yes, I remember that journey. I can still smell the river. It was wonderful.”

Monkey Mother replied, “I knew from what you told me on your return, that your membrane had not thickened that much. That it was still very thin. I was relieved. I gave you less and less blue powder the following evenings. Then on the fifth evening, when you came back from the antelope plain with the smell of death all around you, I saw that the leader in you would always be present, that it was also your fate to be possessed by the river of *this* world. I saw that your path would be strewn with the blood of *Antelope Hunter*. I saw that one day either you would have to kill him or he would kill you.”

“We are bound to each other. I can feel it. There *is* no escape, is there?”

“No, there is no escape from *Antelope Hunter*, just as you cannot escape the river of this world. I have seen it.”

“Where will the river of this world take me, *Monkey Mother*?”

“It will take you where you have to go, but now is not the time to talk about that. What is important is this: I knew when you came back to me with the smell of death that I had to remove you from the river of this world so your Spirit Guide could appear and become one with you. I realized there were forces lurking in the river of this world—like *Antelope Hunter*—that could suddenly seize you and bind you to this world. I had to free you from this world by

stopping your *thinking*, by making you as helpless as you were the moment before you were born.

“That,” she continued, “was when I decided to give you the black powder, to split you in two. I had no choice. Once that happened, everything fell into place and your Spirit Guide appeared. No matter what happens from now on, you will be safe because your Cheetah Guide will always be with you. Even the Spirits of Knowing cannot overcome its gaze. Tomorrow evening, when you sit down alone at the lip of the cave, the Spirits of Knowing will begin to gather around you. They will be hungry for your opening to widen. You may become confused, afraid, but you must stay calm and summon your Cheetah Guide before the red glow disappears. If you wait too long, your Cheetah Guide will not be there to protect you.”

“Protect me from what?”

“From the Eye of Creation.”

“How will my Cheetah Guide do that?”

“Your Cheetah Guide will summon the *Shadow* of the Eye of Creation. Only your Cheetah Guide has that power. Once the Shadow falls on you, you will be protected from the Eye of Creation. Otherwise, when your opening widens, you would be at the mercy of the Eye of Creation. No one has ever survived its gaze.”

Chapter 13: SPIRIT CAVES, DAY 7, THE LIGHT

On the seventh night, I went without *Monkey Mother* to the lip of the cave. I was calm. I sat down and crossed my legs as the red glow of the sun began slipping beneath the horizon.

The red glow began to breathe heavily, just as it had the night before. I entered my spirit body and summoned my Cheetah Guide. I became a cheetah on four legs pacing across a vast waste of sand that went on and on. There were no trees or grass or birds or water—only low, silent hills of sand that were everywhere.

I realized it must be in the desert, the waterless place travelers spoke of, and that the hills of sand were what they called dunes. There was a dim light everywhere. I could feel my Cheetah Guide searching for something. His pacing back and forth seemed endless, and then, suddenly, he stopped and turned to the left. Off in the distance, I saw a dim red disk balanced between two low dunes.

I lay down on my belly and waited. My paws stretched themselves out toward the red disk as if trying to touch it. The red disk began to sink and as it did, I could feel something like roots creeping out of my opening.

The tendrils raced out in all directions—and then I was watching the tendrils at the edge of the earth searching the air for something to hold on to, and then I was back on my belly watching the red disk disappear. When it did, the black sky and the white stars began pouring down in long melting strings around the searching roots, and then I felt my opening suddenly widen and then my navel began to hum and my whole body began to tremble like I was going to break apart into pieces, and then, suddenly, I was lost in darkness, and then—just as suddenly—there was nothing but Light.

The Light I felt was not just light. It was alive—even more alive than I could ever be. It felt so beautiful and true and perfect I wanted to cry. I knew then that the Light was more real than the world of the village or the world of the spirits. The light seemed to gather me in as a mother does a child, and for a moment I felt as if I was one with the Light. Right then, I knew there was no good nor bad nor time past nor Time to Come—there was only the Light.

Yet something in the Light told me the world of the village and the world of the spirits existed, and I belonged to them as much as the Light. Yet I also knew they were dreams, just as I knew I was a dream—as was *Runs Like Cheetah*. All this was going through my mind when I felt myself being pulled back to the lip of the cave where I sat, staring out at the moon.

Everything seemed alive but in a new way, as was everything around me—the trees, the stars, the moon, the night, the river, even the lip of the cave where I was sitting. The whole world was singing to me. I began singing back as I had never sung before. My whole body rang with my song of the Light.

I heard *Monkey Mother* whispering in my ear like water and then I felt her loving, warm arms closing around me. Then I heard her whispering in my left ear, “You have traveled far, little one, and you have traveled well.” Then I heard her whispering in my right ear: “Lie down and rest, River Mother. It is time. It is time.”

It was just before dawn when I woke. Birdsong was beginning to fill the air and then, ever so slowly, the dark shadows of night disappeared. All around me, the green world blossomed. I was once again *River Mother*, but my thoughts were entirely of the Light. Deep within me I knew I was both myself and the Light—as was the world around

me. I had no desire to move. I wanted to be alone with the Light.

I realized *Monkey Mother* was no longer next to me and when I looked back into the darkness of the cave, I saw her sitting in the shadows, watching me. She did not say anything. Nor did I. She knew.

Chapter 14: SPIRIT CAVES, DAY 16, THE MOUND OF PROPHECY

I must have stayed at the lip for days, I really do not know how many. *Monkey Mother* told me that I sat and slept at the lip for nine days. Each day, *Monkey Mother* would appear from the back of the cave with fruit and water and then retreat into the shadows, saying nothing. Finally, one day, she called to me from the shadows, "*River Mother*, there are things I must tell you."

"I am ready now, *Monkey Mother*. Come sit with me."

"I saw the Light come to you, *River Mother*, and I knew then it would always be with you. It is your fate to be a prophet like no other. You will lead worlds."

"When will this be, *Monkey Mother*?"

"When you are ready."

"But when will that be, *Monkey Mother*?"

"When you leave the Spirit Caves."

"But I do not want to leave."

"That will change."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I too have journeyed as you have journeyed. Did you think you were the first?"

"Excuse me for being so stupid. I am not myself yet."

Just then, I do not know why, I looked down at the ground in front of the cave. For some reason, a flat, grassy hill had caught my eye and was pulling me towards it. It was in front of the cave and about half the height of the cave. I had seen the hill many times, but it had meant nothing to me. It was simply a hill. Now I could not take my eyes off it.

"What is that hill, *Monkey Mother*?"

"It is the Mound of Prophecy."

"You mean Prophets stand there?"

"No. Those who have come to hear the prophecy stand there."

“Where do the prophets stand then?”

“They stand in one of the Spirit Eyes.”

“How do you get to the Eyes?”

“Here, let me show you.” She took my hand and began walking to the back of the cave. She passed the spring; I could hear it bubbling in the darkness, but she kept going. Suddenly she stopped and said, “There are steps going up to the Caves of the Spirit Eyes. There are two of them. The left steps lead to the left eye, the other steps lead to the right eye. Which do you want to take?”

“The left.”

“Then climb them. You must *see* them with your body. They twist and turn. I will follow you.”

I began to climb, but it was very hard. The steps were as high as my knees. I had to hold on to the walls to keep my balance.

“*Monkey Mother*, these steps are huge. I can barely climb them.”

“How do you think I feel?”

I suddenly realized that the steps must have been up to *Monkey Mother's* belly. I could hear her grunting as she pulled herself up over each of them.

“But why are they so large?”

“No questions. Keep climbing.”

When we reached the top, we stood there catching our breath. Unlike the Cave of the Spirit Mouth, which meandered like a river, the Cave of the Spirit Eye was as straight as an arrow. The sunlight pouring through it was blinding. *Monkey Mother* took me by the hand and led me to the edge of the Eye. Below us, I could see the Mound of Prophecy.

“This is where the prophet stands,” *Monkey Mother* said, “Those who have come to hear the prophecy stand on the Mound of Prophecy below.”

“But when does the prophet go to the left eye, and when the right?”

“Fate decides, just as it decided for you a few moments ago.”

“But why are the steps so big? You never answered me.”

“Do not be so impatient. I want to show you something.”

She took me by the hand and began climbing down the huge steps. It was much easier, especially for *Monkey Mother*, who began cackling as she bounced down them. When we reached the Cave of the Spirit Mouth, she took my hand and led me further back, and then she stopped.

“Careful,” she said, “there are steps right in front of you that lead down to the jungle. They do not twist and turn like the steps leading to the Eye Caves, but they are just as big.”

I could see a dim light far down at the bottom. I began climbing down. The light grew brighter and brighter and then I was down in the jungle. *Monkey Mother* came bouncing down behind me.

I suddenly realized she must have taken these same steps to gather fruit each morning. I remember being puzzled why I had never seen her climbing up and down the cliff face in front of the cave but I had been so happy just sitting there I soon forgot about it.

“*Monkey Mother*, you took these steps to get fruit for me, did you not?”

“Yes. I did not want to disturb you. It was easy going down, but not so easy going up—especially with a handful of fruit. No more questions. I want to show you something.”

We walked around the tall rock cliff containing the Spirit Caves until we came to the Mound of Prophecy. It was very

grassy and overgrown, but close up I noticed it was not a smooth mound. The grass had almost covered the fact that it was made of layers that looked like huge, flat bowls placed upside down on top of one another, each smaller than the one beneath it.

The bowls were about as high as my knees, the same as the steps inside the Spirit Caves. *Monkey Mother* took me to the side of the Mound facing the river. In the middle, the grass had been removed, and I saw the layers were composed of small tree trunks and mud and shells and small stones. *Monkey Mother* told me these were the steps used by the Circle of Wisdom when they gathered to hear a prophecy. I hit one of the steps with a stone. It was very hard.

“*Monkey Mother*, I am waiting for you to tell me what is going on.”

“The Mound and the Spirit Caves are very old. They were here before our tribe came long, long ago. All we know about the Mound and the Spirit Caves are the stories. Some stories say they were here when the earth was born. Some say they were made by the Giants, the children of the children of the Great Mother.”

“Which story do you believe?”

“Both of them. I believe a rough suggestion of the original Spirit Caves was created by *Mut* when she created the earth, but I believe *Mut* left the eyes and mouth as ghostly, faint impressions to be carved out later by humans. The Spirit Caves—as we see them today with the eyes and mouth and the steps carved out—were made by the Giants—as was the Mound. The Giants must have been huge compared to us—that is why the steps are so large.”

“But why did you wait until now to show me this?”

“Because the time has come for you to speak as a prophet.”

“But what will my prophecies be, *Monkey Mother*?”

“If I already knew that, little one,” she cackled, “you wouldn’t be much of a prophet, would you?”

Chapter 15: SPIRIT CAVES, DAY 17, MAFDET SPEAKS

After we returned to the Cave of the Mouth, all I wanted to do was sit at the lip of the cave and feel the light falling on my face. I never again wanted to return to the darkness where *Monkey Mother* always sat. I went there only to relieve myself.

One morning I was sitting at the lip watching the light playing on the leaves when I turned to *Monkey Mother* and said, "*Monkey Mother*, I want to know more about Light. Tell me what you know."

"The Light is the Shadow of the Eye of Creation. Once it falls on you, it will always be with you. You simply have to summon it."

"How do I do that?"

"You must summon your Cheetah Guide first. The Eye of Creation and the Shadow are linked—like twins. If you summon the Shadow with *your* spirit body, the Eye of Creation will also come. You will never be able to withstand its gaze. That is why you first need to become one with your Cheetah Guide. Spirit Guides are like the animals of *this* world. They never look at the sun. They know the sun is there, but they aren't curious about it. Only humans are curious about the sun. Only humans are tempted to look at the sun with their eyes open. Some desert tribes use the sun to blind those who keep stealing. They pin their eyes open and hold them facing the sun until their eyes burn out.

"Your spirit body," she continued, "is the same as your human body—it too is curious and will attempt to look at the Eye of Creation. That is why you must be protected from its gaze by your Cheetah Guide. The wisdom of the Cheetah Guide is not the wisdom of humans. It is the wisdom of cheetahs—of animals. It is different. It is a wisdom that has grown out of surviving, not curiosity."

"But why does the Light feel more real than *this* world?"

“No one can answer that. It just does. *Feeling* is the only thing we really know. Nor do we really know *why* something feels *more* real than something else. It just does. But I can assure you that both worlds are real—as is the spirit world, which is the world we must travel through to find the Light.

“But that is not what I have to talk to you about. Today, you must begin to *speak* as a prophet—the tribe will expect that of you when you return.”

“What must I learn, *Monkey Mother*?”

“You have already learned most of it. You have learned from the Light that we are all one and must be treated as such. That is the beginning of wisdom. Yesterday, you learned how to choose which Eye to speak from. But you cannot speak as a prophet until one of the Goddesses agrees to speak through you.”

“How do I do that?”

“You will know how when the time comes. First you must go to the Cave of the Eyes.”

“*Monkey Mother*?”

“Yes, little one?”

“Why must I go to the Cave of the *Eyes* to *speak*. And why did I have to live in the Cave of the Mouth to *see* the shaman’s ways? It seems backwards. We *see*—we *know*—with our eyes, and we *speak* through our mouths, is that not so?”

“It does seem backwards, doesn’t it? Oh, you are full of questions. All I can tell you is I was taught that way and that it has been that way since our tribe came here long, long ago. The stories that have come down to us tell us it has been so since the time of the Giants. Those stories tell us we must *speak* from the Eyes and *see* from the Mouth. Listen to me—in those first stories, these are the words of the Giants: ‘*This is the place where we speak from the Eyes and see from the Mouth.*’

“Maybe,” I said, “what the Giants were talking about is not *where to stand*, but what wisdom is. Maybe what they really meant is that we must always *speak* with wisdom, with *knowing*, and the Eyes represent that—because to *see* is to *know*.”

“And maybe,” I continued, “what they really meant about “*seeing from the Mouth*” is that our stories always show the truth of something—and it is by listening to those stories that we learn to be wise—to truly *see*. Maybe that is why the Giants placed their cheetah carving of *Mafdet* in the Spirit Cave Mouth like a tongue. We both know that the storytellers ask the Goddesses to sing through them when they make their stories. So maybe the carving being placed in the Mouth means that it is the singing of the Goddesses through our storytellers that fills their stories with beauty and truth.”

“You are wise beyond your years, *River Mother*, but the Circle of Wisdom will expect you to speak your prophecies from the Cave of the Eyes not the Cave of the Mouth.”

“I do not want to change where I stand. I am just saying there are different ways of understanding the Giants. I do not think the Giants were telling us where to stand—or maybe they were. But I also think they were telling us how to be wise—which is the really important thing, do not you agree, *Monkey Mother*?”

“Yes—without wisdom we are lost. But it is time you stopped asking questions, do not you agree, *River Mother*? It is time for you to go to the Cave of the Eyes and see which Goddess agrees to speak through you. I will stay here on the Mound of Prophecy and speak to you. I will ask you for two prophecies. Do not worry about them. After all, you are *River Mother*, as you have so often reminded me. It will be easy for you,” she cackled, “do not you agree?”

I could still hear her cackling as I circled around to the huge steps in back of the cliff. After I had climbed them to the Cave of the Mouth, I walked back to the steps leading to the

Eyes. I immediately took the steps to the left and climbed to the Left Eye of Shamans and entered my spirit body. I called to *Mut*, the Mother of everything, and to *Nut*, the protector of humans, and to *Ma-at*, the Goddess of Truth and Balance, and finally to *Mafdet*, the Cheetah Goddess, the protector of *Ma-at*.

None of the Goddesses appeared, and then, suddenly, my Cheetah Guide appeared.

“What are you doing here? I did not summon you.”

”But you did, *River Mother*, I heard you.”

I realized he must have mistaken my call to *Mafdet*, the Cheetah Goddess. I told him I was sorry, that it was my fault, that my mind had not been clear, that I probably had both him and *Mafdet* in my mind when I called for her. I told him that I always welcomed his coming—that he was my beloved guardian—but that today I had need of *Mafdet*.

My Cheetah Guide stood there looking at me as if he wasn't sure he should leave, that perhaps I was mistaken, that I needed his protection. It was only after I waved him away, telling him I wasn't worried about my safety, that my Cheetah Guide finally gave up and left.

No sooner had he disappeared than *Mafdet* appeared on my right side—almost as if she had been waiting in the shadows. I had seen small clay statues of her, but the statues had not prepared me for how tall she was. My head barely reached her waist and I was already as tall as most men.

Mafdet had the head of a cheetah and the body of a woman. Her gaze was so fierce I kept looking away. It took all my courage to begin speaking to her, but no sooner had I started than she said, “*River Mother*, I have been waiting a long time for your summons. It is time.”

With that, *Mafdet* became a part of the right side of my spirit body. I had never felt so strong. I was on fire. I looked down at *Monkey Mother*. She must have known what had happened because her eyes were wide open.

Monkey Mother spoke: "Speak, Prophet, and tell us what will become of *Runs Like Cheetah*."

A fierce voice rose up within me: "*The one called Runs Like Cheetah will return to the village when the river next rises. He will come with two cheetahs, one on his left and one on his right. The cheetahs will walk with him as one body. He will become a great hunter, greater than his father, greater even than the Giants of long ago. In his fifteenth summer, he will leave the village and never return.*"

Monkey Mother spoke again: "Speak, Prophet, and tell us what will become of *Antelope Hunter*?"

The fierce voice again rose up within me: "*The one called Antelope Hunter will return to the village after the next rising of the river, after the return of Runs Like Cheetah. The heart of Antelope Hunter will be filled with hatred. The blood of many will run like a river through the village. He will be cursed by the tribe and made to live in the jungle alone and without companions.*"

Monkey Mother knelt down and said, "I have heard you, O Prophet, and will bring your *speaking* to the Circle of Wisdom."

With that, *Mafdet* suddenly left me. I fell down exhausted. I could barely move yet I could feel a fierceness growing within me that I knew would never go out.

Chapter 16: DAY NINETEEN—I RETURN TO THE VILLAGE

When I woke, *Monkey Mother* was sitting next to me. She was buzzing with energy.

“*River Mother*, it is time for us to return to the village. I must leave first and prepare the way for you. I will tell your mother and *Moon Under Water* what has happened and that you will return tonight. When you return, the people of the village will have many questions, but now is not the time, so you must return late at night when everyone is sleeping. Then you will be left alone for two moons so you can heal. No one will see you except your mother and *Moon Under Water* and me.

“The moon will be full, as it always is at the birth of a new shaman, and there will be some, like your mother and *Moon Under Water*, who will not sleep until they welcome you back. I will return when the moon is high and call out your name.”

With that, she bounded down the face of the cliff and jumped into the dugout. She was paddling hard like three people when she turned the bend and disappeared. I missed *Monkey Mother*—she was like a second skin—but I welcomed being alone. I had come to prefer it. *Monkey Mother* said it would pass, but I knew I would never again be a running girl full of questions. I did not know who I would become, but I knew those days were over.

I watched the sun ride through the skies and then disappear under the earth and then I watched the full moon rise and dim the brightest stars. The moon pulled me like a sorrow and a welcoming. I waited.

“*River Mother, River Mother*, it is me, *Monkey Mother*, I have come for you. I am by the river bank in front of you. Come quick.”

“I am coming, *Monkey Mother*.”

I bounded down the sheer cliff to meet her. She pulled me into the dugout, gave me a handful of fruit, pushed the dugout off the bank, and paddled back toward the village.

“There are many crocodiles out tonight, *River Mother*. When I reached the bend I could see them sitting on the river bank beneath the Spirit Caves. Their eyes were gleaming with moonlight. I was afraid to come ashore until I remembered I had some monkey meat, so I called out to them and threw a small handful at their heads—then I threw a few more handfuls downstream. One taste of the monkey meat and they began crawling over each other to get downstream.”

“Maybe the Goddess *Taweret* summoned them to accompany us back to the village. After all, this is a special evening, a rebirth, a Celebration—do not you agree, *Monkey Mother*?”

“Yes of course I agree. How could I not?” she replied. “It *is* a very special evening. But the Goddesses can be unpredictable. The crocodiles may indeed have been summoned to accompany us—but in their bellies. To tell you the truth, they looked more hungry than holy.”

When we reached the village, my mother and *Moon Under Water* were waiting on the river bank. As soon as I stepped out of the dugout they threw their arms around me and began to cry, and then I was crying too. It had been a long journey.

Monkey Mother then stepped out of the dugout and said, “*River Mother* has returned to us as the great prophet we have been waiting for.” No sooner had she said that than she too began crying until none of us could stop we were so happy.

As we walked back to the village, my mother said to me, “*Moon Under Water* must leave us now. She will speak with

you tomorrow.” Then she took me by one hand and *Monkey Mother* by the other, and the two of them began walking me back to the village.

Monkey Mother lived in the hut next to ours, and after I thanked her, she went inside her hut to sleep, but my mother continued to stand outside our hut, as if she were waiting for something to happen.

“Mother, what’s the matter? Why are you standing here?”

“This hut is no longer mine.”

“Whose is it then?”

“It is yours, now that you are a great shaman. It is the way.”

“But I am only a girl.”

“Only in your body. Your spirit is no longer that of a girl.”

She was right. Fate had changed my path. I looked inside my hut. All my mother’s things—her beads, her pots, her sleeping mat, her cages of pet lizards and birds—were missing.

“But mother, it is so bare. Only my sleeping mat is left.”

“Yes, only your mat. It is the way it must be. I am afraid you are being reborn again—it never stops for you, does it? In time, you will fill the hut with the things your spirit needs. They will be different, as it should be.”

“But mother, where will you live?”

“Right here, in the hut next to you. *Moon Under Water* and I built it when you were gone. From now on, I will be on the right side of you and *Monkey Mother* on the left. It is the way.”

I was so intent on getting home I had not noticed the new hut next to ours. I looked inside. It was filled with all my mother’s things—her beads, her pots, her sleeping mat, her cages of pet lizards and birds, everything I was used to seeing as I fell asleep. An immense sadness fell over me as I hugged my mother and went inside my empty hut.

As I lay looking up at the dark ceiling, I wasn't sure if I could stand another birth. I knew I was to be a great prophet and a great leader, but I was not even a woman. I was a *River Mother* who was still a child—but one who wasn't allowed to be a child any more.

**Chapter 17: DAY TWENTY—MOON UNDER WATER VISITS
ME**

The sun had no sooner risen than *Moon Under Water* appeared at my door. “*River Mother*, it is *Moon Under Water*. I have come to speak with you. May I enter?”

“Of course, there is no need to ask. I am just a child.”

“No, you are *River Mother*. I greet you as an equal, and from this day on you must speak to me as one.”

A sudden fierceness entered my right side. “Speak, *Moon Under Water*.”

“*Monkey Mother* has told me of your prophecies. I know now that *Runs Like Cheetah* will leave us forever and *Antelope Hunter* will become a river of blood, but I must bow to what has been spoken.”

“I too must bow to what has been spoken, *Moon Under Water*. It will be a time of great sorrow for both of us.”

Right then, the fierceness left my right side and I began to cry, “*Oh, Moon Under Water*, I am so sorry.”

“I know this *River Mother*, but we must pay attention to the winds of fate. They have begun to blow already. You are in great danger. While you were away, I went downriver to the antelope plain. I could see the river bank was crawling with crocodiles. I knew I could never land there. I was about to turn back when I saw *Runs Like Cheetah* in the distant trees and called to him. He laughed and told me he would take care of the crocodiles and he came out of the trees with two large haunches of antelope. The crocodiles began to thrash as soon as they saw him. He let out a scream and threw the haunches far down river. The crocodiles were gone in the snap of a finger. I asked him why the crocodiles had arrived so suddenly when they had never been there before. He said the cheetahs had become such skilled hunters that they soon had more meat than they could ever eat, but his father insisted the cheetahs must keep hunting. Antelope carcasses littered the camp—and late one night, the lions got wind of the smell and entered the camp growling. They

began making the fire larger and larger and throwing fire sticks at the lions until they went away, but the next morning Antelope Hunter gathered all the carcasses and threw them on the river bank. The crocodiles came in swarms that soon covered the river bank. He said his father told him it was a good thing, that now they wouldn't be bothered by lions anymore—and that the crocodiles would also keep intruders away, like *River Mother*—and that he was going to hunt down even more antelope for the crocodiles on the river bank.”

As she spoke, I couldn't stop thinking about the crocodiles waiting on the river bank beneath the Spirit Caves. They had never been there before. *Antelope Hunter* filled my mind.

“There is more you must know, *River Mother*. As I was talking with *Runs Like Cheetah*, *Antelope Hunter* suddenly broke out of the brush. I was startled by his appearance. There was no mistaking that he had become more animal than human. It was also clear he did not want me talking to *Runs Like Cheetah*. I was afraid for *Runs Like Cheetah*. When I insisted *Runs Like Cheetah* must return to the village, the eyes of *Antelope Hunter* filled with rage, and for a moment I thought he was going to cut me with his knife—and then he backed down, his eyes filled with cunning, telling me *Runs Like Cheetah* could leave after the river rose, that there were still some things he had to learn.”

“What did you say back to *Antelope Hunter*?” I asked.

“I did not say anything at first. *Runs Like Cheetah* may have become a man during his time at the antelope plain, but he is like a child in his trust of *Antelope Hunter*. I knew he would only leave if his father agreed. I knew the river would rise in two moons, so I said yes, after the river rose.

“Did *Antelope Hunter* tell you how soon *Runs Like Cheetah* was going to return after the river rose?”

“He would only say that that he would return when the time was right. But I know when he does it will be a time of great danger for you.”

“Yes, we are bound together by fate. Neither of us can escape the other. He wants to kill me because he thinks I will take his son away. But he is mistaken. *Runs Like Cheetah* will indeed turn away from him, but not because of me; he will turn away because of the river of blood *Antelope Hunter* will drag through the tribe.”

“I know you speak the truth, *River Mother*. I have been watching you since you were a small child. Even then, I could see the fierce Mother was with you. But it is time—we must prepare for what is to come. The tribe knows you have returned as a great prophet, but it will be hard for the men to hear you. They will doubt you no matter what I and *Monkey Mother* say because all they will see when they look at you is a child—a girl who is not yet a woman.

“So for a while,” she continued, “you must never leave your hut until late at night when everyone is sleeping. You cannot be seen. Those who come to see you will be told to speak to you from outside your hut. Your mother and *Monkey Mother* will be with you to cover you with robes whenever you come out at night. We are going to create a cloud of mystery around you that will fill the minds of the tribe, especially those of the men. We will do this for three moons. When the time comes for you to be seen, you will be clothed in *power*.”

“What do you mean ‘clothed in *power*?’”

“You will look like nothing else they have seen. Your appearance will be that of a Goddess. Most people are fooled by the surface of things—they fail to see beneath it. So we will alter your surface—your appearance will speak of the power of Goddesses. Power is something men understand. They will be in awe of you.”

“But I still do not understand how you are going to change what I look like.”

“I have asked two women to work with you in secret—*Moving Water* and *Bright Hands*. I can trust them to say nothing of what takes place. I have asked *Moving Water*—the curer of hides—to make you a thin curtain made of the

yellow cobra. This will cover your door so no one can see you directly if they try to look in. All they will see is your shadow moving behind the light skin. Everyone is curious to see you, but now is not the time. I have also asked her to make you a robe of the silver skin of the cobra Goddess *Wadjet* and the black feathers of the vulture Goddess *Nekhbet*. The robe will cover your entire body. You are tall like a woman, but you still have the body of girl. The robe will hide that.

“Finally,” she continued, “I have asked *Bright Hands*, the pot maker, to mold you a fierce cheetah headdress with the colors of the cheetah Goddess *Mafdet* and a trailing veil made of the black feathers of the vulture. She will also teach you how to mix white clay and fat to paint your eyes so they will look like the teardrops of the cheetah. *Monkey Mother* told me you must never remove the teardrops—once you apply them, they must stay on your face until the day of your death. You must wear both the robe and the cheetah headdress whenever you make an appearance. After you become a woman, you will wear them as you see fit. You will know when.”

“*Moon Under Water*, tell me—are all men fooled by appearances?”

“It is not just men—some women are fooled as well. But not all men are fooled—there are men who are very wise—who can see beneath the surface of the river.”

“Who are the wise men among us?”

“*Runs Like Cheetah* is wise in his own way, but he is so good natured his roots have never tasted the darker waters that bring true wisdom. Your father was a very wise man. He would be sitting in the Circle of Wisdom if he had not been bitten by a cobra on the night of your birth.”

“I can feel his shadow at times—and the cobra’s shadow as well. Who else is a man of wisdom?”

“*Moon Traveler*, the old man at the end of the village—he is one.”

“I know him, but not very well because he is always sleeping during the day.”

“It is his way. He is older than anyone in the tribe. When I was a child, he was already a man. He told me that as soon as the sun goes down the songs begin to gather in his soul and then, as it grows darker, they rise up through his throat like the moon. He said his songs had been coming to him that way since he was a boy.”

I said to *Moon Under Water*, “Sometimes when it is very late and everything is quiet, I can hear him singing from far across the village. I listen to his singing for hours when I cannot sleep. His songs are very beautiful but the sound of them sometimes makes me cry. I know some of the stories he sings are of the Giants and some are of our ancestors who were here before us—I have learned much from them—but sometimes they are hard to follow the way they can change so suddenly.”

Moon Under Water replied, “He told me once that his songs have many threads, just as our lives do—and that some of the threads of our lives are as unpredictable and as sudden as the threads in his songs. He said that while the stories he sings are important, what is even more important is they carry the *sound* of our lives—that is the sound you hear that is so beautiful and sometimes make you cry.”

“Yes, that must be why they can reach so deep within me. But what I have to know right now is can he be trusted like *Moving Water* and *Bright Hands*?”

“Yes, in everything.”

“Who else among the men is wise?”

“*Little Man*.”

“Of course, but I never thought of him as wise because he is always chattering and tumbling and catching flies between his fingers. *Runs Like Cheetah* and I used to play with him. He was the same age but he never grew. *Runs Like Cheetah* thought he was the funniest person in the world. He would fall down laughing at the things *Little Man* did.”

“I know. *Little Man* is impossibly crazy. But it is only a mask. He is as wise as *Moon Traveler*.”

“Can he be trusted like *Moon Traveler*?”

“Yes, as much as *Moon Traveler*—why do you ask?”

“I have my reasons, but for now I want to keep them within myself.”

“As you wish, *River Mother*.”

“*Moon Under Water*?”

“What is it, *River Mother*?”

“You haven’t told me when I will first appear before the tribe.”

“In three moons, when the Circle of Wisdom gathers. By then, *Runs Like Cheetah* will have returned. There will be much excitement in the village, as much as there is now because of your return. That is when you will make your appearance to join the Circle of Wisdom. I will ask *Runs Like Cheetah* to accompany you with his cheetahs. One last thing, *River Mother*—it is a delicate matter.”

“What is it?”

“When *Runs Like Cheetah* returns, he will no longer be a boy. He is a man now and will desire you—he will want to be with you. Even with your cobra robes and cheetah headdress you will still be a girl. You must refuse him—you must tell him he must wait—that you are not yet a woman.”

I felt my right side stiffen. A sudden fierceness entered me and I said, “I will speak to him—and he will wait. He will know by the sound of my voice that *River Mother* has spoken—and not a girl. In our ninth summer, the voice of *River Mother* spoke through me and struck fear in his heart. He will remember that sound—and he will wait.”

Chapter 18: BRIGHT HANDS

Bright Hands, the pot maker, was older than me but not by much. She was about 16 summers. I knew her, but not well. She quickly told me she was honored to serve me—and just as quickly she took a cord and measured the roundness of my head. Then she drew a picture in the sand of what the headdress would look like and told me it would be very thin, like an eggshell, so I could wear it without tiring.

She drew another picture to show me that my face would appear in the cheetah's open mouth and that his long white fangs would frame my face and make me even more beautiful. Then she drew a picture in the sand of the long vulture feathers that would trail from the back of the headdress, and told me she would attach them so they would flow in the wind when I walked. She told me the headdress would be beautiful and terrifying at the same time—that *Moon Under Water* had wanted it so.

Before she left, I told her I needed her to make a few things that had come to me in a dream. One was a large clay mushroom to sit over the smoke hole at the top of the hut. All our huts were made with smoke holes like this. If it rained while we were away, the huts would fill with water. I told her the clay mushroom would fix this—the rain would flow over the mushroom and down the sides of the hut.

Our huts were very tall—about half again as tall as a man—and shaped like half of an egg. The door, though, was small, and came to just above a man's stomach, so visitors had to stoop to enter. So with just the door for light, our huts were dark—too dark for me at this stage. I wanted more light and told her I had a dream as to how the light should come in. I told her to cut four viewing slits in the hut at eye level—one on the left, one on the right, one on the back, and one over the door. The slits were to be as high as half my thumb and as wide as my foot—just big enough to let light in from four

directions and also give me a good view of the village if I wanted it.

I then told her to make four hollow, half-closed eye lids about the size of my head and place them on the outside of the hut over the slits. I lowered my eye lids to show her what I meant. I wanted the tribe to think of me as always watching over them. I told her there was another reason for making the slits and half-closed eye lids the way I wanted them—they would allow me to see others but not let them see me. I told her *Antelope Hunter* was always on my mind. She nodded silently.

I liked talking with *Bright Hands* about these things. She had a sharp mind about the right way to make things. She listened to me very carefully and then showed me how she would do the things I wanted. For example, she listened to me about the mushroom I wanted over the smoke hole and then drew a picture in the sand as to how she would like to make the support for it. She drew a snake that started at the edge of the smoke hole and then curved way out and then in to attach to the bottom of the wide mushroom cap. “Do you like it?” she asked. She did not have to ask—I was delighted. I had never even thought about how to attach the mushroom—only that the dream said I should have one.

Then she spoke about how she would attach the eyelids to the outside of the hut so as to make them seem natural, as if they were the eyes of the hut. I told her I wanted something inside the hut just above the four slits—but I wasn’t sure what.

“What must go above the slits” she replied, “are the spread wings of the vulture to signify the presence of the Goddess *Nekhbet*.” She drew the wings in the sand. I was amazed. It was as if she somehow knew what I needed before I did. I had never met anyone like that before. As she was leaving, I told her I also needed some new pots for food and water.

“Oh, I have made some for you already,” and she reached outside the door and pulled in a large woven bag that contained four of the most beautifully painted pots and pitchers I had ever seen. “These are for you, *River Mother*. The woven bag too. They too came to me in a dream.”

I knew right then we were two halves of the same soul. I knew, somehow, that my journey would be her journey—that if I was destined to be the *Dreamer*, she would be the *Maker*.

After she had left, I felt a strange spirit enter me—a spirit I had never felt before.

“Why have you come?” I asked the spirit.

There was no reply. Only silence.

“Who are you then?” I asked.

Again, silence. And then, very slowly, the voice said, “/ *am the one you will one day become.*”

Chapter 19: MOVING HANDS

Moving Hands, the curer of hides, came a few days later. She was of my mother's age. She had already made the door curtain of yellow cobra skin and attached it to the inside of the hut, showing me how it would let the light in but hide the details of my face and body from those outside. I could see that the people moving back and forth outside looked like shadows. It was perfect. "That is how you will look," she said, pointing to the shadows, "but even more shadowy because it is darker inside."

After she measured my body for the robe, she told me she would make the silver cobra skin very soft so it would flow in the wind, and she moved her hands back and forth around my body to show me this. Her hands were so graceful they seemed to me like slow water moving over stones. I couldn't take my eyes off them as she continued to show me how she would place the shiny black vulture feathers on the shoulders of the robe to make them look more powerful. She told me *Moon Under Water* had suggested this.

Before she left, I asked her how she would trap all the cobras that were needed. She said *Moon Under Water* had told her she must use *Little Man* to trap the cobras, not the hunters. I told her to have *Little Man* bring me three of the skeletons after she had skinned the cobras—that I had a special use for them. I do not know why, but as soon as I had told her this, I began to playfully move my left arm toward her moving like a snake. Suddenly, she began to move hers in the same way, but her motion was so real I jumped back.

"How did you do that?" I asked.

"I do not really know," she said. "My hands have always been graceful, even as a child, but when I imitate the cobra, my left arm has a life of its own. The first time I did it, I

became so terrified I ran screaming to *Monkey Mother* that my arm had left me and become a cobra.”

“What did *Monkey Mother* say to you?”

“She said not to worry, that a cobra never bit itself. And then she started to cackle so hard the whole village came running to see what was happening.”

“What happened then?”

“She took a shiny stone and moved it back and forth in front of my arm until it fell asleep.”

Chapter 20: *LITTLE MAN*

“*River Mother*, it is me, *Little Man*.”

With other visitors, I could only see the shadow of their legs and stomachs in the yellow door curtain. *Little Man* did not have to tell me who he was—I could see the shadow of his entire, tiny body through the curtain—except it was upside down. He was standing on his head. I said, “Oh, *Little Man*, I know it is you. Come in and see me my good friend.”

With that, he walked in on his hands and flipped over in the air so as to come down sitting right in front of me. “I am at your service, *River Mother*,” he squeaked in his high voice, and with that he reached into his shoulder bag and pulled out three gorgeous white cobra skeletons he had formed into coiled cobras with their heads held high, about to strike.

I laughed, “Oh *Little Man*, how did you know I wanted them to be like that?”

“Excuse me, *River Mother*,” he laughed back, “but I did not even think about what *you* wanted. I made the cobras the way I like to see them—the way they look when they are most dangerous.”

Only *Little Man* and *Monkey Mother* could speak to me like that. I never took offence. I think it was because the two of them could be so funny—but each in their own way. *Monkey Mother* always kept a serious face when she was being funny. It only made me laugh harder. *Little Man* was different. He always looked like he was about to say something very funny, even when he was being serious. It made me helpless with laughter.

“That is the way I like to think of Mother Cobra too,” I replied, “is it not funny how alike we think?”

“Thinking like you is not that funny,” he squeaked, “*Monkey Mother* told me of your prophecies. The hand of fate is not

a kind one.” And with that, he suddenly reached out with his left hand and caught a fly—by the wings— and then with his right to catch another fly—again by the wings.

I couldn’t stop laughing. “Oh you are a little demon, aren’t you? Fate has nothing on you— it is too bad you do not have many hands, because there are many flies in here.”

“Oh no, *River Mother*, you are mistaken—these same two hands will do.” He was grinning from ear to ear. He dropped the two flies and immediately caught two more, again by the wings. “See, no fly is safe from my fingers—would you like me to continue?”

I knew he could go on forever. His hands were so fast that nothing was safe around him. Sometimes, when we were children, he would grab so many flies and bees out of the air as to make *Runs Like Cheetah* roll on the ground howling with laughter.

“You have done enough *Little Man*. I need to keep a few flies for company after you have gone.”

“So be it,” he said, and then he suddenly flipped himself high in the air and landed in back of me.

“*Little Man*,” I laughed, “please come back here. If I had eyes in the back of my head we could keep on talking, but I am afraid I do not.”

Suddenly, I felt him leap up in the air behind my back and then he was standing in front of me with the three coiled cobra skeletons in his hands.

“Where do you want me to place these, *River Mother*—on the walls on either side of you—and in back of you?”

“How did you know I wanted them there?”

“We think alike, remember? What if I placed them over the eye slits? That way you can look out and be protected by *Mother Cobra*.”

He reached into his bag for some tiny sharp bones, spit on the clay around the slits, and attached the three cobras so quickly I couldn't stop laughing. He showed me how I could slip my head and right eye between the cobra's head and its coiled body to look through the slit. I tried it. It felt perfect, as if Mother Cobra was holding my head and eye in place as I looked through her coiled body.

"The coils will keep you from getting too close to the slit," he said, "you can never tell what might be waiting for you on the other side." He looked like he was about to break into laughter. Then he showed me that the entire cobra skeleton could be flipped to the side if I wanted to get my eye right next to the slit.

"I know how curious you can get, *River Mother*." He was grinning from ear to ear.

"I am glad we think alike, *Little Man*, because I need more company than just the flies."

"Some birds, perhaps? Perhaps in cages that are round like the moon?"

"Yes, of course—and I want a few mice too—the little white ones."

"Cages for them as well? Do you want me to make them like your hut, but smaller with tiny eye slits?"

"Oh you rascal—when will you have them?"

"I have to catch more cobras first. You are keeping me very busy, *River Mother*."

"Not as busy as I'd like to," I snapped back, but the voice was not mine. *Little Man* knew it too, and backed off a step.

I looked at him and said, "Do not be afraid, *Little Man*."

"I am not afraid, *River Mother*. I am only afraid I will fail you. I would die first."

Chapter 21: RUNS LIKE CHEETAH RETURNS

My mother came to my hut to tell me the river had risen and would soon begin to fall, but I already knew that. For days and nights I had heard the river rushing past our village, carrying everything in its path, and then, one night, the noise began to fade away.

I knew *Runs Like Cheetah* would return soon. My mother had told me that *Monkey Mother* and *Moon Under Water* would be leaving soon with two dugouts, one for them and one for *Runs Like Cheetah*. The following afternoon I heard the sound of excited voices down by the river and then the laughing and screaming of children. I rushed to the eye slit on the river side and I saw *Runs Like Cheetah* coming up from the river with his two cheetahs.

He had them on leashes but I could see they weren't really needed. The larger male stayed by his right side, the smaller female on his left, and in perfect step with him—walking when he walked, stopping when he stopped. They were beautiful. They walked to the center of the village and stopped. I switched to the front eye slit.

Runs Like Cheetah was soon surrounded by women and children. He had grown taller and more handsome—his muscles gleamed with sweat as he moved among them. *Moon Under Water* was right—he had become a man. Even the way he carried himself was different. He knew he had become a great hunter. The other hunters sensed it immediately, and deferred to him whenever he stopped to talk to them. They were in awe of the cheetahs.

I saw him pointing back to the river and three of the hunters ran down to it and came back carrying three large haunches of antelope meat. I knew there would be a great celebration. The women were already preparing the fires and laying out fruit and barley beer. Meantime the small children were

crazy with excitement, walking up to the cheetahs and touching them and then running back screaming laughing. The cheetahs did not move a muscle.

Suddenly, the rear legs of the female started to twitch, and *Runs Like Cheetah* put his hand up. "Stop running," he said to the children, "you are exciting the cheetahs. They like to be touched gently and will not harm you. But if you run, they will try to kill you. They will kill anything that runs. It is their way."

The children stopped laughing as if struck dumb. Their eyes widened.

"Here, you," he said, pointing to one of the children, "the little fat one with the big teeth, what do they call you?"

"*Baby Man*," the small, big-toothed boy replied.

"How old are you, *Baby Man*?"

He puffed out his baby belly and said, "Seven summers."

"You have very big teeth for a boy of seven summers. I have never seen such big teeth."

"If you say so, but maybe you haven't seen many teeth if you know what I mean."

"Oh is that so? Well, tell me *Baby Man*, are your big teeth as sharp as the Crocodile's?"

"If I bit you, you'd know," the small boy said, puffing out his baby belly and putting on a show of bravery.

Runs Like Cheetah almost fell down laughing. "Oh you are a brave one, aren't you? Come here, little *Baby Man*."

"I am not afraid of anything, you know," the small boy replied, but he approached *Runs Like Cheetah* very slowly, keeping one eye on him and one eye on the cheetahs following his every move.

“Now my little brave one, I want you to reach out very slowly— but *only* when I tell you— and touch the cheetah on my left.”

Runs Like Cheetah began singing to the cheetah on his left and she began singing back, never once taking her eyes off the small boy.

“Now?” the small boy asked, “I am not afraid of anything, you know.” But I could tell he was trying to hide his nervousness. When he reached out to touch the cheetah, she suddenly bared her fangs. The boy jumped like a frog. *Runs Like Cheetah* couldn’t stop laughing, “I said for you to *wait* for me to tell you when, did I not?”

“Yes—I remember now” the boy replied. He wanted to fade back into the crowd, but *Runs Like Cheetah* was not going to let him.

“But you did not wait. Why not?” *Runs Like Cheetah* demanded.

“I do not know—I was not afraid, you know, but maybe I was too excited, or maybe nervous.”

“Listen to me little one, you must never be excited or nervous when you are close to an animal—even the lion. They will smell your fear. It would be far better if you stood on your hands and sang to them. Here let me show you.” He looked over the crowd and pointed to someone in the back. “*Little Man*, come here and show *Baby Man* how to do this.”

The crowd parted, and a grinning *Little Man* somersaulted hand over foot to where the fat little boy was standing. They made an odd pair—*Little Man* looked like a tiny, perfectly proportioned man standing next to an equally tall baby with a big belly. He bowed to the fat-bellied boy and said in his high, squeaky voice, “At your service, my brave little one—O my, you do have big teeth do not you?” No sooner had he said this than the two cheetahs began singing.

Runs Like Cheetah couldn't stop laughing. "Your high voice confused them, *Little Man*, they thought you were singing to them. You should learn to lower your voice when you are around them."

"Perhaps you should get smarter cheetahs," *Little Man* giggled back in his squeaky voice. *Runs Like Cheetah* broke out laughing again. Soon the entire tribe was laughing, even the children.

Little Man walked over to *Baby Man* and said to him, "Watch me very carefully, my little brave one. This is what you must do when a lion looks at you." *Little Man* stood on his hands and began walking on them around the cheetah, while clacking his teeth together loudly. "Since you have such big teeth my little brave one, you may as well use them like I am doing—it will confuse the lion and he will lie down and go to sleep—is that not right *Runs Like Cheetah*?"

"Yes *Little Man*, it surely is," *Runs Like Cheetah* replied.

After *Little Man* finished walking on his hands around the cheetah, he said to the small fat boy, "it is your turn now—stand on your hands." The small fat boy tried but kept falling. *Little Man* grabbed him by the feet, turned him upside down, and said, "You may need a little help at first, but a smart boy like you will soon be able to do it on his own, am I not right, my brave little one?" The small boy snapped back, "I can do anything—I am not afraid, you know," and with that *Little Man* began to walk the boy upside down around the cheetahs. "Now clack your teeth together and do not stop," *Little Man* told the boy. The clacking sound was so loud I could hear it clearly from my hut. I remember thinking his teeth must be as big as his toes to make such a sound. Little did I know that his mouth would turn out to be even larger than his teeth.

The fourth time around, the cheetah slowly laid her body down and turned over, belly up, and began to purr. *Runs*

Like Cheetah said to the boy, “Now you can pet her, my brave little one, look how happy she is—but this time you must pet her *on the belly*,”

The boy put on the best face he could and said, “I am not afraid, you know,” and then he walked very slowly to the cheetah and knelt down and touched her belly, rubbing it gently. The cheetah began singing to him. The boy’s eyes widened with amazement. He looked up at *Runs Like Cheetah*.

“Well done, little *Baby Man*,” he whispered to the boy. “Now stand up and thank the cheetah for being your friend. Her name is sung like this,” and he sang something that sounded like a black finch. Then he said to the boy, “Here, listen to me again—then you try it.”

The boy stood up a bit nervously and sang the cheetah’s name. The cheetah, still lying on her back, sang back the same sound. A huge smile filled the boy’s face. I have never seen anyone as happy as that small boy. He looked around at the men and women and children as if he were a little God.

And for a moment, he was.

Chapter 22: THE CELEBRATION

Monkey Mother came to me the next day and said she had told the little boy, *Baby Man*, to always sit outside my hut during the day so he could run errands for me. She said, “He is full of himself now that he has sung to the cheetahs. He told me he is not afraid of anything and that he would gladly sit outside your hut next to your door and do whatever you asked of him. He is so small that when you call him you will be able to see him through the door curtain. That way, you can speak to him without him coming in. He is outside now.”

I called to him, “*Baby Man*, are you sitting outside my hut?”

“Yes, *River Mother*, I am.”

“Stand in front of the door so I can see you.”

“Yes, *River Mother*, here I am, it is me.”

His little body appeared through the skin. I could see his big white teeth grinning and said, “Will you always be outside my door when I call you?”

“Yes, *River Mother*.”

“Good. Now sit down next to my door and stay there.”

“*River Mother*?”

“What is it, *Baby Man*?”

“Can I leave to relieve myself whenever I have to?”

“Yes, but you must tell me you are leaving and return quickly.”

“*River Mother*?”

“What is it, *Baby Man*?”

“What do I do when I am hungry?”

“You must eat at your mother’s hut. But you must tell me when you are leaving and you must return quickly.”

“*River Mother*?”

“What is it, *Baby Man*?”

“What if my friends come by and want to play with me?”

“Then they must play in front of my hut, and not be noisy, so you can hear me if I call you.”

“*River Mother?*”

“What is it, *Baby Man?*”

“Can you see into Time to Come, like people say?”

“Yes *Baby Man*, I can.”

“What do you see, *River Mother?*”

“I see you not asking any more questions.”

Monkey Mother couldn't stop cackling and I had all I could do to not join her. After she left, I began watching the Celebration through the eye slits—but most of all I watched *Runs Like Cheetah*. I couldn't take my eyes off him. Everything he did was beautiful. It took all my strength to keep from running outside to sing and dance with him.

All through the feasting, *Runs Like Cheetah* kept looking my direction—he knew I was inside the hut—and I could tell by his eyes he wanted to come see me. But he never did. When the fires died down, he gave my hut one last glance and then began to walk to his mother's hut on the other side of the village.

When he was halfway there, the cheetahs glanced back in my direction and began to sing. Then, from across the village, I heard *Moon Traveler* joining them in song. The song went on and on like thin, drifting smoke. It was beautiful. I must have fallen asleep listening to it because I remember I was crying in my dreams and then I was hearing my name and I woke up to the rising sun and *Moon Under Water* whispering, “*River Mother*, it is *Moon Under Water*, I must speak with you.”

“Come in, *Moon Under Water*.”

“*River Mother*, you must prepare yourself. *Runs Like Cheetah* is coming to see you today. I cannot hold him off any longer. I told him you needed time to be alone to heal from your spirit journeys, but he will not listen. He is filled with desire.”

“So am I, *Moon Under Water*. I may not be a woman yet, but I too am filled with desire.”

“It is not the same kind of desire as his. You must believe me on this.”

“But you must believe me that as soon as I saw *Runs Like Cheetah* walk up from the river, I was filled with the desire to touch him—to breathe his scent.”

“Listen to me, *River Mother*, as soon as *Runs Like Cheetah* sees you, he will not be able to contain himself. I know this. He will want to be with you. Even the voice of *River Mother* may not bring him back to his proper mind. I know this. It is the way of men. You will need something to numb his desire.”

“How will I do that?”

“You must never let him see you as he remembers you in his mind. If he does, it will not matter that you are still a child. You must meet him as the shaman you are. You must whiten your cheetah tears and put on your robe and cheetah headdress. When he enters, he must see you like this. And your eyes must *never* be lower than his. Here, I have a special seat *Bright Hands* made for you.

She reached outside to get it, but it seems *Baby Man* had climbed up on it to make faces at the passing villagers. “Get off the seat, you little demon,” she said to him, and brought in a large circular platform made of small woven reeds. It was about as high as my leg calf.

“It is beautiful, *Moon Under Water*. Please thank *Bright Hands* for me.”

“*Bright Hands* is very proud of it. She made it so you could sit on it with your legs crossed underneath you, as you did in the Cave of the Spirit Mouth. When you sit on it, you will be higher than anyone sitting in front of you.”

“Excuse me, *Moon Under Water*, but how did you know that I sat with my legs crossed underneath me?”

“*Monkey Mother* told me. She tells me everything. It is important I know everything if I am to guide the tribe. There

are certain things only a shaman like *Monkey Mother* can know—such as the strength of your spirit body. That is one of the things she made known to me.”

“But what does the crossing of my legs have to do with my spirit body—or your guiding the tribe?”

“*Monkey Mother* decides what to tell me. That is one of the things she told me—that you crossed your legs easily, like you were born to it. It is not natural for us, you know—we always squat—do not we? By the way, she also told me you were a bit frightened the first time you used the cave hole to relieve yourself. But that is natural—I was frightened too.”

“But what were you doing squatting at the cave hole?”

“When I was very young, *Monkey Mother* thought I would be the next shaman, but she was wrong. I had a number of abilities, but she did not find out *how small* that number was until we went to the Spirit Caves.”

“What was it that she saw?”

“I was able to take the first few spirit journeys, but I could never tell her *the scent* of the spirits I had met. She saw then that she had been mistaken about my abilities.”

“What did she say to you?”

“She said I would lead in another way. And that is what happened. *Monkey Mother* has been on my right side at the Circle of Wisdom ever since. Without her guidance, I would have failed many times to see the truth. Soon, you will take her place and sit on my right in the Circle of Wisdom.”

“But that is where *Monkey Mother* sits. Where will she sit?”

“She will change positions and sit on my left side. The shaman who used to sit on my left side, *Angry Stones*, was *Monkey Mother’s* teacher. She died 12 summers ago, just before you were born. We have been waiting all that time for you to join us in the Circle of Wisdom.”

“Why is that?”

“There must always be two shamans in the Circle of Wisdom. That is the way. The shamans must balance each other or terrible things can happen. The older one—the one approaching death—sits to the left of the Leader. That is the

seat of wisdom. The younger one sits to the right of the Leader. That is where you will sit. It is the seat of power.”

“What is the difference?”

“There is no difference worth speaking about. The shaman in the seat of power is usually younger, but that is it. They are both seats of wisdom.”

“But why must there always be two shamans?”

“Unspeakable things can happen if there is only one shaman. The Goddesses are very powerful—and unpredictable. It is possible for them to deceive a shaman so that the tribe will be led to their deaths.”

“Has that ever happened?”

“The stories say it happened to the Giants—which is why they are no longer here. The stories say the Giants became angry with the Goddesses and cursed them because they believed the Goddesses had sent them a dream that made fools of them. They decided they would show the Goddesses that they were equally powerful by refusing to praise them ever again. The Goddesses sent a terrible flood to punish them. Many of the Giants survived by taking refuge in the hills—but only one of the two shamans survived. The Giants took their survival as a sign they were indeed as powerful as the Goddesses and continued to ignore them, especially after the Goddesses brought out the sun and allowed the water to recede. The Giants saw this as a true sign of weakness. They were sure the Goddesses had been put in their place, and staged a huge Celebration praising their own strength.

“It was then,” she continued, “that the Goddesses chose to kill all of the Giants once and for all. One of the Goddesses—the surviving shaman’s Protector—asked the shaman if the other Goddesses could come to the Celebration as a sign of peace—that they would all visit in a bright cloud bearing gifts. The Giants were sure they had finally triumphed over the Goddesses and gathered underneath the bright cloud to receive their gifts. The bright cloud began lowering and then, suddenly, it darkened and sent down a long winding snout that sucked all of the Giants up in a thunderous roar. The Goddesses were waiting for

them at the other end. They tore the Giants limb from limb and scattered their bones all over the earth. Sometimes we find them buried in the river bed.”

“But what is to prevent the Goddesses from clouding the minds of both shamans?”

“I see that *Monkey Mother* has not yet spoken to you of this—so I will. Shamans can only speak to one Goddess at a time. It is the rule. Do you understand this?”

“It is the way it seems to happen.”

“Yes. No one knows why this is so, but it is the rule. When you went to the Spirit Cave Eyes to summon the Goddesses, you called to all of them, did you not?”

“Yes I called to *Mut*, and *Nut*, and *Ma’at*, and *Mafdet*.”

“But only *one* answered you?”

“Yes, only *Mafdet*.”

“That is because *Mafdet* chose to be your Protector. Today, if you summon any of the other Goddesses, *Mafdet* will appear. Your Protector is very jealous. If you tell *Mafdet* you wish to speak to one of the other Goddesses, she will tell you that she will speak to them and tell you what they say. Sometimes she will allow another Goddess to speak with you directly, but it is very rare.”

“I do not understand what this has to do with the tribe having two shamans.”

“Let me take the story of the Giants—but where there is not just one shaman, but two—let’s say you and *Monkey Mother*. In the story, if you remember, *all* of the Goddesses were determined to kill the Giants, so the Protector Goddesses of both shamans would have had to deceive both shamans. But let us say that the Goddesses disagreed among themselves. This can happen. In the story of the Giants, let us say that *your* Protector—*Mafdet*—disagreed with the others who wanted to kill the Giants and told you so. But *Mut*, who is *Monkey Mother’s* protector, was one of the Goddesses intent on killing the Giants, and thus would deceive *Monkey Mother*. Afterwards, when you spoke to *Monkey Mother*, it would be clear that the Goddesses were

intent on deceiving you. Hopefully, when you told the others of this, they would listen and survive by hiding in caves.”

“I can see now,” I replied, “why two shamans are important. It gives you an advantage, but a slim one.”

“Yes, very slim. If I have learned anything in my years of leading the tribe, *River Mother*, it is this: nothing is sure in this life, *nothing*.”

Chapter 23: RUNS LIKE CHEETAH VISITS ME

As soon as there was enough light, I took one of the water bowls *Bright Hands* had made and bent over it to fix my tear marks so they'd be clear and sharp. Then I took my silver cobra robe and threw it over my head. It was so light it floated in the air before settling on my body. Then I put on my headdress and again bent over the bowl to see how ferocious and beautiful I looked. I wasn't disappointed. I was ready to see *Runs Like Cheetah*. I faced the door and sat cross legged on the reed seat. I called out to *Baby Man*, "Please find *Runs Like Cheetah* and tell him I would like to see him—but first stand in front of my door, I want to ask you something."

"What is it, *River Mother*?"

"Can you hear me talking to others when you are sitting outside my door?"

"A little bit."

"How much is a little bit?"

"Oh, just a little bit."

"Do you know it is not good to listen to what *River Mother* is saying unless she is speaking to you directly?"

"But I cannot help it, *River Mother*—it just happens."

"Oh, it just happens, does it? Well, I peeked through the corner of the door yesterday when I was speaking with *Moon Under Water* and guess what I saw?"

"I do not know. What did you see, *River Mother*?"

"I saw you leaning in towards the door cupping your ear with your hand so you could hear us better."

"Oh. Are you sure I was not scratching my ear?"

"Oh, I am sure. Sure enough to tell you that you can no longer sit beside my door where I cannot see you, but in front of it where I can see you."

"*River Mother*?"

"Yes, *Baby Man*?"

"Suppose, just suppose, someone heard you talking to *Moon Under Water* and told others what he heard?"

“Could you possibly be talking about yourself, my little one?”

“No, *River Mother*, it is just someone I made up.”

“Well, that person you just made up would have to go to everyone he told and tell them he lied, that he made the whole thing up and that they must forget it.”

“*River Mother?*”

“Yes?”

“What if everyone he told had told it to others?”

“Then they would have to tell the others that they lied, that they made the whole thing up and that they must forget it.”

“*River Mother?*”

“What is it now, you little demon?”

“What if those others had told even more others?”

“What do you think? Those others would have to tell the even more others they lied, that they made the whole thing up and that they must forget it. Are we to keep going like this forever, you little imp?”

“No, *River Mother*—we have gone far enough, I am sure of it.”

“Now you listen to me you little imp—you are the ‘someone’ you made up, is that not so?”

“I guess you could say that if you wanted to.”

“Well then, when the ‘someone’ you made up finishes doing what I’ve told you has to be done, all those others are to come here and stand in front of my hut and tell me, one by one, that what they heard from you was not true and that they will never mention it again to anyone ever.”

“Is that all, *River Mother?*”

“Not quite. Then I want *you* to tell me that you will never again listen to what I am saying to others and that what you told the others was untrue. Do you understand?”

“Yes, *River Mother.*”

“Now, my little friend, tell me—what was it that you told the others that you overheard?”

“I told them I heard *Moon Under Water* saying to you, ‘*As soon as Runs Like Cheetah feels you, you will need something to dumb his design.*’”

“And what exactly is that supposed to mean, my little friend?”

“I do not know, but it sounded very important.”

I was glad I was behind the door curtain where he couldn't see me holding my sides trying to stop from laughing. *Oh this one is a rare one*, I thought to myself.

“I am sure what *Moon Under Water* said did sound important, you imp, but what I want to know is this—are you clear as to what has to be done to clean this mess up?”

“Yes, I am very sure—but I have one more question.”

“Are you sure it is only one, and not two?”

“Oh yes. If I had two questions to ask, I would tell you—I am not afraid, you know. Anyway, you were telling me before we began talking about this mess, as you call it, and what I must do to correct it, that I must sit in front of your door from now on.”

“That is correct.”

“But if I sit in front of your door I will not be able to stop hearing you.”

“I wasn't finished. You are to sit in front of my door facing me but back away from the door for the length of a cheetah. Do you know how long a cheetah is?”

“Lying down or sitting, *River Mother*?”

“Lying down, you fat little imp. Now get to it and find those you have told.”

“Yes, right away, *River Mother*, I am already running like the wind!”

As soon as I heard his little feet racing across the village, I went to the eye slit and waited. I wasn't disappointed. Five of the most frightened children I have ever seen—three small boys and two even smaller girls—were lined up next to *Baby Man*. I growled from behind the eye slit, “I am waiting to hear what you have to say, little ones.”

Starting with *Baby Man*, they each told me that what they had heard was not true and that they would never repeat it again to anyone ever. When they were finished, I growled through the eye slit, "*River Mother* hears everything. If I hear anything like this horrid lie *Baby Man* has told you, I am going to turn each of you into a frog—starting with you, *Baby Man*—do you all understand?"

Baby Man and the five children stood there shaking, afraid to speak. Finally, *Baby Man* said, "I am sure they understand very well, *River Mother*. Is there anything else?"

"Yes, tell the children they can go, and then you get your little feet going and find *Runs Like Cheetah* and tell him I must see him. Now!"

"Yes, right away, *River Mother*, I am already running like the wind!"

As soon as I heard his little feet racing across the village, I adjusted my headdress and robe and sat back on my seat of reeds and waited. It wasn't a long wait.

"*River Mother*, it is *Runs Like Cheetah*. May I come in?" I could see the shadow of his legs through the door curtain. I was filled with excitement.

"Of course," I replied. "But leave your cheetahs outside for a while. I have had a large rock placed there to hold their leashes."

He had to stoop to enter so he did not see me completely until he began to straighten up. He tried to hide his surprise, but he couldn't. He was very uneasy.

"Please sit, my friend. Do you like my hut?"

"It is very different with the white cobra skeletons and the black vulture feathers."

"Do you like it being so different?"

“I do if you do, *River Mother*. I like the singing birds in the round cages and the white mice a bit more. Is the inside of their little houses the same as yours?”

“You will have to crawl in to find out!” With that, he began to laugh in that wonderful way of his and then I began to laugh and then neither of us could stop. It felt so good. I couldn’t stop teasing him and said, “What do you think of the way I look? I look different, do I not?”

“Yes, very different—are you always dressed like this, *River Mother*?”

“Yes. I am still healing from my spirit journeys. I will appear like this until I sit in the Circle of Wisdom next to your mother. You are the first of the tribe to see me outside of the few helping me. How do I look, really?”

“Like a Goddess, *River Mother*.” His eyes were desperately trying to see my eyes through the white tear marks and the cheetah headdress. He was looking for the girl he knew, but it wasn’t easy. The women had done their job well. I felt sorry for him—I could easily see him as he had always been, but he couldn’t see me in the same way.

I tried to cheer him up. “I’ve missed you very much, *Runs Like Cheetah*—I watched you singing and dancing at the feast yesterday and wanted so much to be with you.” Right then, I knew I shouldn’t have spoken to him that way. His eyes became hungry with desire. It *was* a different desire, just as *Moon Under Water* had warned me.

But it wasn’t *that* different from my own desire, and I was strangely attracted to it, even its scent of danger. I could feel the hunger of my own desire building and then suddenly, my right side stiffened, and the hunger disappeared. And then, I can’t say why, I suddenly stood up and pulled the huge cobra robe around me like a pair of wings. The sight of it moving through the air startled him and his hunger also disappeared.

I changed direction immediately and asked him what he thought of the coiled cobra skeletons sticking out into the hut from the four eye slits.

“I did not know what to think of them when I first entered. They frightened me to tell you the truth. Why are they there?”

“So the Cobra Goddess can guide my seeing. What about the four half-closed eyes on the outside of the hut? What do you think of them?”

“I like the eyes. I could feel you looking through them the moment I returned. But I was saddened that you could see me but I couldn’t see you. All I could see in the half-closed eyes was darkness.”

“If you had come very close and pressed your eyes against them, you could have seen my eyes looking out at you from inside the cobra’s white coils.”

“I’d rather just see your eyes, *River Mother*.”

“But they are looking at you now—is that not enough?” I was startled at how tricky I had suddenly become. I was about to say I was sorry but something made me demand he bring the cheetahs in—that I had something to tell them. He reached outside and loosened the leashes. The cheetahs came in very cautiously. They were familiar with my scent, but they took one look at me and the inside of the hut and lowered their bodies as if they were stalking prey.

At first, I did not know what they were stalking. For sure, it wasn’t my clay headdress or the coiled cobra skeletons on the walls. Animals are sometimes curious about dead things—but they are never afraid of them. But the cheetahs were afraid of something. I knew it wasn’t my scent—they were familiar with that. At first, I thought it might be the scent of the vulture wings attached to my veil and robe. But cheetahs aren’t normally afraid of vultures—it had to be something else they were stalking. Then it came to me—it was my robe. Some of the cobra’s scent must have lingered even after curing and it had mixed with my scent. What the

cheetahs were afraid of was the flying cobra-cheetah-human sitting in front of them who smelled alive—and surely moved. The cheetahs' uncertainty affected *Runs Like Cheetah* as well. He suddenly appeared as uncertain as they did.

I realized then that the three of them had truly become one spirit—anything affecting one of them immediately affected the others. I sensed it would be easier—and far less dangerous—to relax the cheetahs than to try to relax *Runs Like Cheetah* and possibly rekindle his desire, so I sang like a black finch to the female.

The female immediately stood up and moved forward. She placed her head in my left hand and began to purr. I extended my right hand to the male and he too came forward and placed his head in my hand and purred. The sound went through my body like a deep rhythmic hum. I looked up at *Runs Like Cheetah*—he was suddenly himself again.

“Your cheetahs,” I said to him, “must have picked up the scent of the cobras from my robe. The robe was just made for me—some of their scent must still be present. Look how happy they are now. They just needed reassurance that it was me.”

“I know. I need reassurance also, *River Mother*. Meeting with you like this is not easy for me. I am your friend, but it is hard to be myself with you so different.”

“It is hard for me as well, *Runs Like Cheetah*, I can assure you. But you must be patient with me. Let us talk of other things. Tell me of your father.”

“He is hunting with his cheetah as he has always done. But something has changed in him. He seldom talks—it is almost as if he is more animal than human. I love him, but he is no longer himself. He has become possessed. He goes to the river bank every day to train the crocodiles. He has become obsessed with them, and sees them as his protection from intruders. Especially you. They follow him like long, savage

ducklings. You wouldn't believe it, but they have learned very quickly. When they obey his commands—he feeds them. When they refuse—he whips them on the snout with a long sharp stick. They will attack and stand still on command. When my mother and *Monkey Mother* came to get me in the dugouts, I knew there was no way they could ever bring the dugouts up on the river bank to get me.

“My father,” he continued, “had commanded the crocodiles not to move, so they refused to race after the meat I threw downriver. My father stood on the bank laughing, repeating over and over that it would not be easy for me to leave him. I had been prepared for this. I was afraid he might command the crocodiles to attack the dugouts, so I waved to *Monkey Mother* to turn back to the village. Then I waited until my father went back to the camp and ran back up river with the cheetahs as fast as I could to a small cliff overlooking the river. Just as I got there, I saw the two dugouts approaching and jumped in pulling the cheetahs with me. *Monkey Mother* pushed the empty dugout they were towing towards us and we all climbed in. *Monkey Mother* couldn't stop laughing. She kept telling me I'd never get the cheetahs to do that again, that I should have seen their faces. She was right. When we got to the village they jumped out of the dugout like it was filled with snakes.”

Chapter 24: I ENTER THE CIRCLE OF WISDOM

The Circle of Wisdom was set beneath a circle of giant *Baobab* trees. The trunks were so thick that the arms of five men could not get around them and their long branches were so spidery they looked like roots shooting into the sky—almost as if they had been planted upside down.

Monkey Mother told me the stories said that when the Giants were very young and knew little of the ways of the Goddesses, they began having dreams of the Goddesses eating the fruit of the *Baobab* trees. The Giants took this to mean that the power of the Goddesses came from the fruit and they decided that they too could eat the fruit and become just as powerful. The Giants then set about planting a circle of *Baobab* trees.

But the *Baobab* trees grow very, very slowly, so the young Giants had to wait many summers for the trees to grow and bear fruit, and as they waited, the shade from the trees became so dense it left a circle of bare earth beneath them.

Monkey Mother said the Giants took the cool shade as a good omen and sat there for many summers, waiting for the *Baobab* fruit to appear. When it finally did appear, they ate huge piles of it and then sat back and waited to become as powerful as the Goddesses—but nothing happened.

It was then that the young Giants realized they could never really be sure what their dreams meant. They were also convinced the Goddesses had sent the *Baobab* dreams to make them look like fools and began cursing the Goddesses, saying they would never praise them again. When The Goddesses failed to respond to this, the young Giants took it to mean that they had put the Goddesses in their place.

What the young Giants did not know was that the Goddesses had silently decided to kill the Giants for being so

arrogant. But the Goddesses did not do it immediately—instead, they remained silent for many summers. This silence convinced the Giants that the Goddesses were afraid of them. It was then that the Goddesses came in a golden cloud and killed them all.

When I asked *Monkey Mother* why the tribe held the Circle of Wisdom beneath the *Baobab* trees, she said it was to always remember the folly of the Giants. “The Giants were great humans, far greater than we are,” *Monkey Mother* said to me, “but they were fools to think they could be as great as the Goddesses. The Goddesses know things we can never know. We are always at their mercy.”

As a child, I had sat near the Circle of Wisdom many times with my mother, listening to *Moon Under Water* and the others. I was anxious to finally enter it. I knew it was where I was destined to be. When the time came for me to go to the Circle of Wisdom, *Runs Like Cheetah* and *Monkey Mother* came to my door. I was watching the shadows of their legs moving back and forth outside my door when *Monkey Mother* called to me, “The Circle of Wisdom is waiting for you, *River Mother*. We have come to take you there.”

I could hear the crowd whispering as I stooped to get through the door. *Runs Like Cheetah* and *Monkey Mother* stood in front of the door, blocking the tribe’s view until I could straighten up. Then they stepped back to reveal what I looked like in full dress. I was greeted by small gasps, and then a sudden rush of whispers erupted.

Monkey Mother waved her stick at the tribe, telling them to stand back and allow me to pass. *Baby Man* decided to join us and fell in behind *Monkey Mother* waving a small stick of his own, saying, “Do not listen to what *River Mother* is saying unless she speaks to you directly,” at which time *Monkey Mother* gave him a swift whack on the head to shut

him up. It was then that *Runs Like Cheetah* whispered to me, “The cheetahs will walk on either side of you when I sing to them. They will be without leashes—do not be afraid. Tell me when you are ready.”

“I am ready.”

Runs Like Cheetah began to sing something I had never heard before.

“What are you singing?” I whispered to him.

“I told them to guard you with their lives.”

The cheetahs immediately took their place on either side of me. As I walked forward, the crowd parted like tall grass. I spoke to each person as I passed, thanking them for coming to greet me. None of the small children had the slightest idea who I was. Most of them hid behind the legs of their mothers, crying. The older children—the ones who had been my playmates—were uncertain how to greet me. I could see it in their eyes. As soon as they saw me, they pulled back, as if they knew things would never again be the same between us.

Some of the mothers cried and tried to reach out to touch me, but the cheetahs gently pushed them back. When the men saw how the cheetahs were protecting me, they were content to lower their heads in acknowledgment as I spoke to them. They wanted to see the young girl, but they couldn't.

Moon Under Water had been right—all they could see was *River Mother*—the prophet who had returned from the Spirit Caves protected by the fierce Cheetah Goddess, *Mafdet*. My cheetah headdress told them that, just as my robe told them that the Cobra Goddess, *Wadjet* and the Vulture Goddess, *Nekhbet* moved with me wherever I went. That was enough to stop them from trying to see me—they were afraid what they might see.

When I reached the *Baobab* trees, *Moon Under Water* and the other members of the Circle of Wisdom were waiting for me. After the Circle had seated itself, *Moon Under Water* spoke first, welcoming me to the Circle of Wisdom. The others nodded in agreement. She then asked *Monkey Mother* to move and sit on her left, in the Seat of Wisdom, and then beckoned me to sit on her right, in the Seat of Power.

Monkey Mother then spoke to the Circle: “We have been waiting twelve summers for a shaman to come who would balance the Circle. Those have been years of great uncertainty for me. I was at the mercy of the Goddesses—but at last a shaman has come who will end that. We all know that *River Mother* is not yet a woman, but she is already a greater shaman than *Angry Stones* or me. In time, she will become an even greater shaman and leader. I have seen it.”

One of the older men, *Sky Over Still Water*, then spoke, “We are honored *River Mother* is with us in the Circle of Wisdom. *Moon Under Water* has told us of her prophecies and powers—but we have seen none of them. Only you, *Monkey Mother*, have seen them. How do we know that the Goddesses haven’t deceived you—as they have other shamans when there was no second shaman to balance the Circle?”

“The only answer I can give, *Sky Over Still Water*, is this: there *is* no way of knowing if I have been deceived. All I can tell you is that my Protector, *Mut*, told me none of this. What I have told you is what I have seen and heard in my time with *River Mother* at the Spirit Caves. Yet I admit there is no end to what the Goddesses can do if they wish to deceive us.”

Then one of the women, *Thin Moon Rising*, spoke: “*River Mother* appears before us as a shaman favored by the

Cheetah Goddess *Mafdet*. Her headdress tells us that, and her robe tells us that *Wadjet* and *Nekhbet* move with her wherever she goes. Yet, you, *Monkey Mother*, come to us very simply—as yourself with no headdress or robe. Why must *River Mother* come to us like this? Why does she not appear before us as you do?”

Monkey Mother replied, “If you were not so young, *Thin Moon Rising*, you would have remembered that I did not look like I do now when I first came to the Circle of Wisdom. I too was not yet a woman, but my teacher, *Angry Stones*, knew I was ready to take my place in the Circle of Wisdom, just as I know that *River Mother* is ready to take her place. When a young shaman returns from her trials at the Spirit Caves, she is very fragile and must have time to heal. Much of the healing comes with solitude, which is why *River Mother* removed herself from the tribe as she did. But the shaman also heals by gathering images of her Protector Goddess around herself. This is done with a headdress. A shaman will also wrap around herself the animal Goddesses that move with her in daily life. This is what *River Mother* has done. You all know that my Protector Goddess, *Mut*, is both male and female—the Mother who created herself and everything that exists in the heavens and earth. The animal Goddess who moves with me, my Spirit Guide, is the Cobra Goddess, *Wadjet*. Look now, so you can see what I looked like many summers ago when I first came to the Circle.”

She stood up and reached into a large woven bag and took out a huge robe made of river reeds and the shoulder feathers of the white vulture and placed it around her body. The reed robe had the large breasts of a woman and the stiff sex of a man.

She then put on her *Mut* headdress. It covered her entire face and head. The right side was painted black and had the bearded face of a man; the left side was painted white and had the large eyes and face of a woman. Then she took out

a long walking stick with a cobra head and waved it at *Thin Moon Rising* saying, “Remember now how I appeared to the Circle many summers ago, so you can tell others after I am gone.”

Then *Moon Under Water* spoke: “*Sky Over Still Water* has brought up a matter that has not yet been answered—have the Goddesses deceived us as to the powers of *River Mother*? Perhaps it cannot be answered, but we must try. I am going to ask *River Mother* to call on *Mafdet* to help her utter the prophecies again. This way, the Circle can judge for itself the powers of *River Mother*.”

I had not been prepared for this, but it had to be done. I spoke to the Circle, telling them it would be more proper if I were standing in the Cave of the Eyes and they were standing on the Mound of Prophecy, and that the prophecies might change because time has passed since they were last uttered. There was some discussion of this and then *Monkey Mother* banged her cobra stick on the ground, saying, “Here and now is the time for *River Mother* to speak. *Mafdet* will not desert her.”

Right then I felt the fierce *Mafdet* enter the right side of my body. *Monkey Mother* turned to me and said: “Speak, Prophet, what will become of *Antelope Hunter*?”

A fierce voice rose up within me: “*The one called Antelope Hunter will return to the village on the first rising of the river after the return of Runs Like Cheetah. The heart of Antelope Hunter will be filled with hate. The blood of many will run like a river through the village. He will be cursed by the tribe and made to live in the jungle alone and without companions.*”

Then *Monkey Mother* spoke again: “Speak, Prophet. What will become of *Runs Like Cheetah* now that he has returned to the village?”

The same fierce voice rose up with me: “*The one called Runs Like Cheetah will protect River Mother from the rage of Antelope Hunter. When Antelope Hunter returns after the next rising of the river, he will drag a river of blood behind him. He will be stopped by Runs Like Cheetah and his swift-footed cheetahs. Antelope Hunter will be cursed by the tribe and made to live in the jungle alone and without companions. In his fifteenth summer, Runs Like Cheetah will leave the village and never return.*”

With that, *Mafdet* suddenly left me and I fell exhausted at the feet of *Moon Under Water*. There was utter silence in the Circle. Nothing moved. Not even the leaves.

Then, as was her way, *Moon Under Water* spoke to the Circle, “We must not speak of this to the rest of the tribe until we have devised a plan to stop *Antelope Hunter*. The truth of the prophecy is good for all of us. We will take *River Mother’s* truth and listen to it within ourselves.” As I lay there, I could feel her sadness falling on me like a gray, shadowy mist.

Chapter 25: THIRTEEN SUMMERS—I BECOME A WOMAN

Becoming a woman happened of its own accord—like the sun rising—just as my mother had predicted. And as she had predicted, it happened in my thirteenth summer. I no longer wore my headdress and robe, only my cheetah tear marks. Because of this, everyone could see what was happening to my body. My breasts became sore and began to swell—and then a few small hairs grew around my sex, and soon drops of blood appeared between my legs.

I went to my mother and told her. She nodded and said, “The time is right for you to bleed. The moon is beginning to appear. It is the time when all the women in our village bleed. Your bleeding will last for a short while and then it will stop. In a few moons, your bleeding will grow stronger and then it will stay the same. But it will always come at the same time as the other women.”

“Why is that?”

“Women are creatures of the moon. We travel together. We grow, we are full, and then we disappear only to come back again—over and over, just like the moon.”

“I have always felt close to the moon.”

“A shaman like you could never be a stranger to the moon. I know of your spirit journeys—*Monkey Mother* told me how you became one with the moon.”

“It felt so beautiful I did not want to leave.”

“I understand your needing the moon and wanting to stay there,” she said laughing, “but the tribe needs you more than the moon does. Without you we would be lost. The men may not know this, but the women do.”

“I know this, mother. I am not blind to who I am.”

“That you are *River Mother* I have never doubted. I always knew this, as did *Monkey Mother*. But there is something else I must tell you.”

“What is that?”

"You are a woman now. Soon you will desire *Runs Like Cheetah* in a different way, and when he sees your woman body, his desire will grow even stronger."

"Yes I know. *Monkey Mother* has told me this."

"What else did she tell you?"

"She told me that women can have babies, but that some women—the women who have never been with men—never have babies. When I asked her who the women were who had never been with men, she said *Bright Hands* and *Moving Hands* were two such women."

"What did you think about that?"

"I was surprised. They are both beautiful. Any man would desire them. When I asked *Monkey Mother* why they had never been with men, she said it was their way. I do not know if I understood her though."

"What *Monkey Mother* meant was that women like *Bright Hands* and *Moving Hands* do not desire to be with men.

They desire to be with other women. Or they have no desire at all—but that is rare."

"But how can they be with other women? They have the same bodies."

"There are ways—but that is all I want to say right now. What is important for you to know is that the Circle has forbidden the men to touch these women. The Circle has told the men they are to be left alone because without their skills the tribe would suffer greatly. That usually satisfies the men. They are always hungry with desire, but they are frightened by the thought of being without their pipes and bowls and hides."

"What about the women who have no skills who desire to be with women? How are they protected?"

"The other women invent skills for them, skills you cannot see."

"Like what?"

"Like the skill of interpreting dreams, even if they do not have that ability. The men are told that without that skill the tribe will suffer, that they must leave her alone. Men need a reason, any reason, but it has to be strong one."

“What do you feel about women who do not desire men?”

“They are good friends.”

“I think so too. I felt very close to *Bright Hands* and *Moving Hands* when they came to help me. I did not know they were women who did not desire men, but I did sense that *Bright Hands* would be more than a friend. She seemed another part of me—a part I did not know I was missing until we spoke.”

My mother replied, “*Monkey Mother* says that such women sometimes take the place of the man spirit some women are born with but have lost. You were born with the spirit of a woman and the spirit of a man—but after you caught fire, your man spirit became like a shadow. Sometimes you will miss the man spirit that was so much a part of you—but there is nothing you can do about it—your man spirit no longer exists. Sometimes the women who do not desire men can take the place of your man spirit. That is what has happened between you and *Bright Hands*.”

“Do those women who take the place of your man spirit become like men then?”

“No, but sometimes they appear to have the *ways* of a man. That is different from them becoming like a man. Part of them becomes what you lost after your man spirit faded to a shadow.”

“Yes, that must be what happened with *Bright Hands*—she felt like a part of me that was missing but I did not know it. Has that happened with you?”

“Yes, of course. Did you think you were the first woman born with the spirit of a woman and the spirit of a man? I was born that way too. Your father took the place of my man spirit, but when he died, I had nothing but the shadow. It was not enough. Then one day I was speaking with *Moving Hands* and I had the same feeling about her that you had with *Bright Hands*. We have become very close. She has made me happy again.”

Chapter 26: I RECEIVE A WARNING

My desire to be with *Runs Like Cheetah* grew daily—I was on fire—as was *Runs Like Cheetah*. I could see it in his eyes—and I could see it in his sex—it would become large and stiff and he would plead to be with me, but I kept telling him he would have to wait.

I knew my fate was to be more than a mother. If I were to be only a mother, my desire was so strong I would have gladly been with him every time we were alone. But I knew this was not the right time for me to be a mother, because I knew that *Runs Like Cheetah* would leave the tribe in two summers and never return.

Runs Like Cheetah did not know about the prophecy, so I asked him if he planned to leave the village soon. I spoke to *Runs Like Cheetah* about this many times, but all he could tell me was he had no idea why I would ask him such a thing—he wanted to stay in the village and hunt with his cheetahs until he grew as old as *Moon Traveler*.

Monkey Mother was also concerned about the prophecy and questioned me about it after the Circle of Wisdom—but I could tell her nothing more than what the prophecy had said. After I thought about it some more I said to her, “The prophecy might mean he is going to die at fifteen summers, or it might mean he is really going to leave the tribe—but why would he leave the place he loves?”

Monkey Mother looked at me in the strangest way and said, “Prophets can be blind to their own fate, *River Mother*, and you are no exception. Did it ever occur to you that *Runs Like Cheetah* is going to leave the tribe because he is going to leave *with you*, and that neither of you will ever come back?”

“But how could that be, *Monkey Mother*? Why would I leave everyone I love, you, my mother, *Moon Under Water*—the very tribe I am destined to lead?”

“You are indeed destined to lead, *River Mother*, but I am afraid *this* tribe is not the tribe you will lead. As soon as I heard your prophecies at the Mound of Prophecy, I had a sudden vision of you leaving for a place far away with *Runs Like Cheetah*—and with *Bright Hands* as well. My heart dropped. When I heard the prophecies again at the Circle, I had the same vision and all doubts left my mind.”

“But my leaving would unbalance the Circle.”

“Yes, it will be a dangerous time for us again. But even worse, it will leave us without a future leader. *Moon Under Water* will not live forever—and none of the Circle is her equal—only you.”

“Have you spoken to anyone about this?”

“Only *Moon Under Water*—it is my duty.”

“What did she say?”

“She cried and said to me, ‘I do not know how much I can bear of this darkness. *Antelope Hunter* will soon drag a river of blood through our village killing many, and now—in two summers—my son will leave me taking *River Mother* with him and *Bright Hands* as well.’ I have never seen *Moon Under Water* look so sad and helpless.”

“What are we to do?”

“You must summon *Mafdet*. We will ask if my vision of your leaving was true. It is possible I am being deceived by *Mut*. We will find out. I want *Moon Under Water* to be there. We must say nothing to the others—nothing, do you hear me?”

I had never seen *Monkey Mother* so serious.

“Yes”, I replied, “I will say nothing. Bring *Moon Under Water* to my hut late tonight, when the village is sleeping. I will summon *Mafdet* then.”

Chapter 27: MY PATH DEEPENS

I was sitting on my woven seat dressed in my robes and headdress when *Moon Under Water* and *Monkey Mother* came into my hut later that night. The village was silent except for the high, sad songs of *Moon Traveler* drifting like dreams across the sleeping village.

I nodded to *Moon Under Water* and *Monkey Mother* and they sat in front of me. *Monkey Mother* looked up at me and said, “Speak, Prophet—who will *Runs Like Cheetah* take with him when he leaves the village in his fifteenth summer?”

The fierce voice rose up within me: “*The one called Runs Like Cheetah will take his two cheetahs when he leaves in his fifteenth summer. That is all.*”

Monkey Mother looked confused and blurted out: “Speak, Prophet—*why will Runs Like Cheetah* leave the village?”

Again, the fierce voice rose up within me: “*Runs Like Cheetah will leave the village because River Mother will ask him to leave with her.*”

Monkey Mother quickly sensed the direction of the prophecy and said: “Speak, Prophet—why will *River Mother* leave the village?”

The fierce voice again rose up within me: “*River Mother will leave the village because it is her fate.*”

Monkey Mother tried again and said: “Speak, Prophet—what is the fate of *River Mother*?”

The fierce voice again rose up within me: “*The fate of River Mother is to be a great prophet and leader.*”

Monkey Mother tried once more: “Speak, Prophet—why will *River Mother* leave the village if she is to be a great prophet and leader?”

The fierce voice again rose up though me: “*River Mother is destined to be a great prophet and leader in a faraway place.*”

Monkey Mother tried again and said: “Speak, Prophet—where is the faraway place *River Mother* will go?”

Once more, the fierce voice rose up: “*The faraway place River Mother will go is the end of the river, where it meets the great blue water.*”

Monkey Mother then said: “Speak, Prophet—who will *River Mother* take with her when she leaves?”

Once more, the fierce voice rose up: “*When River Mother leaves, she will take Runs Like Cheetah and his two cheetahs. She will also take the one called Bright Hands and the small child who is yet to be born to her.*”

With that, *Mafdet* left me and I collapsed. When I was myself again, *Monkey Mother* spoke to us: “*Mafdet* has balanced the Circle. I see now that my vision was correct—but not complete. We know now that it will be *River Mother*—not *Runs Like Cheetah*—who will first decide to leave the village, and it is *she* who will take *Runs Like Cheetah* and *Bright Hands* with her. This befits a great leader. And now we also know that *River Mother* will take the small child yet to be born to her. This is something we did not expect. We must say nothing of this to the tribe or

the Circle until we devise a plan to replace *River Mother* and the others. It would be too upsetting, especially in light of the bloody river *Antelope Hunter* will soon bring to the village.”

I looked at *Monkey Mother* and *Moon Under Water* and said, “But I have *not been* with *Runs Like Cheetah*. I have resisted his desires—and mine. How can I then have a child?” *Monkey Mother* replied, “When the Circle is balanced, it is never wrong. You *will* have a child—and you *will leave* in two summers—so *now* is the time for you to be with *Runs Like Cheetah*. If you wait too long to be with him, the child may be too young to survive your journey, for it will be a long and dangerous one.”

Right then, my right side stiffened and I said to them, “I have heard the prophecy and I have heard your wisdom *Monkey Mother*. I have accepted both and the path I must take. Speak to me with your wisdom, *Moon Under Water*, for you have said nothing.”

“I can only say to you what a leader and mother and wife who is holding a great sorrow in her heart can say to you—that the truth of the prophecy is good for all of us. We will take this truth and listen to it within ourselves.”

After *Monkey Mother* and *Moon Under Water* left my hut, I lay down exhausted. I was restless and filled with thoughts. The sad, beautiful singing of *Moon Traveler* was drifting across the village like high, thin smoke. I couldn’t stop thinking about what was to come—first, my being with *Runs Like Cheetah* and then the bloody rage of *Antelope Hunter*. I could feel them blindly coiling and uncoiling as I slipped off into a deep, dark sleep.

**Chapter 28: I PREPARE FOR THE RAGE OF ANTELOPE
HUNTER**

When I woke the next morning, my mind was clear as to what had to be done. I called out to *Baby Man* to bring *Runs Like Cheetah* to my hut. I had to talk to *Runs Like Cheetah* about my plan, but I also knew he would be filled with desire. I put on my headdress and robes in the hope they would numb his desire and waited.

I was sitting on my high, woven seat in my robes and headdress when he entered. He was taken aback by my appearance and asked, “Why are you dressed this way, *River Mother*?”

I replied quickly, “We must prepare for what is to come—a bloody attack on this village by your father and his crocodiles. Why do you look so surprised? Surely your mother told you of this.”

“She did, *River Mother*, but I still cannot believe it. I know my father has changed, and I also know he hates you, but he would never attack this village. I live here as does my mother. He loves us.”

“I am afraid that will not stop him. Both *Mafdet* and *Mut* have predicted that as soon as the river slows, he will drag a river of blood through this village. You have to accept that he is no longer the father you knew. You think your father is possessed, but it is far worse than that—he has traded his soul for that of an enraged lion. That cannot be cured by our healers as possession can. Your father may look the same, but he is no longer human. He has become a bloodthirsty animal. Do you understand what I am telling you?”

“Yes, I understand what you are saying, *River Mother*, just as I understood my mother when she told me the same thing, but I still cannot accept it.”

I replied, “I know it is hard for you because you love your father and believe he loves you, but you must accept what the Goddesses have told us, because it is the truth. He has become an animal who will kill all of us unless we stop him.

Now listen to me, and say nothing of what I am about to say to anyone except your mother and *Monkey Mother*. If you need help doing what I tell you to do, you are to use only *Little Man* and *Bright Hands*. They can be trusted to keep a secret. But you will say nothing to them until after *Moon Under Water* has spoken to the village about the coming of *Antelope Hunter*. As of now, only you and I and the members of the Circle know of his coming attack—and for a while, only the two of us will know what I am about to tell you.”

I was surprised by my directness. *Moon Under Water* and *Monkey Mother* had spoken of devising a plan to stop *Antelope Hunter*, but it was clear to me I wasn't going to wait for their help in doing so. It must also have been clear to *Runs Like Cheetah* because he said, “What must be done, *River Mother?*”

“Listen to me carefully, *Runs Like Cheetah*. As soon as the river stops rising and *Moon Under Water* has spoken to the tribe about the coming of *Antelope Hunter*, you must start a watch—day and night—at the river bank with *Little Man* and *Bright Hands*. You must set two fires every night, one on each end of the river bank. The prophecies have told us that after the river has fallen, *Antelope Hunter* will attack from the river with his crocodiles. He is sure to attack in silence very late at night, when the village is asleep. The fires will allow you to see the eyes of the crocodiles long before they reach the river bank. Do you understand?”

“Yes, *River Mother*. What else must be done?”

“Despite their courage, your cheetahs will be no match for the crocodiles. They will be able to distract the crocodiles when they begin crawling up the river bank, but only for a while. There will be too many crocodiles and they will be very hungry—*Antelope Hunter* will see to that—and their hunger will make them kill anything in their way. You must stop *Antelope Hunter* and the crocodiles from going any further than the river bank until the tribe can run into the jungle for safety. To do this you must make many large

bundles of dry wood and reeds—as big and as wide as a man—and hide them under vines near the river bank. There must be enough bundles to completely block the way to the village from the river. Then, just before *Antelope Hunter* sets foot on the ground with his crocodiles, you must spread the bundles across the village entrance as fast as you can and set fire to them. Their burning will frighten the crocodiles. They will be afraid and back off, but *Antelope Hunter* will not be afraid. He will find a way through the fire. Who among the hunters can you trust to help you attack *Antelope Hunter* and his cheetah?”

“I do not trust the older hunters,” he replied. “They will remain loyal to my father and not attack him. I do not believe they will help him—but most likely they will choose to do nothing. I would only trust the youngest of them—the ones I grew up with. There are three of them. They are young like me, but strong and fearless.”

“Good, I replied, “Do not tell them anything until *Moon Under Water* has spoken to the tribe about the coming of *Antelope Hunter* and his crocodiles. *Moon Under Water* will wait as long as she can after the river has stopped rising before doing that. We do not want to alarm the tribe until it is time. And we must also be aware that one of the older hunters loyal to *Antelope Hunter* may travel to the antelope plain and warn him of our plan. If that happens, we will lose our advantage.”

“You are right *River Mother*. Any one of them might go to my father. They are loyal to him. Right now, only you and I and the Circle of Wisdom know he will attack when the river begins to fall. The river will begin rising in two or three moons. Shortly after, it will begin to fall and soon after that the river will be slow enough for *Antelope Hunter* to row upriver in a dugout, which is how he must come if he is to bring his crocodiles. There is no other way. After *Moon Under Water* has spoken to the tribe, you must gather your young hunters and tell them what must be done. You must show them how to build the fire bundles and how to hide

them with vines by the river so they can be moved very quickly across the entrance and set afire to block the crocodiles. The crocodiles will be afraid of the fire, but *Antelope Hunter* will not be afraid.

“He is,” I continued, “a strong, wily hunter and will find his way through the fire to kill me with his spear. I know I am not strong enough—or skilled enough—to stop him, and he will not be alone when he comes to kill me. He will have his cheetah at his side. He is so filled with rage that I am sure he has trained his cheetah to kill me on command. Now listen very carefully to me *Runs Like Cheetah*—when he is finished killing me, he will turn on you and try to kill you and your cheetahs for leaving him. Do you understand?”

“I understand, *River Mother*, but this is my father you speak of. He is a great hunter who taught me everything I know. It is with great sadness that I accept his rage against you. He has indeed become possessed, but my father loves me—he would never try to kill me, nor my cheetahs.”

“You are too loving and good natured to see what has happened to your father. His is not the kind of possession that can be overcome by our healers. Your father is no longer human. He has traded his soul for the soul of an enraged lion. He now has the ferocity, cunning, and strength of a lion—as well as the lion’s desire to kill anything in his path. When *Monkey Mother* and *Moon Under Water* went to the antelope plain to bring you back to the village, *Monkey Mother* saw that his rage was no longer that of a possessed human—she saw he had traded his soul for that of a lion.”

“But *River Mother*, how could *Antelope Hunter* have traded his soul? It sounds impossible. Our souls are inseparable from our bodies—only death can separate them.”

“Yes, that is true, but listen to what *Monkey Mother* told me. She said that she had never actually seen the trading of a human soul for that of an animal, but that she had heard many stories and believed them. She said that *Antelope*

Hunter could never have done this by himself—he must have found a male shaman with a very dark soul to help him.”

Runs Like Cheetah replied, “But you still haven’t explained how the shaman can trade a hunter’s soul for that of a lion without killing the hunter. Only death can separate the soul from the body. ”

“Yes, that is true. But there is more to it. Listen very carefully to what *Monkey Mother* told me the shaman must do to trade souls. First of all, the souls are not really traded—that is simply a way of talking about what the shaman does, because the hunter’s soul never leaves his body. It remains there as a part of the spirit body of the hunter, but it is greatly diminished—you might call it starving—because the hunter’s body is kept in a deep sleep close to death. The task of the shaman then is to entice the lion’s spirit body to enter the body of the hunter and trap it there, because unlike the human soul—whose boundaries extend *beyond* the boundaries of its spirit body, the soul of an animal *is* its spirit body. They are one and the same. When you trap the spirit body of an animal, you trap its soul. Are you following me?”

“I think so. But how is the lion’s spirit body trapped?”

“The shaman and the hunter work together. First, the shaman has the hunter trap and cage a ferocious male lion. Then the shaman puts the hunter into a death-like sleep next to the lion cage while he beats and starves and taunts the caged lion for days on end. Sooner or later, the lion becomes so enraged his spirit body leaves his body in an attempt to kill the shaman.”

“What does the shaman do then? How can he avoid the enraged spirit body of the lion?”

“He doesn’t avoid it, he encourages it, because this is the moment he has been waiting for. Do not forget, he has kept the hunter next to the lion’s cage for days but in a sleep so near death only the deepest part of his human soul remains.”

“What part is that?”

“The part that allows us to tell stories. But it is barely alive.”

“Is the spirit body of the lion aware of the hunter’s state?”

“You would think so, but its rage blinds it to everything except the hated shaman. The shaman is depending on that. At the exact moment the lion’s spirit body lunges at the shaman, the shaman commands his own spirit body to enter the body of the hunter and the lion’s lunging spirit body blindly follows it.”

“But why is the lion’s spirit body so easily fooled?”

“It is fooled because the lion’s spirit body is so filled with anger it continues to lunge at the shaman’s spirit body only to be trapped inside the hunter.”

“But how is it trapped? Why can the lion’s spirit body not leave the hunter’s body the same way it entered it?”

“Because at the exact moment the lion’s spirit body enters the body of the hunter, the spirit body of the shaman leaves it, *waking the hunter* as it escapes. The waking of the hunter closes the trap. What is left of the hunter’s human soul hungrily grabs the lion’s soul and acquires its ferocity and cunning as well as its rage to kill anything in its path. *Monkey Mother* said the strength and cunning of such a hunter is beyond measure and is greatly feared.”

“But what happens to the lion?”

“When the lion loses its soul, it loses its guiding force. It may look like a lion, but it is no longer the same as it once was. It is unable to hunt or defend itself. It becomes prey. But it is a different story for the hunter. He may look like a human, but he will always behave like a lion. Such hunters can still tell stories, but barely. They become like very smart animals that hunt day and night without stopping. They can track and kill anything, even the elephant. After they have eaten some of the prey, they will always return to the village and guide the tribe to the kill. *Monkey Mother* told me that such hunters were greatly admired by the other hunters, but were never completely trusted and always made to live outside the village for fear they might attack someone in a sudden rage. *Monkey Mother* said that in all the stories she had heard, the hunter had always traded his soul to become a very great hunter of animals, as great as a lion, but never to become a hunter of humans. She told me your father was different

from all those other hunters: he chose to become a monster—to become a hunter not only of animals, but of humans.”

“Do you think the stories *Monkey Mother* told you are true?”

“Yes, I do. The stories have the sound of truth. We are both sure that *Antelope Hunter* no longer sees you as his son. He sees you and your cheetahs as he sees me: as prey to be killed—and eaten. He must be stopped before he does this. How you do this will be up to you—but I assure you it will not be easy. It may help you to know that the prophecy also said that you will stop *Antelope Hunter* but not kill him, and that he will be cursed by the tribe and made to live alone in the jungle without companions. So it seems you will not have to kill your father to protect me and the village, but how you do that will be up to you.”

Runs Like Cheetah looked at me for a long time. I could see he was torn between his love of his father and the hard truth of what I had told him. Then his eyes suddenly cleared and he said, “I know what I must do, *River Mother*. I am ready for the return of *Antelope Hunter*. Is there anything else you wish to tell me?”

“Yes, there is, *Runs Like Cheetah*. But I must do something first.”

I called out, “*Baby Man*, are you still outside my door?”

“Yes, *River Mother*.”

“There is no need to stay any longer. You can leave now and play with your friends for the rest of the day.”

“What if my friends do not want to play?”

“Then you can play with yourself but not outside my door.”

“Are you sure you want me to leave, *River Mother*?”

“Yes, I am sure.”

“Are you *really* sure?”

I could feel the fat little rascal grinning from ear to ear. He knew something was up. I turned my voice into a dark

growl and said, “Yes, *Baby Man*, I am sure, and if you do not leave right now I am going to turn you into a frog.”

As soon as I heard his little feet running like his life depended on it, I laughed and turned to *Runs Like Cheetah*. He seemed confused as to what was going on, but he never looked more beautiful. I took off my headdress and robe and drew my naked body close to his and whispered, “I want to be with you as a woman now. Right now.”

Runs Like Cheetah removed his loincloth. His body glowed like a God as he reached out to touch my face and breasts with the hunger of his desire. I could feel us coming together like water as he pressed against me. His sex had grown so large I couldn’t take my eyes off it. It seemed magical—as if it somehow belonged to both of us. “We will always be together,” I whispered to him.

Then I turned my back to him and bent at the waist as I placed my hands on the woven seat. It was the perfect height. ‘*Bright Hands again*,’ ran through my mind very quickly, and then I felt his breath on my neck and back as he entered me. His hot sex suddenly broke the veil of my sex and then he was slowly entering me again and again until I no longer knew who I was, only that I loved him like no other.

Chapter 29: MORE PREPARATIONS

I sent *Baby Man* to fetch *Monkey Mother* and *Moon Under Water* so I could inform them of my plan to stop *Antelope Hunter*. I wanted to make sure they agreed to it. It had been bold of me to proceed on my own—perhaps too bold. When they arrived, *Moon Under Water* entered first. I glimpsed *Monkey Mother* lagging, behind busily whacking little *Baby Man* on the head before she too bent down to enter.

“That boy is a little imp if there ever was one,” *Monkey Mother* snapped, “the way he keeps strutting around like a little God telling everyone how important he is being your Messenger.” She began strutting around like a chicken, imitating his walk. The imitation was so good *Moon Under Water* couldn’t stop laughing. Soon the three of us were in tears. I said, “It is the way of men to strut around like that. It must be why the little rogue amuses us so much.”

“He is funny,” *Moon Under Water* added, “but he is also figuring out his life, which is a good sign, except he’s doing it right in front of us—which is not our way. He’s up to something, but I cannot guess what, and I suspect he cannot either. I’ve never seen anyone quite like him.”

When *Moon Under Water* said that, I saw how keen her ability was to see through the surface of things. There was indeed something about little *Baby Man* that bore watching. But right now, we had other eggs to hatch. The first was my plan for defending against *Antelope Hunter*, the second being how the tribe was to survive my leaving.

I reviewed the plan I had laid out for *Runs Like Cheetah*—adding that I had left him the task of figuring out the exact tactics he would use. *Moon Under Water* asked, “When will he come back with his plan?”

“I presume when he is ready,” I replied.

“It would be better if you set a time,” *Moon Under Water* said, “do not you agree *Monkey Mother*?”

“Yes, it is his first battle, and this one will be like no other because of what *Antelope Hunter* has become. He will need all the help we can offer. You should speak to him tomorrow and tell him he must meet with us in three days. The river will soon begin rising. When it stops, *Antelope Hunter* will be upon us in all his fury.”

I looked at both of them and said, “The heart of the tribe will be torn apart by the attack of *Antelope Hunter*. Many of our brothers and sisters will be savagely murdered before he is stopped. We must find a way afterward to help our brothers and sisters heal, and we must call on others, like *Bright Hands* and *Runs Like Cheetah* and *Little Man* to help us. But we have our limits. With the exception of *Bright Hands* and *Little Man*, we are not healing spirits. What we need is someone whose spirit will help our brothers and sisters heal simply by being among them. I know this may sound strange, but I believe little *Baby Man* is such a spirit. I know he is a child of only eight summers—and can behave like an idiot—but I have been watching him very closely. No matter what difficulties he faces, he always finds a way of overcoming them. And he does it in such a way that he always takes you with him. At least that is the effect he has on me. It has become clear to me that he is a rare soul. But that is my opinion. What do you think, *Monkey Mother*?”

Monkey Mother looked at me as if I had lost my mind, “That little rascal can cause more confusion than a pack of monkeys—how could he possibly help heal the tribe?” *Moon Under Water*, however, raised her eyes very slowly, as if she were curious where I was going.

I continued, “He is indeed like a pack of monkeys, but little *Baby Man* is also a survivor, a very special one who is almost impossible to defeat—which is exactly what this tribe will need. Do you not agree, *Moon Under Water*?”

Moon Under Water smiled like a crocodile. It was unnerving. I had never seen that side of her. I then said to *Monkey Mother*, “We have been living in good times—but that is about to change. The rage of *Antelope Hunter* will rip the heart of our village to pieces. Our brothers and sisters will be left trying to find a way through the despair and hopelessness that surely awaits us. *Baby Man* will not let that happen. Perhaps it is a kind of special stupidity he has, but he will always find some way to get around anything that threatens to defeat him. He will refuse to be bested, refuse to go down, he will scramble out of every hole fate digs for him—and he will take the tribe with him by doing so. I believe it. We see him today strutting around pretending to be a leader, except he doesn’t know what kind of leader he is supposed to be. Fate has come to rescue him in this—he is exactly who he must be to keep us from despair. Do you not agree, *Moon Under Water*?”

“Yes, I do. I am afraid *River Mother* is right *Monkey Mother*—she saw right through the little fool. He is exactly what we will need. But little *Baby Man* may also need to see himself in a new role if he is to truly succeed. Today he is the Messenger of *River Mother*, and he will remain as such, but he needs to play an additional role, one that will expand his attention. What do you think it should be?”

I looked at *Monkey Mother*. She was staring down at the ground. It was clear she wanted no part of what I was proposing. Finally, *Moon Under Water* broke the silence and said to me, “He shall also be called *River Mother’s* Listener. And you, *River Mother* will tell him of this. You will tell him he is to *listen* to what everyone is saying and tell you if he hears anything he thinks you should know.”

“Oh *Moon Under Water*, how could you do this to me? He will spend all day telling me everything in the world. He will drive me crazy.” *Moon Under Water* looked at me very quietly and said, “You will find a way around that, after all, you are *River Mother*, are you not?”

Monkey Mother suddenly looked up, cackling, “Oh she is, she surely is!” I was in for it. I was going to get it for drawing up a battle plan without them. Then, ever so slowly, a tiny, crooked smile crept across *Moon Under Water’s* lips again: “Listen to me, *River Mother*, it is not important that you listen to what he is saying, not really—what’s important is that *he* listen to what the tribe is saying, because he will always have something to add, some crazy way of encouraging them, of lifting their spirits. Am I right or am I wrong in this?”

“Of course you are right, *Moon Under Water*. He just cannot help being himself, can he? Oh why did I not see this as clearly as you?”

“Oh you would have seen it, but it would have taken you a bit longer. You are still young *River Mother*. You will get wiser with time, believe me in this.”

That was all it took for *Monkey Mother* to burst out cackling again, “Oh she surely will get wiser! After all, she is *River Mother* is she not?” That tiny, crooked smile crept across *Moon Under Water’s* lips again as she said, “Right now, *River Mother*, I suggest you call him in, tell him of his new role, and set him to work. This way, he will be going at full speed when things turn dark. After all, what harm can he do?”

I had been trapped. I wanted to suggest that little *Baby Man* also become the Listener of *Moon Under Water* and *Monkey Mother*, but *Moon Under Water* must have sensed what I was thinking and suddenly said with that big crocodile smile of hers, “Oh, it would be so nice if he were to become our Listener as well, but it would never work with us, *River Mother*. He is loyal only to you. Fate has bound the two of you together. Is that not right *Monkey Mother?*”

“Yes, it is true,” she cackled. “I have seen it. Call the little rascal in. May *Mafdet* help you *River Mother*, because you’re going to need it. Oh you surely are. “

Monkey Mother couldn't stop cackling and then *Moon Under Water* started up. Soon the two of them were holding their sides. Trapped was hardly the word for it. When they settled down, I shouted through the door, "*Baby Man* are you out there?"

"Where else, would I be but out here, *River Mother*?" *Baby Man* replied, "I am your Messenger, remember?"

"Have you been listening to us?"

"How could I be listening to you *River Mother*? You made me sit so far away I am as good as deaf, remember?"

I was indeed trapped. "Stop asking me if I remember that you are my Messenger and come in here."

"I am already coming, *River Mother*."

When he came inside and faced us, he immediately moved toward *Moon Under Water* who was sitting on my right while keeping a keen eye on *Monkey Mother* to my left. She wasn't above whacking him on the head just for good measure and he knew it.

"*Baby Man*, I have something to tell you."

"Of course, *River Mother*, why else would you call me in?"

"What if I called you in so *Monkey Mother* could whack you on the head?"

"As you wish *River Mother*, but to tell you the truth, she is sitting too far away to whack me."

"That will not stop me from whacking you the next time I see you," *Monkey Mother* snapped.

"As you wish *Monkey Mother*, but not if I see you first."

I thought *Monkey Mother* was going to leap across my lap and give him the beating of his life but I managed to hold her back. "Listen to me, you rascal," I snapped at him, "Are you so stupid as to think you could ever hide from *Monkey Mother*? If she wanted to whack you, she would come to you in your dreams and whack you so hard you'd swallow those big teeth of yours. Now sit down in front of us and listen to what I have to say."

"I am already sitting as you speak, *River Mother*. What is it you wish to tell me?"

"Are you happy being the Messenger of *River Mother*?"

"How could I not be happy, *River Mother*? It is an honor to be your Messenger even if I have to sit in the hot sun all day and not be able to relieve myself except in emergencies."

"I am going to give you a new role, that of *River Mother's* Listener."

"But I am already listening to you."

"I am not talking about listening to me, you fat little imp."

"Then who should I be listening to, *River Mother*?"

"Everyone."

"Everyone?"

"Yes. *Everyone*."

"You mean like the little girl who lives next to me?"

"Yes, like the little girl who lives next to you."

"And the old hunter with the crooked teeth?"

"Are we to go on like this until you name everyone in the tribe?"

"I hope not, *River Mother*. It would take a long time. But I have a question, *River Mother*. What is it I am supposed to be listening to?"

"Everything everyone says."

"Everything?"

"Yes. Everything."

"Like what they had to eat yesterday?"

"Yes. Like what they had to eat yesterday."

"And how many fish they caught in the river?"

"Yes. The fish they caught. Everything you hear."

"But what am I supposed to do with all this listening as you call it?"

"You are to come to me at the end of each day and tell me the most important things you have heard."

"Is that it?"

"Yes, that is it."

"But *River Mother*, how will I know what is important?"

"What *interests* you is what is important."

“But what interests me may not interest you. The yellow stuff that comes out of my nose interests me greatly, but it may not interest you, *River Mother*. Is that not right?”

“Listen to me, you little demon, if you ever come to me at the end of the day and start telling me about the stuff that comes out of your nose, I will whack you harder than *Monkey Mother* ever has. Do you understand?”

“Perfectly, *River Mother*.”

“What I want you to do is this: leave your post as Messenger from time to time and wander through the village. Listen to what people are saying and then tell them what *you* think, just as you do with me. Then at the end of the day I want you to come here and tell me what you thought important—is that clear?”

“Perfectly clear, *River Mother*.”

“Good. You can start right now. Go.”

“*River Mother*?”

“Yes, *Baby Man*, what is it now?”

“One more question. If I am out in the village listening for you, how can I hear you calling me to be your Messenger?”

“That’s for you to figure out. If you do not, I will get a new Messenger.”

His eyes widened like moons: “Do not worry *River Mother*, I will figure it out right away—even as I am leaving you.”

“Good. Now get out of here, you rascal!”

I could hear his little fat feet speeding across the village. I did not know whether to laugh or scream. *Monkey Mother* and *Moon Under Water* looked at me and doubled over with laughter. I tried holding back but soon I was doubled over too. Oh was I in for it.

Chapter 30: WHO WILL REPLACE US?

The next day, *Monkey Mother* and *Moon Under Water* and I got together to talk about what would happen in two summers when I left the tribe with *Runs Like Cheetah* and *Bright Hands*.

I said to them, “There are some things we need to decide now, or as soon as we can. First, we must decide who will replace *Runs Like Cheetah* and *Bright Hands* when they leave with me. We are a small tribe. Their absence will hurt the tribe.”

Moon Under Water replied, “*Runs Like Cheetah* and *Bright Hands* are very special. Their leaving will hurt the tribe unless others rise to take their place. After *Antelope Hunter* is defeated, I will ask *Bright Hands* and *Runs Like Cheetah* to train those who show promise in replacing them. But we will have a very hard time going on without you, *River Mother*. Indeed, the tribe as we know it may *not* survive, but become as scattered as animals. Not only did your presence finally balance the Circle, but it is also now clear to us that *only* you could succeed me as leader. I will not live forever, nor will *Monkey Mother*. If we were to die soon after your leaving, we would be without a leader, and without a shaman. We would be lost.”

I replied, “I am aware of this, *Moon Under Water*. I have been talking to a young girl, *Bitter Moon*, who shows promise as a shaman. In two summers, she will be as old as I was when I entered the Spirit Caves. Have you noticed her?” “Yes, *Monkey Mother* and I have both seen evidence of her abilities—but she could never be a leader. She can barely make it through the day without being seized by voices or visions. She is far too fragile to be a leader—and she may be too fragile to serve as a shaman as well. Only time will tell.” “We do not have that kind of time,” I replied. “Let me take her aside and see what I can determine. She already has

shown strength as a healer, something I have always lacked. Perhaps we can use her power as a healer to strengthen her other abilities. Let me try before we give up on her.”

“As you wish, *River Mother*—perhaps *Monkey Mother* could help you in this.”

“I would be honored. *Monkey Mother*, what do you say?”

“Yes, yes, of course, but what are we to do for a leader? There is no one capable of taking the place of *Moon Under Water* when she dies.”

“No, there is not,” I replied, “but I am going to suggest that we look for a *different* kind of leader, one who perhaps doesn’t have the clarity and insight of *Moon Under Water*, but one who has the ability to rebuild the heart of the tribe, which will surely be broken by the murderous return of *Antelope Hunter* and then broken again when I leave with *Bright Hands* and *Runs Like Cheetah*.”

Monkey Mother looked at me with one eyebrow cocked and said, “Perhaps you have someone in mind, *River Mother*?”

“Yes, I do—it is *Moon Traveler*.”

Monkey Mother shot back, “But *Moon Traveler* is a man, and even older than I am. And he sleeps all day and sings all night. How could he ever lead us?”

“He may be a man, but he is as much a woman in his soul as I am. Just listening to him singing will tell you that. He could not be the singer he is if this were not so. Despite his age, his powers are still great. He may be old—but so are you, *Monkey Mother*—and yet your abilities have not weakened. Nor has he weakened as a singer of songs. Like you, he is perhaps even better than he was as a youth. It is clear he does not have a long time left to live. But I see him as being a much needed bridge—a healing one—until a younger leader rises. If he lives long enough to do that, we will be fine.”

They both looked at me as if I had just described a world that had not existed until I spoke of it.

“*Moon Traveler* will be a different kind of leader,” I said, “one who will lead by singing, not deciding. The deciding will be done by the Circle. He will do what he has always done—sing of the hearts of the tribe and the hearts of those who were here before us. He will sing of who we are and who we will become. That is what the tribe will need to become whole again. The tribe will have to learn to sleep during the day and stay awake at night, just as he does, but maybe it will be better that way, with the heart of tribe being as torn and injured as it surely will be.”

“Your suggestion is a good one,” *Moon Under Water* replied, “but there is a problem—*Moon Traveler’s* gaze is always turned inward when he sings. This is no secret—he has told us so himself. It is what makes his singing so haunting. But for his singing to lead the tribe in the way you describe, his gaze must also fall upon the life of the tribe. His gaze must be outward as well as inward.”

“I agree,” I replied, “but I do not see this as a problem we cannot overcome. *Moon Traveler* is a wise man and a good man. He will want the tribe to survive. I am sure once we speak to him he will understand how his gaze must change.”

“If you were as old as I am, *River Mother*, or as *Monkey Mother*, you would know there is a difference between understanding something and being able to do it, especially when someone as old as *Moon Traveler* is concerned. Did it ever occur to you that *Moon Traveler* may not be able to change?”

Her eyes narrowed as she said this. She had expected more of me—I had never even considered the possibility that *Moon Traveler* might *not* be able to change. I was humbled. “You are right, *Moon Under Water*,” I replied. “I am sorry. It never occurred to me *Moon Traveler* might be too old to change.”

We looked at each other for the longest time, saying nothing. Then her eyes began to slowly widen, as if she were

encouraging me to continue, and then, suddenly, she became very alert, as if she had just felt a quick nibble and was ever so slowly pulling a fishing line in. Right then our eyes locked. I realized the fish was me and I suddenly blurted out, “*Little Man* will help him! *Little Man* will be his outward eyes!”

Once more, that crocodile smile spread across *Moon Under Water’s* face. It was just as unnerving as the first time I had seen it, but this time I knew I had also seen the face of a true leader. I realized right then that leading others did not mean giving orders and commands, but getting the best out of those around you. *Moon Under Water* knew I had the perfect answer somewhere inside me and she had very patiently lured it out.

I was humbled once again. How could I ever have hoped to replace her as a leader? I must have been a fool. But *Moon Under Water* must have seen what I was thinking because she quickly pulled me up by saying, “Yes, *River Mother*, you have seen the truth. *Little Man* will surely be his outward eyes because he is not only very wise, but also very *playful*, which we are not. That is what you saw, is that not so? That it would take someone as playful as *Little Man* to change *Moon Traveler’s* gaze.”

“Yes, that is what I saw. But I wouldn’t have seen it without your help, *Moon Under Water*. Only *Little Man* is wise enough—and playful enough—to change *Moon Traveler’s* gaze. How could *Moon Traveler* not love and trust him? *Little Man* would be like a light feather blowing in the wind with all his joking and riddles about the tribe. How could *Moon Traveler* not want to ride on those feathers with *Little Man*? I believe *Moon Traveler’s* gaze will change without his even being aware of it.”

Moon Under Water nodded and whispered to me, “Or if he does become aware of what is happening, he will not care.

He will like it. It will feel like he's falling in love, which is what is going to happen, is that not so, *River Mother?*”

Once again, the subtle wisdom of *Moon Under Water* overwhelmed me. She missed nothing. Nothing. Before I could say anything, she added, “I do not think *Little Man* will have any objections. He will understand immediately what has to be done and how to best do it. After all, the two of them are very much alike in the way they are always making things up. I often see them joking and talking at night. I think all we have to tell *Moon Traveler* is that *Little Man* will be bringing him news of what is happening so that he will be less isolated from the everyday life of the tribe. Their relationship will simply go on as before, but the game will be more serious.”

Chapter 31: RUNS LIKE CHEETAH SPEAKS

It was late at night. I was telling *Monkey Mother* and *Moon Under Water* about my being with him a few nights before. The two of them couldn't resist cackling as they congratulated me on my speed in handling such matters, but quickly quieted down as soon as *Runs Like Cheetah* poked his head in my hut.

We had decided to keep our plans regarding *Antelope Hunter* secret until the time was right to tell the village. Even the three young hunters and *Bright Hands* and *Little Man* did not know of them yet. I was anxious for *Runs Like Cheetah*. I wasn't sure how he would handle himself in front of the three of us. We all knew he was a great hunter, but we also knew that planning to kill an animal was not the same as planning to kill a human—especially one intent on killing you first.

Yet, *Runs Like Cheetah* seemed completely sure of himself. He began by repeating my plan, "I have thought much about this, and I believe as River Mother does, that as soon as the river stops rising, we must set fires every night at each end of the river bank and keep watch. The fires will allow us to see the eyes of the crocodiles well before they crawl up on the riverbank. As soon as we see the glow of their eyes, *Little Man* will run through the village telling everyone to run back to the jungle and climb the tallest trees. I am sure *Antelope Hunter* will attack from the riverbank leading to the village and it will be on a dark, moonless night because it will be harder for us to see what he is doing. He will come leading many crocodiles. He will do this by trailing handfuls of meat behind his dugout. He will also make sure he lands well ahead of the crocodiles so they do not accidentally turn on him in the darkness of the river bank. He knows this could happen if the crocodiles land first and are in a feeding frenzy, which they surely will be. So for a few moments he will be alone on the river bank, calling the crocodiles in."

I interrupted here, “This seems the perfect time to stop *Antelope Hunter* with arrows while he is standing on the riverbank lit by the fires.”

Runs Like Cheetah replied, “We will all have bows and arrows as well as spears and will be standing at each end of the riverbank near the fires. If *Antelope Hunter* stands still long enough, we will shoot poison tip arrows at him and his cheetah. That may end it right there. The poison will not kill them, but they will be unable to stand. They will collapse. But if he moves too quickly, or blocks the arrows with his shield, we will miss and he will drive the crocodiles ahead of him by hurling meat into the village. The meat he uses is rotten and foul smelling. The crocodiles will smell it and chase the scent. Because of that, it will not matter if the night is moonless and dark—they will follow their noses into the village. We will be waiting for them.”

Moon Under Water asked, “But how can you stop the crocodiles? Arrows and spears will be useless.”

Runs Like Cheetah replied, “We have other ways. Once *Little Man* alerts the tribe, I and the three young hunters will take the large bundles of reeds we have made and spread them across the entrance to the village and set fire to them. The wall of fire will confuse the crocodiles. They will not go near it, even if they can smell the meat on the other side.

“But,” he continued, “the fire bundles will eventually go out and the crocodiles will race in to attack the village. How much time the tribe will have to escape is uncertain, because even while the fire bundles are burning, *Antelope Hunter* is sure to punch a large hole in them with his spear and lead some of the crocodiles through. But I believe most of the crocodiles will remain behind until the fire dies completely down. This leaves us having to stop only *Antelope Hunter*, his cheetah, and the small number of crocodiles who get through. We will keep trying to stop him with arrows, but it will be hard to hit him because he will be moving very fast and it will be very dark. We will

have to use other means. Each of the young hunters will have two nets, as will I. If we can distract him for a few moments, we may be able to throw nets over him before he recovers. Soon I will go on a hunt and gather much meat and let it rot. *Bright Hands* is building a high platform which will be placed off to the side behind the fire bundles from which she will throw the rotten meat onto the river bank. This should attract the crocodiles that have not broken through and keep them away from the village. They have been trained with rotten meat. We will use it to our advantage.”

It was clear to me that *Runs Like Cheetah* had carefully thought through what tactics he would use. He had risen to the task. He asked us to come closer and he drew a picture of the village in the sand. At one end, he drew the river and then indicated the jungle surrounding the village on the other three sides. He then drew where the fire bundles would be placed and where *Bright Hands* would build her high platform.

Monkey Mother suddenly broke in and said, “It would be better if we kill the crocodiles and not just keep them at the riverbank. I will give you a special poison. You and *Bright Hands* must be very careful with it. If you soak the rotten meat in it, it will kill the crocodiles almost as soon as they eat it.”

It was clear that *Runs Like Cheetah* liked the idea, but before he could say anything, *Monkey Mother* asked him very sharply “Why are you so sure he will attack by landing at the riverbank. He is a clever hunter—he knows you will be expecting him to land there. Right now only the Circle is aware of the prophecy predicting his attack when the river stops rising, so unless a member of the Circle—or one of the four of us—has told him of our plans, he will come believing his attack will be a surprise. Even after he sees the fire bundles and knows he has not surprised us, I believe his rage

will make him continue rather than turn back. I also believe he will have no choice but to land at the riverbank as he had planned, because if he tries to change and land in the surrounding jungle, the crocodiles will become scattered and lost.”

“As I said earlier,” *Runs Like Cheetah* continued, “once he lands, I believe he will knock down the fire bundles directly in front of him and then use the rotten meat to make some of his crocodiles follow him through the opening. I believe his rage will make him attack this way. If he does, we will trap him along with the crocodiles in a deep ditch we will dig right behind the fire bundles. We will place poisoned meat in it to kill the crocodiles that fall in. But he may fool us. He is a cunning hunter. He may first drive some of the crocodiles through the opening and then dash off to the side into the jungle. If he does this, the crocodiles will be trapped in the ditch, but the village will be in great danger because we will have no idea where *Antelope Hunter* will reenter the village.”

I interrupted him, “I know exactly where he will reenter. It will be where my hut is. It is me he wants to kill. Getting to me as quickly as possible will be first in his mind.”

“Yes, that is most likely,” *Runs Like Cheetah* replied, “we will stop him if he does this by digging some deep ditches in the jungle around your hut. But if he does not fall into one of these as he approaches your hut, we will be forced to face him down with our spears. There is no saying who will win such a fight. When *Little Man* calls out to the tribe that *Antelope Hunter* is attacking, all three of you must flee at once and climb the tallest of the *Baobab* trees. I will have a knotted rope hanging from it so you can climb up the trunk. *Monkey Mother* will need help, so make her be the first to climb. You can push her up that way. Once you are all in the branches, you must pull up the rope.”

I interrupted him again, “*Monkey Mother* and *Moon Under Water* and *Carries the World* may choose to run to the *Baobab* tree, but I will not. I have asked *Bright Hands* to build a platform on top of my hut and attach a knotted rope to it so I can quickly climb up onto it. I will be able to see what is happening much better than you—as will *Bright Hands* from her platform near the river. If we see something that will help you and your young hunters, we will shout to you.”

Runs Like Cheetah replied, “That makes sense for *Bright Hands*, but you will stand out like the moon on top of your hut. You will give *Antelope Hunter* an easy target.”

I shot back, “I will not be that easy a target. I am not an old slow woman—I am almost as quick as you. Besides, I will have a shield to protect myself. He will be so consumed with killing me he may not even see you and the young hunters stalking him with your nets. That will be the time to stop him. There is no talking me out of this, *Runs Like Cheetah*.”

“As you wish, *River Mother*, but it is very dangerous. What will the tribe do if he kills you?”

“He will not kill me. I have seen it. If the netting fails, only then will I climb the *Baobab* tree and hide with the rest of the women.”

Runs Like Cheetah nodded his assent and turned to *Monkey Mother* and *Moon Under Water* and said to them, “If we stop *Antelope Hunter* with nets as he attacks *River Mother*, the battle will be over except for his cheetah. The crocodiles he led through the fire bundles will have fallen into the pit and been killed by the poisoned meat. But the cheetah will still be free and will kill anyone he meets. I am very worried about *Antelope Hunter’s* cheetah—he will be too fast to kill with spears or arrows. We will have no way of stopping him unless I train my cheetahs to kill him. It saddens me to do so, but I have already set about training them to do this as a last resort. If we do not stop *Antelope Hunter* with nets, and fail to kill his cheetah, then they will surely track all of you

down in the *Baobab* tree. But the trunks are so huge around that *Antelope Hunter* will not be able to climb it—only his cheetah will be able to do it. I will place a spear in the branches to use against the cheetah. Stick it in his eye if he ever gets close to you. That will end it. This will be a very dangerous time. Once *Antelope Hunter* sees the two of you high in the tree, he will know he has you trapped and will put you in the back of his mind. He and his cheetah will then try to kill me, and if they succeed, they will then go after the three young hunters, who will be no match for the two of them.”

Monkey Mother broke in and asked *Runs Like Cheetah*, “Are you truly ready to kill your father? It may come down to that.”

“I am ready, but I am not sure that the four of us will be able to kill *Antelope Hunter*. He is no longer human. He may kill us, and if he does, there will be no stopping him. Even if his cheetah is dead, I believe he will still find some way to get to the two of you in the *Baobab* tree. He will kill *River Mother* and eat her and then he will kill and eat both of you and then anyone in his path. He will destroy the tribe. Do you doubt this?”

Moon Under Water responded, “No, my son, we do not doubt this. But what hope can you give us that *Antelope Hunter* will be stopped?”

Runs Like Cheetah said to us, “It is foolish to believe our spears and arrows will stop him easily because it will be very hard to see him in the dark. Besides, he is very fast and will shield himself. The only way is close up, and that will be very dangerous. It is possible that he will take us down one by one. We are hunters not killers. The advantage will be his. But we *can* stop him with nets. *Bright Hands* and *Little Man* have made many nets for us that can be thrown over him and his cheetah. It will still be a bloody fight—but with

the four of us baiting him I believe he will become so enraged he will make the mistake of throwing his spear.

“His spear,” *Runs Like Cheetah* continued, “may wound or kill one of us, but once he has thrown it, he will be without a weapon for a moment and easily netted. All we have to deal with then is his cheetah, if it is still alive. If his cheetah can be netted, we will do so. If not, my cheetahs will kill his. Do not think this will easy or that only a few will be injured. I believe this fight will kill many and will drag the soul of this tribe into the deepest despair. But the real battle will take place after *Antelope Hunter* has been defeated. Winning that battle will be in *your* hands and it will be much harder. Much, much harder.”

Chapter 32: ANTELOPE HUNTER ATTACKS

Once the river stopped rising, I knew it would be just a matter of days before the river slowed enough to allow *Antelope Hunter* to row upriver with his crocodiles. *Moon Under Water* quickly called the village together in the Circle of Wisdom and told them that *Antelope Hunter* would return in a few days, saying, “When *Antelope Hunter* returns, it shames me to tell you it will not be a time of happiness and feasting. The tribe will be in great danger because *Antelope Hunter* has traded his soul for that of a lion. Some of you know the stories of other great hunters who have done this so they could become even greater hunters of animals.

“But *Antelope Hunter*,” she continued, “has done this *not* to become a greater hunter of animals but a hunter of humans. He will be almost impossible to stop because he now has the strength and fury and cunning of a lion. He is determined to kill and eat *River Mother*. After that he will direct his fury at the rest of us. Until I stood in front of you now, only *Runs Like Cheetah*, along with myself and *River Mother* and *Monkey Mother* and the other members of the Circle of Wisdom were aware of what *Antelope Hunter* had become and what his murderous plans were. We have no doubt of what he intends to do. He and his cheetah will arrive in a few nights trailing a flood of hungry crocodiles he has trained to attack and kill. *River Mother* and *Monkey Mother* have both seen this.

“Some time ago, *Moon Under Water* continued, *Runs Like Cheetah* and *River Mother* and *Monkey Mother* and I devised a plan to stop *Antelope Hunter*. Its success will depend heavily on *Antelope Hunter* continuing to believe he will surprise us. Because of this, we have kept our battle plan secret from everyone—even the other members of the Circle of Wisdom—for fear word would get to *Antelope Hunter*. To further prevent any word getting out over the next few days, all of our dugouts will be beached and tied down. *Runs like Cheetah* will explain the battle plan to you after I

have finished. We know from the prophecy that some of us will not escape the fury of *Antelope Hunter*. Because of this, you must listen to *Runs like Cheetah* very carefully when he tells you what you must do to be safe.”

Runs like Cheetah very wisely gave a vague explanation of the battle plan, leaving out many important details for fear one of the older hunters might somehow still get to *Antelope Hunter*, but he gave very detailed instructions as to the escape routes and how high they must climb into the trees. As the tribe returned to their huts, it was clear they were stunned by what they had heard. There was nothing to do but wait. A stake had been driven into the heart of the tribe. How deep it would go was in the hands of fate. That night, the high, sad voice of *Moon Traveler* wound its way through the village like an injured child.

Each night afterward, the moon got darker and darker until it finally disappeared. Then, late that night, I heard *Little Man* racing through the village screaming in his high squeaky voice, “Wake up. Wake up! *Antelope Hunter* has come to kill you and eat your children. Run to the far jungle and climb the trees! Wake up. Wake up!”

I climbed quickly to the platform on top of my hut and scanned the river. The glowing eyes of the crocodiles were as many as the stars in the sky. I had decided to wear my cheetah headdress and silver robe so everyone would know it was me, but *Antelope Hunter* needed no help. If I had covered myself in mud, his hunter's instincts would have found me out, and they did. Out on the river, I could see his glowing eyes staring straight through me.

Runs Like Cheetah had been right—I must have glowed like the moon in the light of the sentry fires, but I did not care. I had come to fight. Just then I saw the three young hunters run out with the fire bundles and set them afire. The fires blazed up as *Antelope Hunter* cried out, “Hear me, *River*

Mother. These fires are nothing to me. I have come to tear your flesh from your body! I see you there, standing in the sky like a Goddess, but you are not a Goddess—you are but a clever girl. My crocodiles will eat what remains of your flesh after I have tasted its ugliness.”

I couldn't see *Runs Like Cheetah* anywhere and then he and the three hunters stepped out of the shadows of the riverbank, drew their bows, and began shooting at *Antelope Hunter*. He was a perfect target in the light of the fire bundles but all the arrows missed or bounced off his shield. I couldn't understand how the four of them could keep missing and then I saw something moving in *Antelope Hunter's* dugout.

At first, I thought it was a lion skin and then I saw it was a man, and then I saw his red glowing eyes and his lion's headdress and lion's claw staff and I knew it must be the dark shaman who had changed *Antelope Hunter*. I knew immediately he must have been clouding the minds of the hunters, but there was nothing I could do about it without entering my spirit body—and that was too dangerous. I could not afford to lose my physical alertness for a moment. I had to stay in this world, even if it meant *Antelope Hunter* would escape the arrows.

Just then, little *Baby Man* burst out from the darkness behind my hut and began racing toward the fire bundles, shouting in his high voice: “I am the Messenger of *River Mother* and I am telling you she is not afraid of you, *Antelope Hunter*, you and your filthy crocodiles. And I am not afraid of you either, you know.”

I looked at *Antelope Hunter*. He was looking all around him, completely confused, like he could not believe what he was hearing and even more so because he could not see the source of the voice. *Baby Man* was so small he was lost behind the fire bundles. *Antelope Hunter* shouted out,

“Listen to me you little elf or whatever you are, my crocodiles will tear you apart when I break through this fire!” Then *Antelope Hunter* moved forward with his spear and shield and began to toss the fire bundles aside until a large gap appeared.

On *Antelope Hunter's* side of the fire bundles, a few crocodiles were moving forward through the gap while on the other side of the fire bundles, unbelievably, *Baby Man* was walking back and forth on his hands clacking his large teeth and shouting, “It is time for you to lie down, you nice, filthy crocodiles. And stop opening your ugly mouths at me. I am not afraid, you know.”

I could not believe it. Right then I realized that stupidity and genius could sometimes be the same thing. The sight of little *Baby Man* walking back and forth on his hands clacking his teeth not only confused *Antelope Hunter* but his crocodiles as well. For a few moments, they both stopped moving forward. It was just enough time for *Runs Like Cheetah* to suddenly race out from the side and sweep up little *Baby Man* in his arms. I had never seen *Runs Like Cheetah* run so fast. For a moment he was in front of the gap looking directly at *Antelope Hunter* and the next he was disappearing into the jungle on the other side of the village.

Antelope Hunter did not even have enough time to raise his bow—that is how fast *Runs Like Cheetah* was. I thought only Gods and Goddesses could move that fast, and then I realized one of them must be with him. *Antelope Hunter* must have realized the same thing, because a flicker of worry crossed his face. He whipped the crocodiles with his spear, threw his rotten meat into the village and raced off into the side of the jungle where my hut was. His instincts were cunning. He knew now that *Runs Like Cheetah* was going to be much too fast for him, but that I was going to be an easy kill.

What he did not know was that the crocodiles he had whipped into the village had fallen immediately into the deep ditch behind the fire bundles. But what I did not know—until it was too late—was that in rushing to hide in the jungle, some of the small children had run the opposite way toward the river and had fallen into the same ditch. I heard them screaming as the crocodiles landed on top of them and then all I could hear was the thrashing of the crocodiles. There was nothing I could do but hope *Mafdet* had spared them by making the crocodiles eat the poisoned meat before they turned on the children. As for the other crocodiles back on the riverbank, *Bright Hands* had already stopped them by throwing the poisoned meat onto the shore of the river.

What I also did not know was that *Antelope Hunter* had landed earlier in the jungle far down river and put his cheetah there to wait for him—and that the cheetah was now racing to meet him. Cunning was hardly the word to describe what took place next. I was waiting with the hunters for *Antelope Hunter* to burst out of the jungle behind my hut, but he never did. Instead he raced through the jungle with his cheetah toward the far end of the village.

It was only when we heard the screams of the women and children that I realized what had happened. *Antelope Hunter* knew we'd be waiting for him by my hut, so he went where the tribe would surely be hiding—in the trees at the far end of the village. He was going to make us come to him. His cheetah had immediately attacked those who had not climbed high enough in the trees and *Antelope Hunter* began shooting anyone he could see with his bow and arrow. If it had not been a dark, moonless night I do not know how many he might have killed before we got to him. As soon as we caught sight of him in the distance, *Runs Like Cheetah* demanded I run for the *Baobab* tree.

I refused, “The *Baobab* is too far away. His cheetah will surely run me down if I try. Give me a spear and then you and the hunters sneak up in back of him through the jungle. Then have your cheetahs attack his cheetah. When his cheetah is attacked, *Antelope Hunter* will not know what to do. He will go crazy. That is when I will approach him. When he sees me, he will be completely blinded by hatred. Then the four of you can sneak up behind him and throw your nets and we will have him.”

Off in the distance, I heard the two cheetahs of *Runs Like Cheetah* attack *Antelope Hunter's* cheetah, and when there was a sudden silence I knew his cheetah had been killed. I walked forward and called out in the darkness to *Antelope Hunter*: “I have come to kill you, *Antelope Hunter*, just as I have killed your cheetah and your crocodiles. You are no match for *River Mother*.”

Antelope Hunter had never seen me up close in my silver robe and headdress and cheetah tears. I was depending on that when I stepped into the clearing in front of him. He was dumbfounded and unable to speak for a moment, and then his blind hatred of me began to twist his face. Suddenly, *Mafdet's* voice rose up inside me:

“Antelope Hunter, you have dishonored everything human. Long ago, I came to you in your dreams and gave you the gift of cheetah-speaking so you could become a mighty cheetah-hunter. But look at what you have chosen to be—a killer of children and women. I curse you and everything you have become.”

Antelope Hunter's face went completely blank. It was just enough time for *Runs Like Cheetah* and his three young hunters to sneak up behind *Antelope Hunter* and throw their nets over him. The battle was over—but not the sorrow of

those who had survived. It came falling from the trees as they began climbing down to cradle the mangled bodies of the dead and the dying. The sun was just coming up. It was going to be a very long day.

I looked at *Runs Like Cheetah* and the three young hunters. They were breathing heavily, flushed with victory. I said to them, "Leave *Antelope Hunter* in the net and then bind the net tightly with many ropes so he cannot move and then drag him into the far end of the village clearing and build a strong cage around him. When that is done, skin his cheetah and stake it out in front of the cage. The village needs to see that he and his cheetah will never harm them again."

I could see the older hunters perched safely in the trees high above the women and children. They had saved themselves first, leaving the spindly lower branches for the women and children where they were easy prey for *Antelope Hunter* and his cheetah. I called to the hunters. "It is safe to come down. *Antelope Hunter* has been captured and his cheetah and crocodiles killed. The tribe needs you to come down and help the women bring the dead and injured to the Circle of Wisdom where they can be attended by *Bitter Moon* and the other healers."

I then took the two oldest hunters aside and said, "You must go quickly to the fire-bundle ditch and retrieve the small children who fell into it. They may still be alive. Bring them to *Bitter Moon* in the Circle of Wisdom. If the crocodiles aren't dead from the poisoned meat, kill them and cut them open to see if they had eaten any of the children. If so, clean their remains in the river and bring them to the Circle."

I then went to the *Baobab* tree holding *Monkey Mother* and *Moon Under Water* in the Circle of Wisdom and called to them that it was safe to come down. I did not want *Moon Under Water* to see her husband bound and caged at the far end of the village clearing. Her shame would have been

unbearable. I told the two of them it would be quicker if we went to the hut of *Moon Under Water* where we could discuss in private what had to be done. I knew that by going this way we would avoid seeing the caged *Antelope Hunter* at the far end of the village, but I did not fool *Moon Under Water*. Her body was bent with shame.

Chapter 33: THE DARKNESS DESCENDS

It was clear that *Moon Under Water* was going to have difficulty in talking about what was to be done with *Antelope Hunter*, but it made little sense not to say what had to be said. I was about to speak to her when I heard a noise outside. I wanted no one to hear what we were saying to *Moon Under Water*, and shouted, "Who is that?"

"It is me, *Baby Man*, the Messenger and Listener of *River Mother*."

"What are you doing out there? You should be sitting in front of my hut, waiting for me to call you."

"But I was afraid I wouldn't hear you call, *River Mother*, and then you would get a new Messenger and I would be just the Listener of *River Mother*, which to tell you the truth, I am still not too sure about."

"You do not have to be sure about anything. All you have to do is listen, you fool. Do you understand?"

"Yes, *River Mother*, just as I am listening to you now."

"Enough. How did you know I was here?"

"I was hiding in the trees above *Antelope Hunter* when you spoke to him in that scary voice that would frighten a cobra."

"That was *Mafdet* speaking through me."

"As you wish, *River Mother*. Like I said, that voice would scare a cobra. For sure, it scared *Antelope Hunter*. I thought he was going to relieve himself right there."

"Oh, is that so?"

"Yes, *River Mother*. I am familiar with the feeling because my duties as your Messenger and Listener often get in the way of me relieving myself."

"I am glad you take your duties so seriously."

"You would not be so glad, *River Mother*, if you had to hop up and down on one leg all day to stop from going. Anyway, that is all water down the hole as the old men say."

“Is there something you came to tell me, *Baby Man*, or are you going to keep wasting my time?”

“I would never waste your time, *River Mother*. After all, I am your Listener and must listen to everything. As I told you before, when I was high up in the trees, I listened to the voice of *Mafdet* and all of that because it is my duty to listen. Then I followed you to the *Baobab* tree and listened to what you said to *Monkey Mother* and *Moon Under Water* about going to the hut of *Moon Under Water*. So here I am.”

“Is that all, *Baby Man*?”

“Not quite, *River Mother*. I must also tell you this: everything I heard interested me, so it must be important.”

“What you heard was indeed important, but there is no need to tell me of it.”

“But I must tell you what is important, no?”

“Yes, but only what *others* say, you rascal. There is no need to tell me what I have said.”

“But why not, *River Mother*?”

“Because I am the one who said it, you fool. Now go sit outside my hut and wait there for me.”

“I am already going there faster than the wind, *River Mother*!”

Moon Under Water looked at *Monkey Mother* and said, “Do you still have any doubts, old mother, as to what his effect will be on the tribe? When we came here, a dark sorrow was in our hearts. The little fool distracted us so that our sorrow had no time to take us down. Somehow, his antics stopped that from happening, which is a good thing. Now—let us talk about what must be done.”

I spoke first: “None of the men were killed by *Antelope Hunter*, only women and children. The hunters climbed to the safety of the high branches. The women and children were easy prey in the lower branches. If it were not for the appearance of *Mafdet*, many more would have been killed—maybe all of us. The cowardice of the older hunters

was a crime against the tribe. But it was also a crime against the women and children. I would like to believe this could never happen again, but my heart tells me otherwise—I believe what happened is an omen of things to come.”

Monkey Mother spoke first: “This speaks badly for the hunters. They are our bravest and yet they were not brave tonight. They were either loyal to *Antelope Hunter*, or afraid of him, or both. Their first duty was to the tribe, not *Antelope Hunter*, and surely not themselves. They failed the tribe.”

Then *Moon Under Water* spoke: “Two summers ago, none of us would have predicted this. For summers beyond memory, we have had good hunting and peace. And now, suddenly, we have nothing but darkness. I cannot tell you why this has happened, but I do know that *Mafdet* set this in motion. It was *Mafdet* who gave *Antelope Hunter* the gift of cheetah-singing. This was not a simple gift—it changed *Antelope Hunter* forever. Then *Mafdet* set him against *River Mother*. And it is *Mafdet* who has tried to break our spirit by revealing *River Mother* will leave us. And yet it is *Mafdet* who saved us from the rage of *Antelope Hunter*. Her intent is a tangle of shadows. We are at her mercy.”

I replied, “We are indeed powerless against the will of *Mafdet*. Yet my heart tells me she is with us, and not against us. We must go forward under that belief. And we must honor *Mafdet* for saving us by asking *Bright Hands* to make a statue of *Mafdet* and place it above the graves of those who were killed.”

Bright Hands suddenly interrupted me and spoke. “Please excuse me, *River Mother*, but there is no need to ask this of me. Two moons ago, I had a vision in which *Mafdet* appeared in the burial grounds telling me that many women and children would be murdered by *Antelope Hunter*, and that I was to make a carving of her to place over their

graves. She brought me to a small cliff in the back of the burial grounds and told me that I was to tell the tribe to dig a single large grave beneath it to bury those who had been killed and that I was to carve a face of her in the stone cliff above the grave.

“*Mafdet*,” she continued, “held her arms out to show me how large the face should be. I was very confused. I had always used clay to make small standing statues of *Mafdet* and had no knowledge of carving a large face into rocks. It was then that *Mafdet* made a small face of herself out of clay, and then she showed me the face from the side and drew many lines of light down the side of it saying: ‘You will make a clay model of my face as I just did and take it with you to the burial grounds. The rock of the small cliff is soft, like the rock of the Spirit Caves. If you take hard stones from the river you can pound the soft rock away to make my face. Watch. She kept showing me the side of the clay face with the lines of light down it while she pounded the rock away from the cliff face, moving from front to back so that first the nose appeared, then the chin, then the lips, then the cheeks, then the forehead, then the eyes. Then *Mafdet* said, ‘*This is how to carve my face in the stone cliff so it will look like the clay face. It will take you two moons to complete the face back to where my eyes end. That is enough. You must start now.*’”

So I did. The face of *Mafdet* is complete now but hidden by two large antelope hides. I believe those killed should be buried together in a single grave as *Mafdet* showed me in the dream. I also believe it is proper that the Circle order the older hunters to dig that grave in the burial grounds across the river, and then carry the bodies across the river for burial by the tribe.”

Moon Under Water replied, “I will bring the Circle of Wisdom together tomorrow and speak of this. *Monkey Mother*, what say you?”

“It must be done as *Bright Hands* says. The older hunters must be shamed but it would be dangerous to say anything publicly that would shame them. Better we be silent. They know they have failed the tribe. Digging the grave and carrying the bodies across the river for burial will be shame enough. It will remind them of their failure for as long as they live.”

Chapter 34: THE DEAD ARE BURIED

The hunters were always represented in the Circle of Wisdom by the two oldest hunters in the tribe. Their names were *Water Hunter* and *Moon Hunter*. They were older even than *Monkey Mother*. They were both present when the Circle assembled to discuss the burial of the dead and the punishment of *Antelope Hunter*. When the Circle of Wisdom was ready, *Monkey Mother* stood first and spoke: "It would not be wise for the Circle to press the older hunters on their failure to protect the women and children. They know they have failed the tribe. Their shame is a dark shadow that will follow them until the day they die. That is shame enough." As *Monkey Mother* spoke, *Water Hunter* and *Moon Hunter* bowed their heads and said nothing.

Thus the Circle of Wisdom wisely chose not to single out the older hunters but to have *all* the hunters—both young and the old—dig the grave and carry the dead to the burial grounds. A few days later, all the hunters carried the dead across the river in dugouts, one by one. They were buried in one large circular grave. Their bodies were laid in, one by one, curled up like infants, as is our custom. To see the bodies of the mothers and children curled up together as if they were preparing to be born again was both sad and joyful. It was sad, because we knew they would no longer be with us in this world, but also joyful because we knew they would come back to visit us from the Other World. They were Ancestors now, and would have the powerful wisdom of Ancestors when they spoke to us.

After the mothers and children had been buried and the grave covered with stones and flowers, *Bright Hands* went over to the stone cliff overlooking the grave and pulled aside the two large hides that had been covering the face of *Mafdet* she had carved onto the cliff. *Mafdet* had always been depicted in our village as a standing woman with a cheetah's face. The only exception was the ancient running

cheetah with a woman's head that the Giants had carved in the Cave of the Spirit Mouth.

We had never seen *Mafdet* as *only* a face until we saw the face *Bright Hands* had carved in the cliff. It looked like the face of a cheetah and a woman at the same time. It was terrifying. I asked *Bright Hands* why she had carved *Mafdet* to look this way. She said to me: "This is the face *Mafdet* told me to carve. It was meant to be terrifying. It is a face that will always remind us of her unknowable ways—for it is she who brought this darkness upon us and yet it is she who saved us. Who can say where she is taking us? There is one more thing I must tell you, *River Mother*—the face I made is also *your* face. When I began to make the clay face, I heard *Mafdet's* voice saying that the face I was making was also what you will look like when you become a great leader."

"Will I really look like that?" I asked.

"Of course not," she laughed. "It is what you will look like in the minds of others if they dare to challenge you. You will be a great leader, *River Mother*. The tribe will be safe in your hands when *Moon Under Water* steps down. Everyone saw this in the way you fought *Antelope Hunter*."

"It will be many moons," I said to her, "before I am as wise as *Moon Under Water*. To be a warrior and a shaman is one thing. To be a leader is another. I have been humbled by what I have seen in *Moon Under Water*."

I was torn about not saying anything to *Bright Hands* about my leaving the tribe, but the time was not right. *Moon Under Water* would decide when to tell the tribe what only she and I and *Monkey Mother* knew—that in two summers I would leave the tribe forever. Hopefully *Moon Under Water* and *Monkey Mother* and *Moon Traveler* and *Little Man* would remain healthy—and hopefully by that time, others would have risen to help guide the tribe. Everything depended on *Mafdet* being with us.

Chapter 35: ANTELOPE HUNTER IS CONDEMNED

After the Circle had spoken on the burial of the dead, it turned to deciding the fate of *Antelope Hunter*. I had spoken to *Monkey Mother* the day before the Circle met and told her I believed *Moon Under Water* would have great difficulty in leading the Circle. I said to *Monkey Mother*, “*Antelope Hunter* is her mate and the father of her only child. His crimes will be spelled out for all to hear. We both know the punishment is going to be severe—there is no way it cannot be. His shame will be her shame.”

Monkey Mother replied, “Do not ever think *Moon Under Water* is brittle of spirit. If she decides to preside over the Circle, you can be sure she will not waver from the truth, no matter how painful. The truth is that *Antelope Hunter* should be killed. He can never change back—no one knows how to do that. He will always remain an enraged lion who will kill anything in his path. Yet is it clear from the prophecy that *Antelope Hunter* is not to be killed, but removed from the tribe and made to live alone without friends. This means he must be maimed so he can never kill again. The maiming will be done before the tribe, as is our custom. That will be difficult for *Moon Under Water* to watch but she will have no choice. Just as important is that you, *River Mother*, say nothing to the Circle. Nothing. Everyone knows of the hatred between yourself and *Antelope Hunter*. I know this hatred was not of your choosing and that your hatred of him differs greatly from his hatred of you, but anything you say will be seen as self-serving.”

When it came time for the Circle to determine how *Antelope Hunter* would be punished, *Moon Under Water* addressed the Circle: “I speak to you as your leader but also as the mate of *Antelope Hunter* and the mother of *Runs Like Cheetah*. I have thought much of what has happened and I now say this to you: the day *Antelope Hunter* chose to become a hunter of humans, he became a stranger to me. He

is no longer my mate. *Runs Like Cheetah* will speak for himself as the son of *Antelope Hunter*. I can assure you I will not fail you in seeking the correct punishment for *Antelope Hunter*. Bring *Antelope Hunter* before the Circle.”

The netted and bound *Antelope Hunter* was brought in and laid on the ground in the middle of the Circle. His face and body were twisted with hate. It was clear if the netting and ropes were removed he would immediately attack the Circle. Even the old hunters, *Water Hunter* and *Moon Hunter*, were startled by his ferocity.

Moon Under Water said: “You see before you *Antelope Hunter*. He was once a great hunter but he chose to trade his soul for that of a lion. *Antelope Hunter* did not choose this path to become an even greater hunter of animals, as other great hunters have done, but to become a hunter and killer of humans. He is no longer one of us. He now has not only the ferocious strength and instincts of a lion, but the cunning, treacherous mind of a human as well. He must never be allowed to threaten the tribe again. I now ask our son, *Runs Like Cheetah*, to speak.”

I was concerned for *Runs Like Cheetah*. It was clear he was still torn—he loved his father but hated what he had become. I need not have worried. Like his mother, he spoke to the Circle with an arrow of truth: “It saddens me to see what my father has become. I love my father but this is not my father. My father is the one who taught me everything I know of hunting. He taught me how to sing like the cheetah and how to hunt with the cheetah—and not with just one cheetah, but two. Who else but a father who loved his son above everything would have taught him how to surpass his father in hunting? I cry for my father, but this is not my father. This is not even a man. He is a demon. Do with him what you must.”

Water Hunter then stood and spoke: “It saddens me to see *Antelope Hunter* like this. It breaks my heart and also the heart of *Moon Hunter*. We both taught *Antelope Hunter* how to hunt as a boy. He soon surpassed us. We loved him as a son. But we must listen to someone who loves *Antelope Hunter* even more than we did. *Runs Like Cheetah* speaks the truth. *Antelope Hunter* was a great hunter who chose to become possessed. He is no longer the man we knew. He is no longer a man. Pride drove him to do what he did. Pride is the hunter’s greatest ally. He must possess it to be who he is. But it must always be balanced with humility. *Antelope Hunter* lost his humility when he lost his respect for the world we live in.”

The members of the Circle then spoke among themselves as to the punishment of *Antelope Hunter*. Finally *Moon Under Water* rose and spoke: “The Circle has decided that the tongue of *Antelope Hunter* is to be cut out so he can no longer sing to cheetahs and train them to kill. All of his fingers will be cut off except for his thumbs so he can never use a spear or a bow, only fish and trap small animals to survive. Then, he is to be taken far down the river and into the jungle where he is to live alone and without companions. If he appears anywhere near this village, the Circle commands he be killed on sight. The Circle has spoken. This truth is good for all of us. Take this truth and listen to it within yourselves.”

Chapter 36: THE BABY IS A MAN

One moon had passed since *Antelope Hunter* was banished from the tribe. We were beginning to climb out of the darkness and slowly heal. *Baby Man* was buzzing around like a fat little bee, asking questions and offering opinions whether they were wanted or not. Some people became so confused they threatened to beat him unless he shut up, but that only made him buzz harder.

But there were others who couldn't get enough of him—like *Little Man*. He was talking to me about *Moon Traveler* when *Baby Man* tugged on my arm to bend down and whispered to me, "I am listening to everything people are saying, *River Mother*, just as you wanted."

"I am sure you are," I nodded, and with that encouragement *Baby Man* began whispering the most fantastic nonsense in my ear. I was about to whack the rascal across the head when he suddenly asked *Little Man*, "What are you thinking, *Little Man*? If it is important, I must know about it."

"Oh is that so? Well, I am thinking about the bees," *Little Man* said in his high, squeaky voice.

"But what is it about the bees that you are thinking?"

"How much their buzzing reminds me of you."

Little Man looked like a tiny, perfectly proportioned man talking to an equally tall baby with a belly. The sight always amused me because it looked so unreal—as if the man had been shrunk down and the baby blown up.

Little Man suddenly grabbed a bee out of the air, "Got you by the wings, you little bee. Here now, let me grab another one."

"I hope that other one is not going to be me, *Little Man*."

"Let's hope so—but you can never tell, can you?"

“I am not afraid of your fast fingers, you know. Everyone saw how I stood on my hands and stopped the filthy crocodiles.”

“But crocodiles are not as fast as I am, *Baby Man*,” and with that, *Little Man* reached out and grabbed *Baby Man* by the ear so quickly he never saw it coming. “I’d like to see you stand on your hands now, my little crocodile-stopper.”

Baby Man winced, “I could, if you’d only let go of my ear.”

“But what if I stood on my hands at the same time you did? That would work, would it not? Let’s try it. Ready? Go!”

Baby Man was slow compared to *Little Man*, but somehow *Little Man* timed his handstand so that he and *Baby Man* turned upside down at exactly the same time—except *Little Man* wound up standing on only one hand with the other still holding *Baby Man* by the ear.

“You’re lucky I am *not* a bee, *Little Man*. I’d sting you hard.”

“Of course you would, but you are not a bee, right?”

“Right, I am *Baby Man*, the Messenger and Listener of *River Mother*.”

“Then what are you doing upside down? Is that a new way of listening?”

“It is for me.”

With that, *Little Man* suddenly flipped upright, taking the wincing *Baby Man* with him. *Little Man* laughed in his high squeaky voice and said, “Make sure you tell *River Mother* about this new way of listening.”

“Do not worry, *Little Man*, I am already running to tell her—if you would just let go of my ear.”

“But there is no need to run anywhere—*River Mother* is right here.”

“It was just a way of speaking. I thought you would know that. Anyway how can I keep listening for *River Mother* if you keep holding me by the ear? Is that not right *River Mother*?”

"I am afraid he's right, *Little Man*. You must let him go."

"But *River Mother*," *Little Man* replied, "*Baby Man* has yet to tell you everything he has heard. Am I not right, *Baby Man*?"

"Not if she has already heard it, you fast-fingered know-it-all."

It was hard to best *Baby Man* when it came to last word, and *Little Man* loved him for it. He laughed, gave his ear one last twist, and let him go. *Baby Man* was still wincing and rubbing his ear as he took off across the village.

Baby Man had the oddest effect on me at times. I could never explain it. Later in the day, I was watching him spin his confusion around the village and I felt a strange movement in my belly. I knew right then I was with child. I sensed there was a connection, but I couldn't say what, and then I saw *Baby Man's* mother in my mind and decided to visit her.

Raven's Eye was a pleasant woman with many children. We had spoken often but never at length about *Baby Man*. She was cooking a frog when I approached her and said, "*Raven's Eye*, may I speak with you."

"Of course, *River Mother*—has my son been misbehaving?"

"No *Raven's Eye*. He is serving me well, but can you tell me why he is so different?"

"I do not have the slightest idea. He is not like any of my other children or me or his father. He is completely different from everybody, really."

"Was he always like that?"

"Yes, even in my belly. This may not sound possible, *River Mother*, but as soon as I felt him move I also heard him talking. It never stopped. I have no idea who he was talking to or what he was saying. Then when he was born, he came out talking. It sounded like speech, but it was in a tongue I could not understand. I still cannot."

"Do you mean he still talks in that tongue?"

“Not when he is awake—only in his sleep. As soon as his eyes close, he starts to speak in that strange tongue. When he wakes, it stops. I asked him once what the name of that tongue was and he said, ‘*It has no name. The people in my dreams speak to me that way. I do not know how I understand it. I just do. As soon as I wake up I forget it. I can only speak it in my dreams.*’”

“Can he remember what he was talking about in his dreams?”

“I asked him once and he said, ‘*I can never remember what I said in my dreams. All I can tell you is that in my dreams I am always lost and I am always asking for directions home.*’”

“Did he ever tell you what the people in his dreams were like?”

“All he would say was, ‘*The people are not like anybody in this village. They are completely different.*’ That was it.”

“You know what’s odd about what you just told me, *Raven’s Eye*? *Baby Man’s* answers to your questions seemed very clear and complete—but he never speaks to me that way. He is all over the place.”

“That is because I am telling you those things the way a normal person would. Believe me, *River Mother*, it is not any easier for me to get direct answers out of him than it is for you. I have to pull them out of him like a honeycomb out of a tree. Whenever he answers me, it is almost always with another question—or something very odd. It is as if he understands the words he’s hearing and using, but he’s not quite sure what they mean. Sometimes, I think he is a stranger to our tongue, but I do not know how that could be. To tell you the truth, I do not understand much about him except that he is a good boy. His father and I gave up trying to figure him out a long time ago. I do not mean to be disrespectful, *River Mother*, but I cannot tell you how grateful we are that you took him off our hands.”

When I went back to my hut, *Baby Man* was sitting outside it. He quickly stood up and said, "I have been waiting for you, *River Mother*."

"I can see that. But why aren't you out in the village listening?"

"I was, but I also knew you wanted to talk to me, so here I am."

"How did you know that?"

"Does a bee know how he makes honey? He just does. It is the same with me. I just know."

"Well then, does '*the bee*' have any idea what *River Mother* wishes to talk to him about?"

"Oh. *that* is a great deal more than honey, if you know what I mean, But yes, I do know what you want to talk about."

"And what is that?"

"*Me*. You want to talk to me about *me*."

Right then I heard a voice say, "*The baby is a man*." and then, "*The man is a baby*." My head rang. Right then I saw why I had never been able to predict what he was going to say or do. What I was dealing with was a man and a baby at the same time. I motioned for him to come inside my hut. He was no sooner inside than he said, "What is it you wish to know, *River Mother*?"

"Did it ever occur to you that you shouldn't speak until *River Mother* speaks?"

"Believe me, *River Mother*, it is always occurring to me, but I thought I'd get to the point."

"And what point is that?"

"Me. I am the point."

"Oh, you surely are *the point*. I spoke to your mother earlier, did you know that?"

"About me?"

"Yes, of course *you*—you're the point, right, or did you forget?"

"No. I never forget anything. What did she tell you?"

"Everything."

"But she couldn't have told you everything."

“And why is that?”

“Because my mother knows only what I have told her.”

“And what is it you haven’t told her?”

“Oh no, *River Mother*, it will not work that way. First you have to tell me what she told *you*.”

“And why is that, you rascal?”

“Because sometimes I make things up.”

With that, I lost my temper, “Enough of this. I know you do not belong here, you little demon, and I also know you are not from the Other World, so *who* are you and where did you come from?”

“I wish I knew. I’ve been hoping you could tell me.”

“Who are these people you see in your dreams?”

“I do not know, but they are different from the people here.”

“In what way?”

“Well, for one thing, it seems I can see them, but they cannot see me.”

“What else?”

“The color of their skin is different. It is much lighter, like the color of antelope. And they speak in a tongue I can only understand in my dreams.”

“Are you making this up?”

“No. It is the truth as I remember it.”

“Is there a different kind of truth than as you remember it?”

“I do not know—you tell me. Anyway it is just a way of speaking. I do not know where I picked it up.”

“Well, you did not pick it up here, you rascal. How else are they different?”

“They are always arguing and boasting.”

“Well now, you have a little bit of that, do you not?”

“Yes, but their boasting is about wars they have fought and warriors they have killed. It is not like my boasting about being *River Mother’s* Messenger or walking on my hands.”

“How else are they different?”

“They have huge dugouts with big sails and many oars. You could fit the entire village in one of them.”

“Are you making this up?”

“No. It is the truth as I remember it.”

“How else are they different?”

“They are afraid of nothing.”

“Well now, you have more than a bit of that, do not you?”

“Yes. But they really mean it.”

“How else are they different?”

“Some of them make small pictures that sound like words. When they look at the pictures, they speak the sound of words. I do not know how to do that, even in my dreams.”

“How else are they different?”

“It is not like here. The men decide everything. The women are below the men and say nothing.”

“Who are their Goddesses?”

“I can never remember the names of their Goddesses and Gods when I wake, just like I can never remember their tongue, or what I said—and do not ask me why because I do not know. But I do know that the Goddesses are not as important as the Gods. They are below the Gods, just as the women are below the men. It is not like here. The women are treated like slaves.”

“Are you making this up?”

“No, it is the truth as I remember it.”

“Why did you not tell your mother all this?”

“She would never understand. I was hoping you would—so you could tell me who I am.”

“I have no idea who you are, but I know this—you do not belong *here*.”

“I already know that, *River Mother*. What I need to know is *why* I am here.”

“I will speak to *Monkey Mother* about what you have told me. She knows many things that I do not. Maybe this will help you: I heard a voice in my head while we were talking outside the hut. Do you know what the voice said?”

“Nothing bad I hope.”

“The voice said ‘*The baby is a man,*’ and then, ‘*The man is a baby.*’ I am afraid it fits you perfectly.”

“Yes. It does. It fits me so perfectly I could cry.” As he said that, I looked in his eyes and saw what I had never seen before. I saw both the baby and the man and wanted to cry with him—or for him—I couldn’t tell which.”

After he had left, *Raven’s Eye* again appeared in my mind. I remembered how I had thought her to be just one of many quiet mothers in the tribe. It was only after I had spoken with her about *Baby Man* that I saw she had an inner eye that missed nothing. She had seen things about *Baby Man’s* nature that I had missed completely. Once more, I was humbled by how lacking I was. I had much to learn.

Chapter 37: GHOST HUNTER IS BORN

Many moons had passed since I first felt my child move in my belly. One evening, when I was at my mother's hut, she put her hand on my belly and said, "The time has come for *River Mother* to be a mother, hasn't it? Here, lie down on the mat. Do you think it will be a boy or a girl?"

"A boy," I said.

"Yes, it will be a boy. I have seen it. So has *Monkey Mother*. The baby will be a big baby. I hope it will not be too painful."

"Is it ever not painful?" I asked.

"No, but some are more painful than others, especially if the child is big. *Monkey Mother* and I will guide you. I have told *Bitter Moon* we may need her."

A short while later, the baby started to come. *Monkey Mother* was there to help deliver it as she had helped my mother deliver me. I joked with my mother to keep the flints away from *Monkey Mother*. "There will be no flints tonight," *Monkey Mother* cackled.

I began to push as my mother told me.

"The baby will be big," my mother said. "I can see the head now. It is very large. Push. Push"

I felt a rip in my birth opening. It hurt like a cutting flint.

"Do not worry," my mother said. "The rip will heal. It will be easier from now on. Here come the shoulders. Push hard. I will call *Bitter Moon* to heal the rip as soon as the baby is out, Push now. *Push*."

The baby may have come easier, but the rip wasn't any less painful. Each move of the baby was like a new cut. "Push, *push*," my mother kept saying. Then, finally, one last push did it. The afterbirth gushed out onto the mat. *Monkey*

Mother cut the birth cord and stored the cord and afterbirth in a jar as is our custom. She said to my mother, “Give the baby to her. She has worked hard to bring it into the world.”

My mother held up the baby for me to see. He was a beautiful boy with large hands and feet. And very long legs like his father. My mother laid him on my chest and stroked his cheek so he would turn towards my nipple to nurse. *Monkey Mother* cackled, “See, I told you the flint wouldn’t be needed. Your baby boy was plenty sharp all by himself. We will have to keep an eye on this one.”

My mother then took the baby away from me and said, “*Monkey Mother* is going to give you some powder to dull the pain of the rip.”

A short while later, *Bitter Moon* entered my mother’s hut. She nodded silently to me and then applied some water and a paste to the cut area. “It will hurt for some time,” she whispered, “so walk only if you must. I will come by every so often to make sure the rip is healing well. You should have no problems, it was a clean rip.”

A few days later, *Runs Like Cheetah* was finally allowed to see me. When I held up the baby for him, he was so happy he couldn’t stop laughing, “So this is who we’ve been waiting for, is it? Look at those legs. He is going to be a great runner and hunter. What are we to call him?”
“That is for you to say—you are the father.”

He looked at me for a moment, unsure of himself, and then something passed between us it was so quick and his eyes suddenly brightened and he shouted, “His name shall be *Ghost Hunter*.”
“Yes,” I said, “that is what he shall be called—*Ghost Hunter*.”

I turned to *Monkey Mother*. Her eyes were shining like moon water. She drew a circle in the sand and then drew a line through it and said, “*Ghost Hunter* has been waiting a long time to enter our world. He will be both a great shaman and a great hunter, but he will be a hunter of a different kind. He has come to rip the seal between worlds—just as he ripped you at birth. Prepare yourself.”

Chapter 38: MOON UNDER WATER SPEAKS TO THE TRIBE

It was near the end of my fourteenth summer that a new life was beginning for the tribe. *Ghost Hunter* was now six moons and growing. The tribe, once so lost in despair, had regained much of its balance. But they were about to lose it again. *Moon Under Water* called the tribe together one evening under a full moon—she was to finally tell them of my leaving.

Up until this time, the Circle of Wisdom only knew that *Runs Like Cheetah* was going to leave in his fifteenth summer. That changed when *Moon Under Water* said to the tribe. “For some time now, the Circle of Wisdom has known that *Runs Like Cheetah* will leave us forever in his fifteenth summer. We kept this from the tribe because we knew *Antelope Hunter’s* impending attack was only a short time off and thought it best not to further worry the tribe. *Runs Like Cheetah’s* fifteenth summer will soon be upon us, so it is proper that I tell the entire tribe that he is going to leave us forever. We will be hurt by his leaving. He has proven to be a great hunter and protector of the tribe.”

Sky Over Still Water, an older member of the Circle, spoke: “As a member of the Circle, I knew of the prophecy that *Runs Like Cheetah* was going to leave. I was here when *River Mother* spoke it. But the prophecy never told us *why*. So I ask you: *why* must he leave us? He has become our protector. Without his bravery against *Antelope Hunter*, we would all be dead or scattered like animals.”

She replied, “*Sky Over Still Water* speaks the truth, All of us who heard the prophecy were never told *why* he would leave. I asked *Monkey Mother* to clarify this by invoking *Mut*. She in turn asked *River Mother* to invoke *Mafdet* so as to balance the Circle. Both shamans came back with the same clarifying prophecy—that *Runs Like Cheetah* and his

two cheetahs would leave because *River Mother* was also going to leave in her fifteenth summer and that she would take *Runs Like Cheetah* with her as well as *Bright Hands* and her baby, *Ghost Hunter*. We must accept this.”

Sky Over Still Water spoke again, “But *why* must *River Mother* leave us? She was to lead us after your death or if you weakened with age. Now there will be no one. Her leaving will also mean we will be left with only one shaman—*Monkey Mother*. The Circle will no longer be balanced.”

Moon Under Water spoke, “We can never understand the ways of fate, just as we can never know the motives of the Goddesses. The prophecy told us only that *River Mother* would leave us to become a great prophet and leader in a far away place where the river meets the great blue water. Why fate has chosen this path for her we do not know.”

I then spoke, “*Moon Under Water* speaks the truth. I do not know *why* I must leave or *why* *Bright Hands* has been singled out to leave with me. But it is clear to me *why* *Runs Like Cheetah* and *Ghost Hunter* will leave with me. We are one flesh and cannot be separated. Beyond that, I know nothing. I can only tell you that the Goddesses have spoken and I bow to my fate. I must also tell you that it saddens me greatly to leave my mother and grandmother and all of you I know and love and who have been so good to me. Exactly when I will leave I do not know, but I know there will be a sign that it is time. I also know this: it will be a long, hard journey. You will be in my heart until the day I die.”

Moon Under Water then spoke, “*River Mother* and *Monkey Mother* and I have been very concerned about who will take her place as shaman and leader. We have not been idle in trying to find an answer. I will tell you now of what we believe should be done. I will also tell you we have already started to change some things because we have so little time.

We ask the Circle to consider all of what I am about to tell you and decide if it is good for the tribe. I have already asked *River Mother* and *Monkey Mother* to look for someone to take *River Mother's* place as shaman. Both of them believe that *Bitter Moon* has the ability to become a good shaman. We already know her great abilities as a healer. Soon *Bitter Moon* will go to the Spirit Caves to be tested."

"I have," she continued, "already asked *Bright Hands* and *Runs Like Cheetah* to decide who could replace them and to begin to train them. *Bright Hands* and *Runs Like Cheetah* are highly skilled and we cannot expect those who take their place to be their equals in all matters, but I believe they will be their equals in some matters by the time *Bright Hands* and *Runs Like Cheetah* leave."

By this time, the unrest of the tribe had become noticeable. From their faces, it was clear that many were not only worried, but afraid. I too was afraid. *Moon Under Water* had not yet spoken to them about who would lead the tribe in the future. When she finally outlined our plan for *Moon Traveler* to become a different kind of leader, the tribe became very restless. It was clear they were completely confused as to why we were proposing *Moon Traveler*.

One of the women in the Circle, *Thin Moon Rising*, spoke: "I understand why you are suggesting a different kind of leader for the years to come. I understand that he will sing to our hearts which are still heavy from the murderous *Antelope Hunter* and will grow even heavier with *River Mother* leaving us. But how are we to lead a completely different life? If we must sleep during the day as *Moon Traveler* does, how are we to raise children and hunt and forage in the dark?"

Moon Under Water spoke, "This is not going to be easy, but it can be done. I asked you here tonight under the full moon so you could see how easy it would be when there is

moonlight to do the things we normally do. When there is no moon, we have to accept that only those things that can be done around the fire are possible. The real problem we will have is changing our sleeping and waking. To work only at night and sleep only during the day will not be good for us. *River Mother* and I have been trying it for three moons now. We have come to see that the body doesn't like it at all. And when the body suffers, so does the soul. We believe, therefore, that we should not keep awake all night but only until it is very late, and then to nap during the day if we need to. We have found that the body can easily accept this change. *Moon Traveler* will speak to you of this."

Moon Traveler then spoke, "My brothers and sisters, there is no need to stay awake all night to hear my singing. That rhythm is only good for me. If you simply do as *Moon Under Water* suggests—stay up very late, everything will be fine. All you need do is let my singing fall on you like rain as you go about your tasks. I am not a leader, and was very wary at first of what *Moon Under Water* proposed to me. But thanks to *Little Man*, my gaze has been slowly shifting to reflect the larger and deeper heart of the tribe. This is what will keep us together in times of doubt and despair. I know I am far older than anyone here—even *Monkey Mother* and my old friends *Moon Hunter* and *Water Hunter*—and I also know that my time is coming to an end. But *Moon Under Water* speaks the truth in telling you that if I live but a few more years I will have served the tribe well. You must trust her. We will never know another leader like her. It is good she is with us at this time."

Moon Under Water then spoke, "You have heard *Moon Traveler* as well as *River Mother* and myself. I believe what we have told you will allow the tribe to keep its balance and grow despite the coming loss of *River Mother* and *Runs Like Cheetah* and *Bright Hands*. It is for the Circle to now decide if we should proceed this way."

There was much discussion among the members of the Circle of Wisdom. The tribe was also encouraged to speak their minds. *Bright Hands* and *Runs Like Cheetah* also spoke to assure the tribe that those who were to take their place were almost ready now and would be more ready on the day of our leaving.

It was almost dawn when *Moon Under Water* finally spoke to everyone, “The Circle has decided that what we have told you will be good for the tribe. It is done. We have begun a new time in the life of the tribe. We will call it our Twilight Time. I believe it will change us in unforeseeable ways. There is no need to be afraid. When *River Mother* and *Bright Hands* and *Runs Like Cheetah* leave us, those who will take their place will step up to help guide us in this Twilight Time. I will not tell you that these changes will be easy. They will be hard at first, but they will become easier with time. This truth is good for all of us. We will take this truth and listen to it within ourselves.”

Chapter 39: I HAVE A VISION

I was well into my fifteenth summer when the sign I had been waiting for appeared. I was half-listening to *Baby Man* about something when I had a vision so sharp it totally possessed me. Later, *Baby Man* told me he saw it too. He must have, because I could feel him next to me as it unfolded.

In the vision, I was standing at the bottom of a cliff that rose high above a wide river. The cliff was facing the rising sun. The river was much wider than the river that ran by our village, but I somehow knew it was the same river. At the very top of the cliff, part of it rose up into a mound. On its surface was a vague, huge face that looked something like the human-cheetah face that *Bright Hands* had made of *Mafdet*.

As I stared up at it, I began rising up as by light or air until I was looking directly into the huge right eye of the vague face. My right side suddenly stiffened and the eye spoke to me, "*River Mother, it is time.*" It was *Mafdet's* voice. The sound of it filled my body with dark light. The eye spoke again, "*The Veiled Face you see before you has been waiting to become your face since the world began. You must leave your village and come here for the Veiled Face to become your face.*"

Right then, the huge face began to become my face—but not entirely. Some of the cheetah face remained.

"What does this mean?" I asked.

"It means you are to become my daughter, the Daughter of Mafdet."

"But the prophecy said I was to become a great leader and prophet in a faraway place, not the Daughter of *Mafdet*."

"It is the same thing."

"Is this the faraway place?"

"Yes."

"But how will I find it again?"

"You must follow the river north until the Veiled Face appears. Watch."

Suddenly, I began rising higher and higher. I could feel *Baby Man* rising with me but I couldn't see him. I was so high up I could see the river flowing into the great blue water, but the river was not just one river anymore. It had fanned out like a cobra's head into many smaller rivers, all flowing into the great blue water

I had never seen anything like it. It was like an endless blue lake with no banks. I turned around to look the other way. I could see the river becoming thinner and thinner until it disappeared into the green jungle. I remember thinking—*That is where my village must be*—and then all I remember is being pulled back into my body like a falling rock, and then, suddenly, I was standing next to *Baby Man* who blurted out, "Do not ask me how, *River Mother*, but I saw it too."

"What is it that you saw?"

"I saw the same thing you did: the huge stone face becoming your face and then I saw the great blue water. I remember the great blue water. I have seen it before. The great blue water washes the shores of the place I go to in my dreams."

Chapter 40: TIME TO COME

I sent *Baby Man* to bring my mother and *Monkey Mother* and *Moon Under Water* to my hut. As soon as they arrived, I told them of my vision. I also told them that *Baby Man* had somehow shared it, but I did not know how, or why. They were just as puzzled as I was about what *Baby Man* sharing my vision meant, but they had no doubt that the vision was the sign I had been waiting for. Finally, *Moon Under Water* said, “You must have some idea why *Baby Man* shared your vision. You are closer to him than his own mother. It is very important you find out.”

“I had no idea at first,” I replied, “then I remembered what you and *Monkey Mother* said to me when the two of you so cleverly arranged for *Baby Man* to be my Listener. You told me that *only* I could have him as a Listener because we were bound together by Fate. I thought you were joking at the time, but I do not think that now. I have no doubt that we are bound together in a very special way, but exactly how is still unclear to me.”

I went on to tell them everything I had learned about *Baby Man* from both *Raven’s Eye* and *Baby Man* himself. All three of them listened very carefully. I skipped nothing. *Moon Under Water* said, “What you are telling us is that you believe *Baby Man* comes from another place. That makes sense. He surely doesn’t belong here. But where does he come from then?”

“Where he comes from,” I replied, “is not just another *place*. It is another *world*. I believe *Baby Man* is caught between our world and a world we know nothing about—a world that is completely different from ours—a world as different from ours as the sun from the moon. In the vision, he recognized the great blue water. He said the great blue water falls upon the shores of the place he goes to in his dreams. He said their great dugouts sail over the great blue water until they disappear. But we know nothing of the

great blue water, only what travelers have told us—that it has no end.

“The fact,” I continued, “that there are things in that world like those huge dugouts—and people who are always fighting—all of this tells me it is not just *another place*, because we do not know of anything like it. Nor have travelers told us of anything like it. Nor do we know of any place where they have pictures that speak words, nor any place where the Gods are more powerful than the Goddesses, or where the men hold themselves to be superior to the women and hold them down like slaves.”

Monkey Mother had been looking down at the ground through all of this, drawing strange pictures with her stick. Then she looked up at me so sharply I jumped inside my body. “*Baby Man* is from a world in Time to Come,” she snapped. “We must speak to *Baby Man* now. He comes from the same world you sensed when the hunters let the women and children be murdered by *Antelope Hunter*. Do you remember? You said that what the hunters did was an omen of things to come.”

“Yes, I remember. How could I ever forget? You are right—it is the same world. Do you think *Baby Man* brought a world in Time to Come into ours when he was born?”

“That is impossible,” *Monkey Mother* snapped. “The two worlds cannot exist at the same time. That is the rule. What could have happened is that his birth allowed spirits from Time to Come to come into this world—spirits that helped turn *Antelope Hunter* into a murderous killer of women and children. Those spirits are no longer here. They can only live for a few moments in this world, like fish out of water. Listen to me very carefully, *River Mother*. *Antelope Hunter* became a cheetah hunter long before *Baby Man* was born—which was nine summers ago. Am I correct in this, *River Mother*?”

“Yes. *Raven’s Eye* told me he was born about nine summers ago, when I was six summers old. That is when *Antelope*

Hunter began to frighten me by looking at me like he was stalking me.”

“Exactly. Until that time, *Antelope Hunter* was an obsessed man but not a bad man. He was a great hunter who could think only of hunting antelope with his cheetah. Then, about nine summers ago, he began to change. His shadow grew darker. I saw it. *River Mother* just told us that she noticed a dark change as well. All this happened about the time *Baby Man* was born.”

Monkey Mother was right. His birth must have brought strange spirits into our world. But I found it impossible to believe that *Baby Man* had knowingly brought murderous spirits from Time to Come into our world. At the same time, I knew it was entirely possible they rode in on his back, just like he rode on mine during the vision.

I turned to *Monkey Mother*, “Do you think that every time he dreams he is bringing back more of those same spirits? If this is so, they could be turning the hunters into murderers.”

“No, that cannot happen,” *Monkey Mother* replied. “It happened once because *Baby Man* was living in both worlds. But he now lives entirely in this world. That is why the people in the world in Time to Come cannot see him. We must speak to *Baby Man*.”

I called out, “*Baby Man*, get in here.”

“I am coming so fast *River Mother* I am already there.”

When he saw *Monkey Mother's* eyes, he jumped inside his body just as I had.

“What is it you wish from me, *River Mother*?”

“It is not *River Mother* who wishes something from you, but *me*,” *Monkey Mother* snapped. “Tell me of your birth.”

“What exactly do you wish to know about it, *Monkey Mother*?”

“Do not you play with me, you fat little fool! I want to know everything you remember!”

“Everything?”

Right then I felt *Monkey Mother* leave her body and slap him so hard his face bent. The words poured out of him so fast I could barely understand what he was saying: “I guess you do want everything, or as I like to say, everything as I remember it, but let me tell you first I am not afraid of anything, so do not think I am afraid of you, *Monkey Mother*.”

No sooner had those words come out of his mouth than I felt *Monkey Mother* leave her body again and slap him so hard I thought his face was going to disappear. That did it. He ducked behind his hands to protect himself and said, “What I remember first is that I was very small, even smaller than a baby’s finger and I was all curled up and I had a tail like a lizard and a head like a fish. And I also remember I was always talking in that strange tongue even though I had no mouth.”

“That’s enough,” *Monkey Mother* snapped. “He is from a world in Time to Come. No one born into one world—this world—can remember back that far. Not even me.”

She looked at all of us with the same sharp eyes. “Do any of you remember back that far? *River Mother*?”

“No. I just remember being born and seeing your eyes. That was it.”

Neither *Moon Under Water* nor my mother said anything. Finally, *Monkey Mother* said, “I have heard stories of this—of a person being born from a world in Time to Come. They *usually* do not live very long because they are so terrified they do very stupid things—like *Baby Man* walking on his hands in front of the crocodiles. But sometimes they learn to live with the terror and confusion, as *Baby Man* has done. He had us fooled at first. We thought he was stupid, or crazy, or he had something wrong with him we couldn’t understand. But now his behavior makes perfect sense.

“No one,” she continued, “knows why, but sometimes the soul splits upon coming into this world. Once this happens, there is no turning back. Part of the soul enters a mother’s belly in *this* world, and part of it stays somewhere outside this world, where it watches the world in Time to Come and gets to know what it is like. And do not ask me where that *somewhere outside this world* is, because I do not know. All I know is what the stories say—that it exists—and here is the strangest part: the *watching* part of the soul also gets to watch the baby growing in the belly of the mother. So the watching part of the soul is always reminded that the other part of it—the part that will make it whole—is with the baby in the mother’s belly.

“This observing of the growing baby and the world in Time to Come by the *watching* part of the soul begins as soon as the soul splits—which is usually just before the baby is like a very tiny fish—but the stories say it sometimes happens sooner. When the baby is born, the *watching* part of the soul lets go and is suddenly pulled into *this world* so the soul can be whole again. Once that happens, there is no way back. This is what has happened with *Baby Man*. That is why he knows so much about the world in Time to Come, and also why he knows *so little* of it. His memories of his world in Time to Come are from that *watching* time. We know the soul is never a baby, that it is always full grown, so to speak. Yet we also know *Baby Man’s* memories of what he watched in *Time to Come* are like the memories of a baby, not a grown person.

“This is very strange,” she continued, “but I believe I know why this happens. The tiny baby’s body in this world that the *watching* half of the soul must enter at birth is like a very, very small, bare hut. When the *watching* part of the soul enters that hut at birth to join the other half of the soul and *become one* with the baby’s body, the only memories that fit—that make sense—are very simple ones, like the memories of a baby or a small child. Those kind of simple memories are the only memories *Baby Man* has of his world in Time to Come. Yet they are powerful enough to make his

soul want to return to it every night in his dreams. He is trying to get back, but he doesn't know how. To tell you the truth, no one knows how. *Baby Man* is trapped in our world and he will die in our world."

Chapter 41: I PREPARE TO LEAVE THE VILLAGE

I could not keep *Baby Man* out of my thoughts as we prepared to leave the village for the cliff. Something told me there was no way he was going to let me go without him. And something also told me it would be foolish not to take him with me. I told *Baby Man* to ask *Monkey Mother* and *Runs like Cheetah* and *Bright Hands* to come to my hut. I told *Runs like Cheetah* and *Bright Hands* of my vision. I left nothing out, including what *Monkey Mother* had said about *Baby Man*. I then asked *Bright Hands* to make the preparations she thought necessary. I depended on her. She had a way of forgetting nothing and remembering everything.

“When will we leave?” *Bright Hands* asked.

“We will leave as soon as you and *Runs like Cheetah* are finished making preparations. That should not take more than one moon. I want you to take some gold and my robe and staff and headdress and secure them so they will be safe from damage and theft during the journey. It will take us at least four moons to get to the faraway place, maybe more. It will not be easy. Once we get past the rapid water and rocks, the water becomes smooth and wide. We can then go by water if we choose. But to get to the smooth water, we will have to travel by foot. Travelers tell us those paths are very difficult. It should take us two moons to get to the smooth water. There we can build rafts and let the current take us down river to the cliffs and the great blue water. This should take us another two moons.”

Runs like Cheetah spoke, “It is not just the journey that will be difficult, *River Mother*. There are fierce tribes all along the way, or so travelers tell us.”

“I know this,” I replied, “but we shall have an advantage over those who wish to rob and kill us—we will travel by night as often as we can, despite the night-hunting animals. The Twilight Time has accustomed us to this. We will also

have your two cheetahs to protect us against the night-hunting animals. The cheetahs will also protect us from those who would rob and kill us. My guess is these tribes have never seen trained cheetahs. Unless they attack in great numbers, just the sight of the cheetahs should end any attack. I know you will not like hearing this, *Runs like Cheetah*, but I want you to begin training the cheetahs to kill humans on command, and to go only for the throat and to do it swiftly, so they can go from one attacker to the next. If the cheetahs keep moving, nothing can stop them. If we lose them, we will be easy prey.”

Runs like Cheetah laughed and said, “I know you will not like hearing this, *River Mother*, but I have been training them to do this for the past three months. They are ready now. But they are very nervous and easily confused. The training went against everything they have been taught since birth. They will never again be the same around humans. They must always be muzzled and leashed. I am afraid what they might do in a close fight, especially at night. They could attack one of us by mistake. I am sure they would never attack me—they know my scent, but I am not that sure about you or *Bright Hands* or *Ghost Hunter*. I will spend this time training them to recognize your scents as well. And that of *Baby Man*. We must take him. He would be a good addition. If nothing else, he can watch *Ghost Hunter*. I like *Baby Man*. He is brave to the point of foolishness and he cannot help but keep our spirits up. If we do not take him, you must know by this time that he is also stubborn enough to follow us all the way to the great blue water.”

Bright Hands broke in here, “*Runs like Cheetah* is right. Only death will stop him from following you, *River Mother*. You made him your Messenger and Listener. But what will he be if you leave him here? He will be the Messenger and Listener of nobody. He will become a joke. He will die of shame. If you take him as *Runs like Cheetah* suggests, you can even give him a new title: the Watcher of *Ghost Hunter*.”

“Where we are going,” I replied, “is not just a new place. I cannot explain this but I sense we are also going to a place that will somehow be closer to the worlds in Time to Come. I also believe that *Baby Man* and I are linked in such a way that I may be able to go with him when he dreams of the world in Time to Come that he came from.”

Monkey Mother suddenly spoke up, “I know you have been thinking about this, *River Mother*. I have smelled the smoke. We both know it is possible for your spirit body to join with his when he dreams. But I warn you—*Baby Man* is not a shaman. There is no predicting what will happen. His dreaming body will be like that of a baby, because that is what it is—as are his memories of that world. You must remember this: while *Baby Man* may not be able to fully enter the world he came from, you are a great shaman for whom such things are possible. But you must never forget that it is *Baby Man* who has taken you there—and therefore it is *Baby Man* who must take you back.

“It is not,” *Monkey Mother* continued, “as if you had journeyed to Time to Come by yourself. I have done that and you can too. But when you are joined to *Baby Man* you must always remember this: if you break away from his dreaming body to enter his world in Time to Come so you can see things for yourself—and not through his eyes—your spirit body will be in great danger if he suddenly wakes up in *our* world. If that happens—if he suddenly wakes up in our world—his dreaming body must return to our world. If you are not quick enough in rejoining him, you will be left in that world and *Baby Man’s* dreaming self will no longer be there to guide you back. You *may* be able to find your way back, but I must warn you that your spirit body may become as trapped in that world as *Baby Man* is in this one. No one knows. Better you *never* break away from him and be content to see things through his eyes as best you can.”

I nodded and called *Baby Man* into the hut.

“Yes, *River Mother*, what is it you wish to tell me?”

“I have decided you will be leaving with us when we journey to the great blue water.”

“But I already know this, *River Mother*.”

“And how did you know this my little honey-making bee? Were you outside listening to what you shouldn’t have been?”

“Oh, no, *River Mother* I would never do that. As I told you, I just know things—especially when you are concerned.”

“And did you also know that I am going to give you a new title?”

“I hope it is one that gives me more time to relieve myself.”

“I am afraid it will give you less, my little one-leg-hopping-up- and-down-question-popper. You are to be the Watcher of *Ghost Hunter*.”

“That will not be easy, *River Mother*. *Ghost Hunter* is only one summer old and he is already running between your legs like a rabbit too fast to catch.”

“Maybe you will be able to slow him down with some of your questions.”

“I am already hopping up and down as I am making them up for him, *River Mother*.”

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Chapter 42: WE LEAVE THE VILLAGE FOREVER

We had a great feast the night before we left the village. Near the end, *Moon Traveler* sang a song of goodbye in his high, sad voice, and *Little Man* did tricks for everyone, including making a big bone come out of *Baby Man's* ear.

Baby Man, of course, couldn't resist whacking *Little Man* on the head with it and then *Monkey Mother* whacked *Baby Man* on the head with her stick and everyone couldn't stop laughing and then just as quickly everyone began to cry. All of our loved ones kept telling us that they would be waiting for us when we returned, but I knew we would never see them again. That night was beautiful, but it was also like a small death.

We left the village the next morning in four dugouts—three were paddled by the three young hunters and the fourth by *Runs like Cheetah* and his muzzled cheetahs. We planned to let the dugouts drift downriver until we reached the fast, rocky water. That would take about a day. Once there, we would have to get out and continue our journey by foot and the three young hunters would then paddle back to the village with the four dugouts.

Soon, we were drifting downriver with the current, one dugout following the other like a string of beads. The lead dugout contained *Runs like Cheetah* and his cheetahs. The second contained a young hunter along with our supplies and *Baby Man*. The third held the second young hunter and me. The fourth dugout held the third young hunter along with *Bright Hands* and *Ghost Hunter*,

It was a lazy day. At times we had to get out and drag the dugouts over the rocks but the river was generally deep enough for the dugouts to float. When we passed the far bend, we saw the Spirit Caves and the Mound of Prophecy

and then, eventually, we began to drift past the antelope plain where *Runs like Cheetah* had been taught to hunt.

The riverbank leading to the antelope plain was still crawling with crocodiles—which puzzled me—until far ahead on the opposite shore I spied the *Antelope Hunter*—and his Lion Shaman—hiding in the underbrush. Their eyes were fixed on *Runs like Cheetah* in the lead dugout. The sight of us suddenly coming upon them had clearly startled them. The river was narrow where they were hiding and several large boulders in the middle of the river began forcing us closer and closer to where they were hiding. Their eyes were filled with terror. They were sure we had come to kill them.

Right then, I went on the attack. *Bright Hands* was in the dugout behind me with the baby. I gave her a quick hand signal meaning *hide the baby* and then I stood up and called out to *Antelope Hunter* in the distance, “We have come here to challenge you to the death.”

The two cheetahs in the lead dugout caught *Antelope Hunter's* scent and began to strain furiously at their leashes. I called out again: “*Antelope Hunter*, here is your chance for revenge—but I know you will not take it, you coward, because then you would have to fight us—and not helpless women and children. Hear me *Antelope Hunter*: if you ever come near this river again, we will cut you to pieces and feed you to the crocodiles. Now crawl back into the jungle with your shaman and never again come anywhere near this river. We will stay here for a short while before we turn back to the village. If we can still hear you, I will send the cheetahs after you and we will end it right here. Now go!”

No sooner had I said that than *Baby Man* stood on his hands in the dugout and shouted, “I am not afraid of you, *Antelope Hunter*, and I am not afraid of your dirty Lion Shaman either. If you do not get out of here, I am going to beat you worse than *Monkey Mother's* stick.”

Antelope Hunter and the Lion Shaman were speechless. Crazy memories of their defeat and *Baby Man* walking on his hands behind the fire bundles must have raced through their minds because they suddenly turned and ran back into the jungle like frightened animals.

I turned to the three young hunters and whispered, “They think we came here to kill them. They had no idea we were leaving the village. *Mafdet* was with us for this to happen. When you return this way, do it very late at night—and very silently. I do not want them to ever know that we have left the village. Hopefully, fear will keep them deep in the jungle. I am going to give a loud command for us to return to the village, but when I give it, do nothing—just put your paddles quietly away and be still and let the sliding currents take us all silently down the river.”

Chapter 43: THIEVES AND MURDERERS

The dugouts made travelling downriver easy at first, but after a while the river became very rocky and we often had get out and walk the dugouts through the rocks. Sometimes the river was so low and rocky we had to carry the heavy dugouts, which was exhausting. It would have been much easier if the three young hunters had still been with us, but they had long ago returned to the village. After days of struggling through the rocks, we decided to leave the dugouts and continue by walking along the trail on the river's edge. I took the lead with my spear, followed by *Bright Hands*, followed by *Baby Man* carrying *Ghost Hunter*, with *Runs Like Cheetah* and his cheetahs taking up the rear.

Traveling at night allowed us to avoid the many thieves who preyed on travelers during the day. Some thieves preferred the night because it hid them, even if it put them at risk of being killed by lions, who almost always hunted at night. Yet the prospect of gaining some spears or arrows or pots without having to work for them made some of the thieves put their fear away long enough to risk it.

We were only two nights out when the first band of thieves surrounded us. They must have thought we were only two women with a small fat boy. In the darkness, the thieves had not seen *Runs Like Cheetah* lagging behind to protect our rear. The six thieves were completely naked and each was skinnier and uglier than the next. They kept jabbering wildly at us, threatening to kill us if we did not give them everything we had. I am sure the only thing that stopped them from killing us right there was the sight of my white cheetah tear marks. The marks definitely frightened them, so I stepped forward with my spear and challenged the skinny, rat-faced leader to a one-on-one fight, hoping he would back down and order the pack to slink back into the jungle.

What I was afraid of most was that they would see *Runs like Cheetah* and suddenly panic and seize the large sealed gourd that *Bright Hands* was carrying on her back. The gourd contained my robe and headdress as well as a small amount of gold. I knew I was not to enter the land near the great blue water without those things.

Mafdet was with us because *Runs like Cheetah* heard the thieves jabbering and worked his way up through the jungle to where they surrounded us. Then, just as I was challenging the rat-faced leader, *Runs like Cheetah* burst out of the undergrowth with his cheetahs, pointed to the leader and gave a fierce whistle—then quickly pointed to the next thief and gave another fierce whistle. The two thieves were so stunned and the cheetahs so quick that the thieves had their throats ripped out before they could raise their arms to protect themselves.

When the thieves dropped to the ground, gasping and bleeding through the huge holes in their throats, the panting cheetahs stepped quietly back and waited for *Runs like Cheetah* to give them another signal. There was no need—the remaining four raced off into the jungle screaming that I was a cheetah-witch. Word of the cheetah-witch must have spread down the trail very quickly, because we weren't bothered by thieves again until we were near the end of the trail. This time, ten well-armed thieves with long greasy hair popped out of the dark jungle and demanded our things. Again, the darkness prevented them from seeing *Runs like Cheetah* walking the trail well behind us, and that failure allowed *Runs like Cheetah* to again come up through the jungle and set the cheetahs loose upon them.

It was the second time I had seen close up how savage and lightning-quick the cheetahs could be. In a matter of moments, the two thieves were lying on the ground, gasping and bleeding from their torn throats while the cheetahs sat patiently next to them, waiting for the next signal from *Runs*

like Cheetah. The eight remaining thieves were terrified, but their numbers emboldened one of them to grab the gourd *Bright Hands* was carrying. His right hand was about a foot away from it when one of the cheetahs leapt up and tore his throat out. That ended the game right there. The seven surviving thieves raced into the jungle screaming, and for the rest of our time on the trail, we were never again approached by thieves.

Lions, as we were to find out, proved to be far more dangerous than thieves. They always hunted at night, right up until dawn, and since we were also traveling at night, they immediately made themselves known. The cheetahs were no match for them—the lions were simply too large and too strong. Even worse, they hunted together in large packs—and they were very good at it.

Of course, we had known all this before we left the village, but it took an actual night attack to show us how ill-prepared we really were. It almost cost us our lives. One thing we had not really thought through before we left the village was how we would actually handle an attack by lions. We had little experience with such things because prey was plentiful in our area, making lion attacks on people very rare.

In addition, a wide circle of high thorn bushes outside the village protected us from animals that hunted at night, the most dangerous being lions. The only approach that wasn't protected by thorns was an attack from the river. Lions can be good swimmers if they need to be, but the river was very wide near the village and the current fast, so it was almost impossible for the lions to come in that way. As a result, we seldom had a face-to-face encounter with them. But that was not the case on the river trails we were following. The lions were everywhere. And they were waiting for us.

Chapter 44: THE LIONS

The first lion attack came on our fourth night. The cheetahs detected their scent and bared their fangs, but we knew they would be no match for the lions, who approached us from the jungle, trapping us against the river. We quickly chose the river. It was very rocky, but shallow. *Runs like Cheetah* commanded the cheetahs to stand their ground. Their presence held the pack off long enough for us to get to a large flat rock some distance from the shore.

As soon as we reached the rock, *Runs like Cheetah* signaled the cheetahs to come to him and they flew over the water, bounding from rock to rock. The lions were not as nimble, and hesitated for a bit at the river bank, not knowing if they would have to swim. That was all the time *Runs like Cheetah* needed.

Monkey Mother had given us a very strong poison, even stronger than the poison used to kill the crocodiles, but it had to be handled very, very carefully and it had to be applied to the arrow tips just before shooting. That took time—and care. *Monkey Mother* had warned us that if only a drop fell accidentally onto an open scratch or in our mouths or eyes, we would die instantly.

The lions leapt in, and finding the river shallow, surged toward us. But the cheetahs had given us enough time for me to open the small jar of poison and dip three arrows in it. I held two of them very carefully, while *Runs like Cheetah* drew the third in his bow. *Runs like Cheetah* waited very patiently. He knew that the rocks in the river would make the lions swerve from side to side. This meant they couldn't attack head on—which was a very difficult shot. Their twisting and turning would expose their soft flanks, which is exactly what happened as they raced across the shallow river.

The first arrow of *Runs like Cheetah* hit the lead lioness in the belly. She went down screaming and thrashing and died almost instantly. That was enough to slow the pack down and for *Runs like Cheetah* to draw a second arrow and kill another the same way. That ended it right there.

The two remaining lionesses turned and ran back into the jungle. *Runs like Cheetah* very carefully took the third arrow from me and shot it across the river, just missing the last lion. He then said to us, "If the lions are hungry enough to attack humans, it is likely they will try again. It is better if we stay on this rock until morning."

When morning came and the lions did not reappear, we returned to walking the trail. But then, six nights later, the same thing happened. Again, *Runs like Cheetah* commanded the cheetahs to stay and we jumped into the river. This time, however, the river became deep very quickly and we had to swim a good distance to get to a large rock.

Baby Man was in the lead. For a small fat boy, he was a very fast swimmer. *Bright Hands* and I—carrying *Ghost Hunter* between us—followed some distance behind him, with *Runs like Cheetah* last to protect us from the rear.

Swimming was hard enough, but *Bright Hands* and I had to do it carrying the baby between us, while *Baby Man* and *Runs like Cheetah* had to do so carrying our supplies. The lions, however, were carrying nothing and were very swift swimmers and they had almost caught up with *Runs like Cheetah* when *Baby Man* reached the large rock.

Runs like Cheetah kept jabbing the lead lioness in the nose with his spear, but that just made her angrier. When *Baby Man* saw what was happening, he dove back into the water and swam quickly down river to a smaller rock where he climbed out, stood on his head, and began screaming at the

lions, "I am not afraid of you, you ugly lions. Try and take a bite out of me. I am not afraid, you know"

The lions were as startled as we were and began swimming madly toward *Baby Man*—and then they suddenly turned like a flock of birds and begin heading for us again. But those few moments gave us just enough time to get to the large rock and for *Runs like Cheetah* to dip two arrows in the poison.

He struck the two lead lions in the exposed soft side of their necks just before they turned away from *Baby Man*. The two lions shuddered and sank as soon as the arrows hit. Again, that ended it. The remaining lions turned back and headed for the jungle.

Runs like Cheetah looked at me and said, "We cannot go on like this. We do not have enough poison for one thing. Sooner or later these lions are going to get to us. Something is wrong. These lions, like the others, looked well fed. Yet they attacked us."

"I know," I replied. "There is plenty of prey here. I have seen it with my own eyes. It is the doing of the Lion Shaman, I know it. Somehow he has given my scent to the lions in this area and associated it with danger. When they catch my scent, they sense their lives are being threatened, and they attack."

"How do you know this?"

"Did you see the way the lions headed toward *Baby Man* and then how they suddenly turned back toward us? They should have kept going toward that little tasty bit of fat. But they only did so for a short time. Then their sense of me as a mortal threat suddenly seized their attention again."

"But how did the Lion Shaman do this? You are a stranger to this area and to the lions."

"This shaman is very skilled. He must have acquired my scent from *Antelope Hunter*. Then he must have traveled through this area in his spirit body when the lions were sleeping."

“What did he do then?”

“I am not sure, but our scents are a part of our spirit bodies. I suspect the Lion Shaman detected my scent from things I touched with my spirit body at the Antelope Plain and he somehow acquired it and began entering the dreams of the lions and threatening them with it. I am not quite sure how he did that. Perhaps his spirit body took the form of a pack of hyenas—who are a great danger to lions. But he replaced their scent with mine. When the frenzied lions woke up, they remembered my scent as being a mortal danger to them. All they had to do was smell it again and they would attack to kill. That’s why they appeared out of nowhere. They caught my scent.”

“Do you think the Lion Shaman has been following us?”

“No. When we surprised them on the riverbank I think he was as frightened as *Antelope Hunter*. I am sure he is still frightened and hiding deep in the jungle with *Antelope Hunter*.”

“So when did he do all this?”

“He must have begun planning it after *Antelope Hunter* was defeated at the village. From that point on, the contest was no longer between *Antelope Hunter* and me. It was between the Lion Shaman and me.”

Baby Man broke in here and said, “Excuse me for interrupting you, *River Mother*, because you are on the hunt as we can all tell, but the Lion Shaman is a filthy stranger who knows nothing of you. How could he hate you? He has only seen you from a distance. He is not like *Antelope Hunter* who saw you every day and hates you for taking *Runs like Cheetah* from him.”

“Yes, *Baby Man*, it is true he is a stranger, but when *Antelope Hunter* was defeated and shamed, the Lion Shaman was also shamed. I humiliated him. That is why he hates me. But that is just the surface. His true hatred goes far beyond that humiliation. Deep in his soul he hates me

because I am a woman opposed to the savage ways of men. I believe the time is coming when men will no longer accept the wisdom of women and will replace it with their own murderous ways.

“The attack of *Antelope Hunter* was an omen of that time to come. When that omen will fully bear its evil fruit, I do not know. But I assure you it is going to happen. It is what the future holds for us. If you have any doubts about this, look at the world *Baby Man* came from. It is a world where women are held down like animals. Is this not so, *Baby Man?*”

“Yes, *River Mother*, that is the truth as I remember it.”

“The Lion Shaman,” I continued, “is still another omen of this world to come. That is why fate brought *Antelope Hunter* and the Lion Shaman together. But the Lion Shaman is very cunning. He also knows that *Antelope Hunter* has become useless—what could he do to us now with no fingers and no voice? The crocodiles we caught the Lion Shaman feeding with *Antelope Hunter* are of no real interest to him. They were just a way of keeping *Antelope Hunter*’s attention while he found out more about me and the village. Like *Antelope Hunter*, the Lion Shaman has become obsessed with killing me—and he will not stop until that happens.”

Baby Man jumped up, “Excuse me for speaking out of turn as so many fools do, *River Mother*, but if you believe this, as I am sure you do being who you are, why did you not kill him back at the river—that is what I want to know, as I am sure many others do if I may be so bold as to speak for them.”

“I do not know why *Baby Man*. I should have killed him, but I did not. I could tell you that I was too surprised to kill him, but that is not the true answer. The true answer is that Fate wanted him to survive and I bowed to Fate. I am afraid we are going to see more of the Lion Shaman, but where and when I cannot say. I am sure he had not expected

us to appear as we did, with spears and drawn bows and arrows, but I do not believe he was completely surprised. After all, he is a powerful shaman. He must have had a vision that I would be traveling south—but the vision must not have told him I would be with an armed group, which is why he was so surprised. His vision must have only shown him that I would be travelling south—but not how or why—and that I would eventually walk the trails. That is when he summoned his spirit body and began entering the dreams of lions living along the trail. He may be hiding in the jungle, but those lions are not. I have no idea how many there are, but I do know this—one whiff of my scent and they will be upon us.”

Chapter 45: THE RAFT

The next morning *Runs like Cheetah* said to us, “We had a narrow escape last night. If it weren’t for *Baby Man’s* quick thinking and his strong swimming we might be bones in the river today. We cannot walk this trail anymore. One of these nights the lions are going to get the better of us. We have to build a raft from the bamboo that is all around us. If the lions try to attack it, we will be hard to reach because we will be moving downriver with the current, and it is swift here. But there is a problem: we will not be able to paddle in any direction as we do in the dugouts, so we may get stuck between rocks. On the other hand, the raft will not sink and it will carry all of us. Even if the water gets very low in places, it will be light enough that we will be able to drag it easily over the riverbed.”

That was enough to get us all working. We spent the rest of the day cutting down ten large bamboo trees. After we had trimmed the trunks to the length of ten men it began getting dark, so we swam back to the large rock and slept. The next day we lashed the ten trunks together with vines. The raft was not wide, only the height of a man, but it was narrow enough to make its way though the rocks scattered throughout the river.

We then took six shorter trunks and placed them across the long trunks: two at each end and two in the middle. The two in the middle we placed six feet apart so we could build platform on it to keep *Ghost Hunter* and our fire-starter gourd dry. By the time we’d finished, it was getting dark again, so we swam back to the safety of the large rock and slept. The next day, we tested the raft. We tied it to shore and got on. The water seeped through the logs and got our feet wet, but it still floated above the water. We wove small pieces of bamboo over the two center cross pieces so that anything placed on top would stay safe and dry. It looked like a long arrow without a point, but I knew it would take

us to the wide smooth water and once there we could make the raft wider.

I suggested that one of us take it out to see how it handled, especially when it began to drift through the rocks. *Runs like Cheetah* suggested that in addition to paddles, a long pole also be used to push off rocks and then *Bright Hands* reminded us the river could get deep very quickly and suggested that two people, not just one, take it out in case someone fell in the water.

At this point, *Baby Man* interrupted our suggestions: “Excuse me for speaking out of turn, as I know I am but a boy who sometimes knows more than he should, but in the world I come from there are rafts much larger than this in the rivers leading to the great blue water. I remember seeing them, and they all had long paddles at the rear of the rafts to steer them as they drifted. The long pole is also used—but only where the water is shallow. And we must cut the front of the raft so it is like the sharp tip of an arrow, as is done in the world I come from, so it will cut through the water easily and help the long raft slide off anything it hits head on.”

Bright Hands looked at *Baby Man*. Her eyes were sharper than I had ever seen them. It was almost as if she were trying to see through him, and then she looked at me and said, “I usually know what will make things work, but this little rascal knows more than all of us put together when it comes to this raft. We should do whatever he tells us to do.”

Then she turned to *Baby Man* and said, “Is there anything else we should do to make the raft better?”

“Yes, *Bright Hands*, but first let me correct you if I may. I do not know more than you do, I would never say that, not even to myself when I am alone wishing I were taller or better looking, but I have seen things that you have not, which is why I seem to know things that you do not. One of

the things I remember seeing in my world is a larger platform in the middle of the raft, but we can build that after we test the raft. We should put six more trunks across the middle of the raft and weave the same kind of platform across them. Then, not only can baby *Ghost Hunter* be dry when he sleeps, but so can we. Anyway, that is how I remember seeing the platforms in the world I came from. The platforms were never at the end or front of the boat, but I cannot say why.”

Bright Hands replied, “That is because the weight of the platforms at the ends would make the boat bob up and down in rough water. Keeping the weight in the middle keeps the raft level, which is what we want. Is there anything else, *Baby Man*?”

“Yes, those who test the raft should be strong swimmers. Who knows what will happen in the fast, rocky water. There is always the chance that a weak swimmer might drown. As I am the strongest swimmer among us—I should be one of the testers. As for the other one, I think it should be you, *Bright Hands*. You are not a strong swimmer, but you are a fast thinker as they say, and that is just as good. Besides, neither you nor I are as important as *River Mother* and *Runs like Cheetah*. If they are lost by drowning then we would also be lost even if we are both alive on the shore with dry feet, as the saying goes.”

Bright Hands gave him another sharp look. Unlike me, she had never really seen this side of *Baby Man* close up and she did not quite know what to do with it. Finally, she burst out with: “Far be it from me to interrupt you, *Baby Man*, but if I may be so bold as to question someone like you who has seen things I have not, is there anything else we should do?” “Yes, *Bright Hands*. we must get some very long, tough vines, as long as ten men—or as long as ten tall women, if you like—and tie one end to the front of the raft and the other to a large rock the size of my belly which we will keep

on the center platform. I have seen these on the large boats in my world. They are called anchor rocks and are thrown into the water to stop the boat from moving. If we get completely out of control, the large rock may save us. That is all I know. We should get to work on all of these things and then test the raft.”

Within two days we had fashioned a steering paddle and two long poles for shallow water. On the third day, we made a long rope of twisted vines and fastened one end to the heavy rock and the other to the cross trunks at the front of the boat. On the fourth day, we carved the front of the raft into a sharp point. I asked *Baby Man* if he was ready for the test.

“Yes, *River Mother*, I am always ready, but I am never exactly sure for what—which is why I am always asking questions for which there are sometimes no answers. As for the test, we must make the first one during daylight, so we can see what is happening. The second test we will do at night. If everything works, we will know we are ready.”

I turned to *Bright Hands*. “Are you as ready as *Baby Man* is?”

“Yes, *River Mother*, I am. But I think it would be wise of you to ask *Mafdet* to be with us. We are not a water people and have much to learn.”

Chapter 46: THE TEST

We pushed the raft off and it began drifting around in a slow circle until *Bright Hands* was finally able to straighten it out with her pole. *Baby Man* kept it going straight downriver with the steering oar and for a short while everything seemed to be fine. We were cheering them on from the trail when we saw the raft bounce off something underwater and slowly turn until it was moving downriver sideways—but this time the water was too deep for *Bright Hands* to straighten it out with her pole—and then I saw *Baby Man* suddenly swing out over the river at the end of his steering oar.

The raft was headed for a small waterfall when *Bright Hands* tossed the large anchor rock over the side. The twisted vines began racing off the side of the raft like a long green snake and then the front of the raft suddenly swung around into the current and the raft stopped dead in the water. And then, just as suddenly, the steering oar handle swung back over the center of the raft with *Baby Man* still hanging on it like he'd just arrived from another world.

Runs like Cheetah picked up a long vine and began racing down the trail to where the raft was. It had stopped only a short distance from the trail so *Runs like Cheetah* was able to tie one end of the vine to a large tree and then swim out with the other end and tie it to the front of the boat. Then he and *Bright Hands* managed to pull up the anchor rock from the bottom of the river and the raft began drifting down river again—until the vine tied to the tree tightened and the raft quickly swung around and then over to the river bank and stopped dead against it. The first test was over but it was hardly a good one.

Baby Man looked completely confused and blurted out: “I never saw a steering oar swing out like that in my dreams. It almost took my head off.”

Bright Hands looked at me and said, “I am surprised *Baby Man* was not knocked out and drowned. The steering oar handle is much too short. When the raft hit something underwater and turned sideways, it pinned the steering paddle sideways against the back of the raft and swung our fat little talker out over the water before he knew what had happened. If he had not somehow hung on like a scared monkey, he would have surely dropped into the river and been swept over the falls.”

Baby Man had been listening to all this with intense interest. He suddenly put his hands on his hips and puffed out his sizeable belly and said, “I shouldn’t have to say this to you, *Bright Hands*, because you are a very special person as *River Mother* is fond of saying, but you have missed something I have proved over and over again—which is this: I am not afraid of anything—and although I may have looked scared to you, I was not—only surprised—and there is a difference as everybody knows—and may I also be so bold as to say that if the same thing had happened to you, *Bright Hands*, you would have been screaming like a baby afraid of falling in the water, because everyone knows you swim like a rock or maybe worse.”

For a moment, *Bright Hands* looked like she was going to swat him, and then she simply shrugged and said to *Baby Man*, “You should lengthen the steering oar handle until it reaches the center platform. With the extra length, any force against the paddle can be easily countered. Even someone as tall and strong as *Runs like Cheetah* would have been swept off the raft by the old steering handle. And you can believe me when I tell you that even *Runs like Cheetah* would have been hanging on like a scared monkey because he really does swim like a rock.”

Runs like Cheetah began to laugh and soon all of us were laughing and the tension between *Baby Man* and *Bright Hands* simply disappeared. We all set to work lengthening

the steering oar handle and by the next day the raft was ready for another test. We pushed the raft off again and with *Bright Hands* using the pole and *Baby Man* on the new steering paddle, the raft headed downstream like an arrow.

When the small falls came up, the front of the raft went over first and dipped underwater, but it quickly bobbed up and then the back of the raft slipped over without a problem. The raft then headed downstream, easily avoiding the large rocks, until it went aground on the riverbed where the water was very shallow. We grabbed *Ghost Hunter* and raced down to help them push the raft off, but they got it off all by themselves and continued downriver, testing the steering this way, then that way, before steering it toward the riverbank next to the trail where they let it go aground.

It was clear that the changes had worked and that the raft design was a good one. When I remembered how the front of the raft had gone over the small falls and then quickly bobbed up, I saw how correct *Bright Hands* had been in telling us to listen to *Baby Man* about carving the front like an arrow and not putting any weight there.

Yet we also knew the raft had to be tested in the dark if we were to continue traveling by night, so *Bright Hands* and *Baby Man* shoved off again as soon as it was dark. They stuck a tall torch in the middle platform so we could follow them and we stood on the bank watching the light from the torch begin to drift this way, then that way, in the darkness until it got smaller and smaller. And then, suddenly, it disappeared. We had no idea if they had sunk or simply gone around a bend in the river, so we grabbed *Ghost Hunter* and the cheetahs and began running down the trail shouting their names. The trail suddenly curved around and we saw the grounded raft on the river bank with *Baby Man* and *Bright Hands* both sitting on it laughing.

Bright Hands told us they had grounded the raft on purpose because it was almost impossible to see the rocks at night, especially with the raft moving so fast—and that even with the light of the moon they had bounced off several small rocks they simply had not seen. That was enough to make them decide to ground the raft before they smashed into something big and damaged the raft. That was it for traveling by night. We slept on the raft and the next morning, as *Baby Man* had suggested, we made the center platform much larger and then we pushed off and began traveling by day. The Twilight Time was over.

Chapter 47: WE DRIFT AND DRIFT AND DRIFT

We may have thought the Twilight Time was over, but we had a hard time adjusting to staying awake during the day. When we tried to sleep at night, we spent most of it wide awake looking at each other. To make matters worse, when we were drifting downriver during the day—and needed to be alert—we would suddenly fall asleep.

Something had to be done, so I suggested we go back to sleeping during the day. I said, “We cannot return completely to Twilight Time, but we can drift from dawn to noon and then throw out the anchor stone to stop and sleep until late afternoon when we can start drifting again until dark. We will use the nighttime to do whatever we need to do and then we will start drifting again at the first hint of daylight.”

This worked fine, except we had not thought about being so exposed to the heat of the midday sun. When we had slept on shore during the day, we always had the shade of trees to break the heat, but on the raft we had nothing. Then *Bright Hands* erected four tall bamboo poles at each corner of the center platform and put a woven roof of leaves on top of it. That shade, plus the gentle rocking of the raft and the cool wind coming off the river, made sleeping very pleasant during the hot day.

It was so pleasant that I began to wonder why people did not live on the water like this, but on larger rafts with larger bamboo huts. Such a village would be safe from lions and snakes and the like, and fishing would be very easy compared to hunting. Of course, there were always hippos and crocodiles on the river—and they could be very dangerous—but I couldn’t help thinking that they could be easily avoided if the rafts were held high above the water by large poles stuck in the river bottom.

I talked about this with *Bright Hands* who said, “It would work in places where the water never gets wild, but here, where the river rises and floods so violently, such a pole village would be instantly washed away. Nothing can withstand this river when it floods, although such a village might survive in some remote backwater where the flood waters could be less wild. But I have my doubts—I do not think anything escapes the wrath of this river.”

That ended my dream of a water village and it was a good thing it did, because it made me pay attention to what the crocodiles and hippos were capable of doing. We came very close to being tipped over one day when we accidentally drifted into a herd of bathing hippos. We never made that mistake again. Just remembering the anger of the huge hippos made me doubly thankful we had chosen to drift during the day. We would have never spotted their dark bodies at night.

As for the crocodiles, they were even more treacherous. We steered the raft away from them whenever we saw them. Unlike a dugout, the raft had no sides for protection. They could easily climb on board the raft whenever they wanted. While we could avoid getting close to the hippos, the crocodiles were another matter. They always sunned themselves on the riverbanks, but our scent—and especially the scent of the cheetahs—was always in the air and the crocodiles would often swim out to get a closer look. We usually kept them from climbing on board by jabbing their eyes with the steering poles, but we had our hands full when large numbers swam out.

If the crocodiles got too close, the terrified cheetahs would begin clawing and straining against their leashes because they were tied down and couldn’t escape. It was all *Runs like Cheetah* could do to keep them from strangling themselves. The first time this happened, little *Ghost Hunter* was asleep. When he heard the high, terrified chirping of the cheetahs,

he stood up in his crib—his face horribly distorted—and emitted an ear-splitting sound that went right through my body. I knew right then he had become possessed. I looked over at *Bright Hands*. Her entire body was trembling with fear. She couldn't take her eyes off *Ghost Hunter*. Whatever it was she saw must have been absolutely terrifying because she never again asked to hold *Ghost Hunter*. But *Ghost Hunter's* scream had stopped the crocodiles from coming any closer. It was as if it had created a wall of fire around us.

After that, almost every time we stopped to sleep, the same scene would repeat itself. The crocodiles would swim out to attack us until the cheetahs caught their scent and began to strain furiously against their leashes trying to escape, at which time *Ghost Hunter's* tiny face would become horribly distorted and he would stand up and begin screaming until the crocodiles turned back. Each time I heard that scream, *Monkey Mother's* prophecy raced through my mind—*“Ghost Hunter has been waiting a long time to enter our world. He will be both a great shaman and a great hunter, but he will be a hunter of a different kind. He has come to rip the seal between worlds—just as he ripped you at birth. Prepare yourself.”*

Chapter 48: WE APPROACH THE WIDE, SMOOTH WATER

Travelers had told us that our journey by foot to the wide, smooth part of the river would take about two moons, but it took almost the same time by raft because we traveled on the water for only a small part of the day.

The raft required far less effort than walking save for the dangerous, rocky stretches of fast water that would suddenly appear. Surviving those took all our strength and skill. We had one last taste of how dangerous fast water could be as we approached the wide, smooth part of the river, which we could see in the distance. It was preceded by a narrow passage of high stone cliffs and we knew the river would gather speed as it narrowed down between them. We could also see it was filled with huge boulders.

As we approached the fast water, I tied *Ghost Hunter* to my back—and none too soon—because we were soon banging against boulders as large as elephants. *Bright Hands* and *Runs like Cheetah* and *Baby Man* worked the long poles and steering paddle as we plunged down through the narrows and then, suddenly, we hit a large underwater rock that lifted one side of the raft high enough to cause the large anchoring stone to tumble into the river.

What happened next was almost the end of us. The anchoring vines unwound like a snake as the raft continued to plunge downriver and then the vines suddenly tightened, stopping the raft and spinning it around headfirst into the rushing water. The spin was so quick that *Bright Hands* and *Runs like Cheetah* both lost their footing, as well as their steering poles, and then a large wave washed *Bright Hands* into the river and she would have been lost if *Runs Like Cheetah* had not somehow grabbed her by the hair as she swept past him. The sudden swinging around of the raft into the current also pinned the steering paddle against the rear

of the raft, swinging *Baby Man* out over the water—and then just as quickly back onto the raft as the front of it snapped headfirst into the rushing current. To make things worse, the steering paddle then broke in half, leaving them without any steering at all.

We were completely at the mercy of the churning river and knew we would probably drown or be battered against the huge rocks if we tried to swim ashore. Even worse, if we cut the anchor vines, it was clear that the raft would tumble out of control without any steering and we would be thrown off and probably drowned. *Ghost Hunter* saw the desperation in our eyes and his face suddenly became horribly distorted and he burst out in a cold, hard laugh that sent a chill through me because it wasn't the sound of a baby, but close to that of a man. *Bright Hands* looked at me in stunned silence. Her expression said it all: *He is worse than a demon.*

For some reason, I glanced over at *Baby Man*. He seemed to have forgotten about being snapped off the raft and then back on again because *Ghost Hunter's* demonic laughter had immediately caught his attention. Unlike *Bright Hands*, *Baby Man* couldn't get enough of *Ghost Hunter*. He was fascinated by him from the moment he first saw him and *Ghost Hunter*, even as a newborn, had been equally fascinated by *Baby Man*. There were times *Ghost Hunter* would stare at *Baby Man* for hours. They were surely connected in some hidden way, because unlike *Bright Hands* and the rest of us, *Baby Man* did not seem bothered by *Ghost Hunter's* demonic possessions. In fact, *Baby Man* thought they were funny.

I had asked *Baby Man* about this and he said, "I do not know why I find it so funny, *River Mother*, but I do. He *is* different—but I have never really thought of him as a demon—just a baby doing a very bad imitation of a demon. Maybe that is because he's a baby and can only speak and move like a baby. I felt something like that after I woke up

in the world of the village. I did not really know how to act because everything I knew was completely different from the way things were done in the village.”

I replied, “I remember those days. You were so odd and confused we thought you were a bit crazy. It wasn’t until much later that we understood why you were so different.”

If there was one thing that had set *Baby Man* apart from the rest of us, it was his sense of humor, which was very different from ours. It was the first thing I’d noticed about him. At times, his joking could be so sly and double-edged I couldn’t tell if he was serious or trying to be funny. But after *Monkey Mother* had determined that his strangeness was due to his being from Time to Come, everything about him began to make sense, including his sense of humor. I was about to remind him of this when he suddenly said to me: “If you have the time,

River Mother—and right now that’s all we seem to have—there’s something important I need to tell you about *Ghost Hunter*’s possessions.”

“And what is that, you little rascal? Tell me.”

“I cannot really say why, but I keep getting the feeling that *Ghost Hunter* finds his demonic possessions as funny as I do.”

That was all I had to hear. All my fears about *Ghost Hunter* suddenly whirled down all around me like a flock of crows—I was sure that a spirit from Time to Come was possessing *Ghost Hunter*. I needed the wisdom of *Monkey Mother*. I entered my spirit body and went to her. She was sitting by the riverbank drawing circles in the mud when she looked up at me and said, “I’ve been waiting for you. What took you so long?”

“*Monkey Mother*, I need your wisdom.”

“I know you do. Listen to me very carefully, *River Mother*. What is possessing *Ghost Hunter* is a very powerful God-Goddess from Time to Come, but the world it comes from is

different from the world of *Baby Man*. It is a world closer to the rising sun.”

She drew a large circle in the mud and split it down the middle. “This God-Goddess is like *Ra*.” she said. “It is both male and female. The female side is a protector, a healer. The male side is a fierce destroyer with many arms and many weapons. Both the male and female sides are strongly drawn to *Ghost Hunter*. There is nothing you can do to stop them. *Nothing*. They will ride him like the wind. *Prepare yourself*.”

With that, she went away and I was suddenly back in my body on the raft next to *Baby Man*.

Chapter 49: WE PREPARE TO DIE

Towards the end of the day, *Runs like Cheetah* gathered us together at one end of the raft and said, “We cannot stay here in the middle of the river. We will eventually starve or be swept off by waves. We must cut the anchor vines and hope the Goddesses pin the raft against the cliffs so we can jump off. But if the Goddesses are not with us—and we’re forced to swim—I do not know if any of us will survive.”

“*Runs like Cheetah* is right,” I added. “If the Goddesses do not pin the raft against the cliffs, we may all drown—but I refuse to believe that some of us will not be able to swim to safety. But that leaves us with another problem. Since *Ghost Hunter* cannot swim, he must be tied to someone if he is to survive. Who is that to be?”

“We must tie him to the strongest swimmer,” *Baby Man* squeaked. “And that, if I may say so, is me, Not only am I the best swimmer but I am also the fattest and will float much better than the bone-skinny three of you—and, besides, if I *am* swept under, I will pop up faster and so will *Ghost Hunter*. Am I not right, *Ghost Hunter*, you nasty little baby demon you?”

I do not know why I had been so blind to the fact that *Baby Man* and *Ghost Hunter* had always been connected in some mysterious way. I had completely ignored the fact that during the time I was pregnant, I would feel *Ghost Hunter* stir every time *Baby Man* looked at me. And now a powerful God-Goddess from a different Time to Come—but with the same strange sense of humor as *Baby Man*—had become drawn to *Ghost Hunter*. I was sure it was that same sense of humor that was causing them to find *Ghost Hunter’s* possessions amusing.

I decided *Monkey Mother* was right—there was nothing I could do about the God-Goddess from Time to Come. But I *could* do something about our being unable to move the

raft. I summoned *Mafdet* and felt my right side stiffen as she entered me. Her fierce voice rose up within me and spoke: “*Untie the cheetahs. Then bind the baby to the boy and cut the vine. You are about to enter a new world.*”

I knew the time had come to live or die. I tied *Ghost Hunter* to the back of *Baby Man* and then *Runs like Cheetah* untied the cheetahs and worked his way to the front of the raft and cut the anchor vines. The raft suddenly exploded downriver. For the briefest moment, I saw a laughing *Baby Man* sitting like a fat little spider in the center of a web that went on and on and on.

Chapter 50: WE ENTER THE NEW WORLD

No sooner had *Runs like Cheetah* cut the anchor vine than the raft began spinning like a leaf in a windstorm, smashing against boulder after boulder until the cheetahs became so terrified they both leapt into the churning water. The vines holding the raft together soon began to fray from smashing against the rocks and then, one by one, the long bamboo trunks began to come loose and soon the five of us were desperately holding on to all that was left—the center platform.

I knew it was only a matter of time before the platform itself would break apart, so I reached inside to a shelf containing the small gourd of poison and tied it to *Runs like Cheetah* and then I grabbed the gourd containing my headdress and gold and tied it to myself. No sooner had I done this than we hit another boulder and were thrown like toys into the whitewater. We tried to stay together, but the swift current quickly swept us apart. I could see *Runs like Cheetah* and *Bright Hands* desperately bobbing up and down—their faces already bloody with cuts. The three of us were helpless against the current. We were either hitting rocks or being pulled under like twigs,

I glanced downriver and spied *Baby Man* and *Ghost Hunter* far ahead of us. The two of them were riding on the churning waves as if they weighed no more than a feather. Right then, for some reason, I knew we were all going to survive. No sooner had I thought this than the whitewater suddenly stopped and we were floating in the calm, wide river.

As we floated lazily downriver, regaining our strength, I could see that the river became wider and wider as it flowed on and then I spotted *Baby Man* and *Ghost Hunter* climbing up on the river bank far downriver. I called out to the others to swim towards them. One by one, we dragged our beaten

bodies onto the muddy riverbank, only to be greeted by the amused clapping of *Baby Man* and *Ghost Hunter*.

The first thing *Runs like Cheetah* did was whistle for his cheetahs. At first, there was no answer. Then we heard a faint, faraway chirping and a few moments later we spotted them racing towards us on the riverbank. They were badly cut and bruised—*Runs like Cheetah* said it would take a few days before they could hunt again—but they were strong enough for protection against thieves. We had entered what seemed an entirely new land with its wide, calm river. When we had crawled up on the riverbank, naked and bloody as newborns, I felt like I was being born again. Naked was hardly the word for it. All of our possessions and weapons had been swallowed by the river except for the two gourds tied to our bodies.

As I watched *Baby Man* and *Ghost Hunter* laughing and playing together in the mud, I suddenly realized the two of them had barely been touched. It was almost as if they had been protected by an invisible hand in their plunge down the churning river. My first thought was that *Mafdet* had protected them, but something told me that she had only made sure they were tied together for safety. Then it came to me: the God/Goddess from Time to Come—the female protector—must have kept *Ghost Hunter* from being harmed—and in doing so, she had also kept *Baby Man* safe, because if *Baby Man* had drowned, *Ghost Hunter* would surely have drowned with him. Right then it became clear to me that as long as they were bound closely to each other, *Ghost Hunter* would be kept from harm by the female protector from Time to Come—and so would fat little *Baby Man*.

Chapter 51: THE WIDE RIVER GETS WIDER

As we lay on the riverbank regaining our strength, I knew we had to build another raft—and quickly. This time, we knew exactly what we had to do; we just had to find the tools to do it. First, *Runs like Cheetah* built a fire. We would need it for protection at night from the lions on one side of us and the crocodiles on the other. *Bright Hands* found some large sharp stones and made hand axes and soon we were all cutting down the large bamboo and vines growing a short distance from the riverbank. By the end of the day, we had cut half of what we would need and then we rested. Before dark, *Baby Man* and *Runs Like Cheetah* quickly made some thin bamboo spears and set about spearing fish and frogs in the shallows. That was our evening meal. We set about gathering enough dead wood to feed the fire all night and then we huddled together for warmth and fell into a deep sleep.

The cheetahs seemed to have recovered faster than we had expected, so come morning, *Runs Like Cheetah* set out with them to kill some antelopes. The rest of us began cutting as much bamboo as we could before the dark set in. When *Runs Like Cheetah* returned with his kill just before dark, he fed the cheetahs and then us. The two antelope he had killed were large, so we ate well. We were exhausted from the heavy work and again fell asleep in each other's arms as soon as it got dark. But this time we were suddenly awakened in the middle of the night by the terrified chirping of the cheetahs. They had caught the scent of crocodiles on the riverbank. *Runs Like Cheetah* knew the crocodiles must have smelled the blood and meat, so he grabbed the heads and hooves of the butchered antelopes with one hand and a long torch with the other and ran screaming toward the crocodiles with the two cheetahs at his sides.

The crocodiles were so stunned by the torch, the cheetahs, and his screaming that even the scent of the meat *Runs Like*

Cheetah threw into the river did not make them move. That changed when *Ghost Hunter* let out a scream so horrid that the startled crocodiles turned around and raced back to the river where the current quickly swept them away in pursuit of the meat. No one went back to sleep that night. Instead, we began putting the raft together as fast as we could. We had become used to the safety of a raft, and the memory of the sudden crocodile attack made us work even harder to get it finished. By the fourth day, it was ready. We pushed off, and the river took us away.

Once out, we travelled on the wide river for days on end, seldom bothering to go ashore except to find dry wood for the firepot or to gather berries and nuts. Sometimes *Runs like Cheetah* would spot a wide plain that looked promising for antelope and would go ashore with the cheetahs. But as time went on, we found ourselves spending less and less time ashore, because fish were large and plentiful on the river and could be caught from the drifting raft with simple hooks or small nets, or even speared if they surfaced for food. Even when we did go ashore, we found the time we spent there became less and less until it was never more than a small part of a morning or afternoon.

The river was our home now, and it was a very comfortable one. It was also a very wide one, and the further we drifted downriver, the wider it became. We found that by staying in the center of the river, the danger of being attacked by hippos and crocodiles almost disappeared as they preferred the shallow waters along the riverbanks. At times the river became so wide that we could barely make out what was happening on the shore. Our lives seemed completely separate from those in the jungle. It was as if that world did not exist—only our little world, drifting down the river. At times it was like a dream.

Because we spent so little time ashore, we seldom encountered other people. We were curious about them and

could see them in the distance, but they were so small we could seldom make out their faces or dress or weapons. The only time we got close enough was in the late afternoon, when we would steer the boat into shallow water, closer to the shore so we could anchor and sleep. But the task of anchoring securely and getting some much needed sleep meant we did not really have enough time to examine the shoreline closely until we woke up later. But by then it was dark, and impossible to see anything clearly. The only thing that was clear was the howling of the night animals.

Despite the fact that we couldn't anchor in the middle of the river—it was much too deep—we found that the middle of the river did have an advantage when we were drifting—the current flowed fastest there. The increased drifting speed of the raft made up for the fact that every afternoon, when we wanted to anchor and sleep, it took a great deal of time to steer the raft toward the shallower water near the shore. It was not a simple task, because if we rushed and over-steered the raft, it would turn sideways to the current and begin to spin. After a few mishaps, *Bright Hands* and *Baby Man* became very good at slowly applying just enough force on the steering oars to get us into shallow water without spinning.

I could have gone on drifting downriver forever, that is how peaceful it was, but I knew it would eventually come to an end. After drifting for more than a moon, I decided it was Time to Come in from the safety of the river and explore this new world we found ourselves in. I wanted to know what the people were like, how they lived. I wanted to see if they were like us. I wanted to know if their Goddesses and Gods were the same as ours—or different—although I did not really know how that could be.

One thing I did know for sure was that this new world we had entered was also a world that had been entered by a God/Goddess from Time to Come. But I did not know that

God/Goddess, as I knew *Mafdet*. I could sense its presence, but I was blind to it, except for what *Monkey Mother* had told me and its effect on *Ghost Hunter*. I had seen how protective of *Ghost Hunter* the female side could be, and I had also seen how terrible the male side could be in *Ghost Hunter*'s distorted screams and harsh laughter. *Monkey Mother*'s warning kept racing through my mind: "*Both the male and female sides are strongly drawn to Ghost Hunter. There is nothing you can do to stop them. Nothing. They will ride him like the wind. Prepare yourself.*"

I had to know more. I entered my spirit body and went to *Monkey Mother*. I again saw her by the riverbank, drawing circles in the mud. She looked up at me and said: "Do not bother to ask me how I know about the God-Goddess from Time to Come. I should be as blind to it as you are, but for a moment I wasn't—I saw that it exists and it is very powerful. That is all I can tell you."

"But why is this God-Goddess drawn to *Ghost Hunter*, and how is it entering our world?" I asked. "It is a spirit from Time to Come. A world from Time to Come and our world cannot exist at the same time—you told me so yourself."

"I do not know why the spirit is drawn to *Ghost Hunter*, and I do not know how it keeps entering this world. The demonic spirits that slipped into our world behind *Baby Man* and possessed *Antelope Hunter* only entered once—at the moment of *Baby Man*'s birth. After that, the seal between that world and our world closed forever. When *Baby Man* returns to that world in his dreams, he cannot enter it. He can only view it from the outside, much as a child would look through the doorway of a hut. *Ghost Hunter* may well be a split soul, like *Baby Man*. We will only find that out when he can tell us what he remembers of his birth. But that still wouldn't explain *how* the male-female spirit keeps entering our world. Somehow, *Ghost Hunter* must be making it possible."

"But why would he do that? And how? He is just a baby."

“You must never forget that the very nature of *Ghost Hunter* is to rip apart the seal between worlds. It doesn’t matter that he is but a baby. His soul is the hunter—not the baby. Right now, the baby is like a puppet—he’s just along for the ride. But I can assure that as *Ghost Hunter* gets older, he will realize who he truly is and become ferocious in his stalking. We do not know why *Ghost Hunter* ripped open the seal between our world and the world in Time to Come, nor why this powerful God-Goddess has kept pursuing him through the opening. But it has happened.”

“Will the rip between the two worlds remain open forever?”

“No, the rip always heals quickly because the two worlds cannot exist at the same time. That is the rule. But then again, *Ghost Hunter* may be continually ripping it open. There is no way of knowing. I am as blind in these matters as you are. We should have realized this the day he was born. I knew he was going to be like no other hunter and like no other shaman—but I did not know how—or why. I wasn’t even completely sure what my own prophecy meant.

“At the time,” she continued, “I thought it was about the seal between our world and the Other World. But I was only half right. It *was* about the Other World—but I now know it was *also* about all the worlds in Time to Come. Listen carefully to what the words of the prophecy actually said: ‘*Ghost Hunter hascome to rip the seal between worlds....*’”

With that, *Monkey Mother* went away and I was back on the riverbank, watching *Ghost Hunter* and *Baby Man* playing in the grass. Suddenly, without warning, *Mafdet* entered my right side—and then something immediately entered my left side. I knew it was the God-Goddess from Time to Come. I couldn’t move or breathe or speak. The last thing I remembered before I collapsed into darkness was *Ghost Hunter* staring at me with the most curious look in his eyes.

Chapter 52: THREE CHILDREN APPEAR

When I finally woke, I found myself looking up at three children standing over me chattering to *Bright Hands* and *Runs like Cheetah*. They couldn't have been more than ten or eleven summers old. I couldn't understand anything they were saying—and it was obvious *Bright Hands* and *Runs like Cheetah* couldn't either.

Runs like Cheetah bent down and whispered in my ear that the three of them had appeared out of the jungle right after I collapsed and that they had been watching me lying on the riverbank for most of the day. When I stood up, they immediately turned away from *Bright Hands* and *Runs like Cheetah* and began talking to me in the same excited manner, as if they immediately recognized me as the leader of our group. What struck me were their large eyes and the color of their skin—it wasn't dark like ours, but the color of antelope hide. What's more, I couldn't tell if they were girls or boys because they were all wearing loincloths.

Ghost Hunter began to giggle. The three children turned to look at him, and then they began talking to each other so fast I did not know how they could still understand each other and then their speech slowed down and their eyes got very large. I sensed that they had just then become possessed by a spirit, but I couldn't go any further than that. It was as if I were blind to the spirit doing it.

I put up my hand for them to stop talking and gestured that we were hungry and needed food, to which they smiled and nodded they understood. Then I gestured that we needed flints and fire-starting things and again they smiled and nodded they understood. I then gestured for them to go get the things I had asked for—but nothing happened. They just stood there, looking at me very intently. Then I remembered that while I was gesturing they had kept glancing over at the

two cheetahs. There was something about the cheetahs that seemed to intrigue them.

I went over to the cheetahs and started singing to them. The cheetahs sang back and then rolled over on their backs, exposing their bellies. I rubbed their bellies, and then I motioned for the three children to come over to where I was. They immediately got down on all fours and started crawling towards the cheetahs. I thought that perhaps they had misunderstood me, so I gestured for them to stand up and they did. Then I gestured for them to walk upright to where I was. They nodded and smiled and then immediately dropped down on all fours again and started crawling towards me. I tried correcting them again, but with the same result, so I decided to let them have their way. I even went so far as to get down on all fours myself.

I gestured for them to sing to the cheetahs as I had, and they immediately did a perfect imitation and then immediately did a perfect imitation of the cheetahs singing back. They then rolled over on their backs with their arms and legs curled up like the cheetahs. By this time, the cheetahs did not know what to make of the children and were becoming very uneasy. I could tell by the wary expressions on *Runs like Cheetah* and *Bright Hands* that they also sensed something very strange was about to happen.

The behavior of the children, however, did not seem to have any effect on *Baby Man* and *Ghost Hunter*. If anything, they seemed amused by the entire thing and began to imitate the children by rolling over on their backs and laughing. Then I noticed something peculiar—the children ignored *Baby Man* but kept looking over at *Ghost Hunter* as if they were waiting for him to do something. I decided to keep going along with whatever game it was the three children were playing, so I reached over and rubbed the belly of the child closest to me. My mind immediately

stopped. I couldn't think or remember anything. I could have been a stone.

It was only when I took my hand away that my mind slowly came back to me. I gestured for *Runs like Cheetah* to come touch the belly of the second child and *Bright Hands* the belly of the third, I could tell that the same thing happened to them because their eyes suddenly looked exactly like the empty eyes of dead people. It was clear to me by now that these weren't ordinary children, but I had no idea how they could have had such power in their bellies. This thought no sooner went through my mind than the three of them stood up and walked over to a sandy clearing. Two of them laid their bodies on their sides facing each other and proceeded to stretch their arms and legs out towards each other until they had formed a circle—at which time the third child laid down between them in a straight line.

I realized it was the same drawing that *Monkey Mother* had made in the sand for me of the God/Goddess from Time to Come. No sooner had I thought this than the child forming the right side of the circle stood up and walked into the semi-circle formed by the other two and looked at me very intently. She then showed me she was a girl by slyly lifting the front of her loincloth and moving her arms back and forth as if she were rocking a baby. After a few moments, she stopped, motioned the others to stand up, and then, hand in hand, the three of them disappeared into the jungle.

Chapter 53: A CIRCLE OF GIFTS

When we woke the next morning, a large circle of gifts was lying on the riverbank. If the three children had brought them late at night, none of us had heard them, which seemed strange to me. Then again, we were so exhausted it was entirely possible. But I couldn't believe the cheetahs had not heard them. They were such light sleepers that the drop of a twig would have wakened them and set them chirping.

Baby Man walked around the circle of gifts and began naming each one out loud: three flint axes, fire-starting flints and moss, animal hides cut into five loincloths and five capes—each sized correctly, piles of smoked fish and doves, bowls of nuts, two strong bows, twelve arrows, five spears, and a large piece of raw meat for the cheetahs. Everything we needed to restart our lives was in the circle. None of them knew what to make of the gifts. Finally, I spoke, “We have been visited by three children possessed by a powerful God/Goddess from Time to Come that I do not understand. We are indeed in a new world. It looks the same, but I can assure you, it is not. It may seem the same on the surface: the trees and grass and water and animals are the same, but there is something new moving beneath the surface of things that is beyond my understanding. All we can do is accept these gifts and believe they will benefit us. That is what my heart tells me. So let us eat what has been given us and after we have built a fire for protection, we should bathe in the wide river and put on the new loin cloths in celebration of our arrival in this world. Then we should all sleep until dark. We have much work to do.”

When we woke, the full moon was rising. *Bright Hands* and *Baby Man* and *Runs like Cheetah* took the cheetahs and some spears for protection and went back into the jungle to start cutting bamboo for a new raft to replace the one that had been destroyed by the rapids. I set about building a small sleeping shelter. It would be ten or so days before the

raft was finished and we needed a shady place to sleep during the day.

Before *Baby Man* began building the new raft, he took *Bright Hands* aside and made five drawings in the mud. He explained to *Bright Hands* that the five drawings showed what he remembered of the large rafts in his world that carried goods to the great, blue water. He and *Bright Hands* had several long talks on how to actually make what *Baby Man* had drawn because *Baby Man* had become wise enough to listen to *Bright Hands* first before actually building anything, as she was by far the better builder.

When they agreed on all five drawings, the building of the raft began, and after about three days, the raft shown in the first drawing was almost complete. It was as long as the previous raft—about ten body lengths, but much wider—about six body lengths—so it no longer resembled an arrow, but a good sized plot of land. We then set about building what was shown in the second drawing—nine large bamboo crossbeams placed across the first level starting a body length back from the front and continuing to the back of the raft. *Baby Man* said he had designed the front without a cross beam so the front could be carved like an arrow point again. The cross beams were to be set a body length apart and tied fast to the bottom raft to give the raft more strength.

Once the cross beams were in place and tied to the raft, we began to build what was shown in the third drawing—many tightly packed bamboo poles running lengthwise over the cross beams to form a raised, tight floor nine body lengths long. *Baby Man* explained that this was the floor we would live on and that we and our supplies would no longer be wet all the time because it would be about a foot above the river level. *Bright Hands* added that there was enough space on the rear part of the floor for she and *Baby Man* to stand and steer the raft. She added that the extra height not only gave them a better view downriver, but it would also allow

the steering paddles to dig deeper into the water and make changing direction easier. We then built the fourth drawing, which was of two steering oars in the rear of the raft. They were kept lined up in exactly the same direction by a clever crossbeam between them, which was designed by *Bright Hands*. The crossbeam allowed one person to work both steering oars.

Baby Man, who was not to be outdone, explained this is how large rafts were steered in the world he came from, especially where the water was deep—as it was here. Steering poles were all but useless in deep water, he said, so the two steering oars were needed not only for accurate steering but also for use as paddles and showed us that it was simply a matter of working the steering oars back and forth like fish tails. Finally we built what was shown in the fifth drawing, which was a hut for sleeping and eating. It was to be lashed to the raised floor in the center of the raft and be about four body lengths wide and four body lengths long and one body length high, with a thatched roof.

A door was cut on each side to supply light as well as an easy, quick way to get to any part of the raft. The hut had an eating and sleeping compartment in the rear with a large clay firepot just outside the rear door for holding a fire. The front compartment, which was smaller, was used for storage of wood, water, our weapons, tools and food. The anchor stone and vines were to be placed just outside the front door of the hut. *Bright Hands* told us that our body weight in the rear compartment and on the steering paddles would balance the large anchor stone weight near the front of the hut and keep the raft level.

By late morning of the twelfth day, the raft was finished. *Bright Hands* and *Baby Man* were proud of it and told us they wanted to load most of the goods and weapons on board and take it on a test voyage for a half day and meet us down river. *Runs like Cheetah* liked the plan and said it

would also be a good time to let the cheetahs roam and hunt antelope as we walked downriver to meet the raft. We decided to sleep until dark, and then load the raft during the night and set it free just before dawn. The raft would be slightly faster than walking, so we knew if it anchored around noon, we would arrive with the cheetahs and *Ghost Hunter* in late afternoon. The raft set off and the two steering oars worked perfectly. The wide, calm water and absence of rocks allowed the raft to set a direction and keep it and they were soon far downriver.

I strapped *Ghost Hunter* to my back and we set out with the cheetahs and a few spears. After a short while walking, we came upon a large plain and *Runs like Cheetah* set off across it with the cheetahs in search of antelope while I continued walking downriver. I was soon past the plain and its place was taken again by dense jungle. I knew *Runs like Cheetah* would signal me by whistling if he made a kill, so I walked a little further and then sat under a shade tree and waited for his signal, because if he had made a kill I would have to go back and help him cut and carry the meat. After a short while, he reappeared far upriver and held his empty hands high in the air and began running toward me with the cheetahs. When he arrived, he told me that there were only a few antelope on the plain and that they had immediately disappeared into the surrounding jungle as soon as they saw him, so he decided it was better to continue walking downriver.

We had gone only a short distance when the three children suddenly appeared out of the jungle, followed by three men and three women. The skin of the men and women was the same antelope color as the children's skin and they wore the same type loincloths. Their eyes were also large like the children's eyes, but then I noticed that the children's eyes were not as large as they had been when I had first seen them—which I took as a sign that the children were no longer possessed.

I decided to test this by singing to the cheetahs. When the cheetahs sang back, the children began laughing and talking excitedly to the men and women, but they made no attempt to imitate my singing and the singing of the cheetahs. It was clear to me that they had no memory of what had taken place and that they were behaving as any children would upon hearing me sing to the cheetahs.

Then, suddenly, the largest of the men stepped forward and grabbed the two spears *Runs like Cheetah* was holding and gestured they belonged to him. Just as suddenly the oldest woman stepped forward pointing to our loincloths, gesturing the loincloths belonged to the tribe. It did not take me long to realize that the circle of gifts we had received had not been freely given by the adults of the tribe. Rather, the possessed children must have taken them in the middle of the night and laid them out on the riverbank.

I spoke quickly to *Runs like Cheetah* and told him to return the spears. I then gestured to the woman that the three children had given us the spears and loincloths as gifts, and that we did not know the children had taken them without asking and that we would surely return the spears but that we would be naked if we returned the loincloths. I took mine off to make sure they understood. The woman made a quick, irritated motion to put the loin cloth back on and that settled it right there.

She then turned to the three children and gave each of them several whacks that lifted them right off the ground. When she had finished whacking the last of them, *Ghost Hunter* let out a cold, harsh laugh that was absolutely terrifying. The children's eyes almost popped out of their heads and the men and women began backing away from us as fast as they could. They knew that it wasn't a baby's laugh and were so nervous I was afraid they might attack us out of sheer fright. I mimed that *Ghost Hunter* had a sore throat and did my best to imitate his harsh laugh and that calmed them down

a bit, but I knew I had to distract them even further so I told *Runs like Cheetah* to give the cheetahs a command to hunt rabbits—which I knew were everywhere in the jungle.

He took off their leashes and started singing to the cheetahs and they raced off into the jungle. A few moments later they came back with two rabbits—which they dropped at *Runs like Cheetah's* feet. He sang to them again and they again raced off and came back with two rabbits. *Runs like Cheetah* repeated this two more times until he had eight rabbits which he picked up and gave to the oldest man. That did it. We became instant friends.

I was glad we had loaded the other gifts on the raft, because the sight of us having so many of their belongings might have been impossible to overcome—cheetahs or no cheetahs. The women gestured for us to visit their village, which we did because it would have been an insult to refuse, but we made it as clear as we could that we had others waiting for us far downriver, so after a short time with the rest of the tribe, we began walking downriver again. As soon as we turned a bend in the trail, we decided to run in case the tribe followed us out of curiosity. That way, they would be far behind us when we got to the raft. It was almost dark when we got to the raft. We quickly explained to the others what had happened and that the tribe might be following us and we should cast off immediately before they saw how many of their possessions and weapons we actually had.

I looked back at the distant trail as we drifted out toward the center of the river and saw some of the tribesmen running and then stopping and pointing at us and then the growing darkness swallowed them up and there was nothing but us and the wide, silent river moving through the night.

Chapter 54: I GO TO MONKEY MOTHER

After drifting downriver far enough to be sure that the curious tribesmen had given up and returned to their village, we threw out the anchor stone, built a fire in the firepot, and roasted a small antelope we had killed the day before. After eating, we sat around the fire pot and talked about continuing to drift downriver the same way as before—first in the early morning and then again in the late afternoon—and to sleep in between. The nights we would spend anchored in the river—just as we were now—so we could eat and nap and do whatever work and repairs had to be done on the raft. Everyone agreed the plan was good, and as we were all exhausted from not having slept that day, we all fell into a deep sleep—except for me. I couldn't sleep at all. The three children kept coming to mind. Although I knew they were no longer possessed, I was still confused as to what had happened when we had first met.

I entered my spirit body and went to *Monkey Mother*. She was again sitting by our village riverbank, drawing circles in the mud. She looked up at me and said, “You should be sleeping, *River Mother*. What are you doing roaming around like a lost child?”

I told her I was very confused about the new world I found myself in, especially about the mysterious appearance of the three children and then how they suddenly reappeared on the trail three days later accompanied by three women and three men from their tribe. I tried very hard to not leave out any of the details of those encounters, but I had no sooner finished than *Monkey Mother* barked, “There's something you've left out, I can feel it,”

“I do not think so, *Monkey Mother*.”

“It happened right after you left me, before the three children saw you lying on the ground.”

Suddenly, everything came racing back to me. “Yes, of course, how could I have forgotten? After I left you, *Mafdet* suddenly came to me of her own accord and entered my right side, and then, just as suddenly, the God-Goddess from Time to Come entered my left side. I couldn’t breathe or speak or move and collapsed into darkness. When I woke, the three children were standing over me.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes, that’s everything. I am sure of it.”

“So what is confusing you? You are a great shaman, *River Mother*. Surely it must be clear to you what has happened.”

“I may be a great shaman, but I am also a very young shaman. I have never experienced anything like this. I need the wisdom of your years.”

“Oh, do you now? Do not be in such a rush, little one. You will have it soon enough.”

“Do not play with me, *Monkey Mother*—I am not *Baby Man* asking stupid questions. I want to know why my mind and body stopped when the God-Goddess from Time to Come entered my left side.”

Monkey Mother shot back, “The God-Goddess from Time to Come was challenging *Mafdet*. You got caught in the middle. I wish I could tell you more, but I cannot. Everything I know about things like this comes from stories I’ve heard about split souls like *Baby Man*. I know of no stories of shamans like *Ghost Hunter* who are capable of deliberately ripping the seal between worlds, so I can only guess at what is happening. My best guess is that *Ghost Hunter* is a split soul like *Baby Man*. We will be able to tell for sure when he is older. But if he is, there is still a big difference between him and *Baby Man*—who seems to have simply fallen into our world with only his memories. *Ghost Hunter* seems to have come into our world bound to a powerful God/Goddess from Time to Come.

“That God/Goddess” she continued, “seems to have deliberately chosen *Ghost Hunter* to be its ally in this world. For all we know, *Ghost Hunter’s* soul may have similarly chosen it to be *his* ally. *Ghost Hunter* and the God/Goddess

from Time to Come have become bound together in a way stronger than mere possession because they strongly desire to be bound to each other. This powerful God/Goddess in Time to Come must have desired to enter our world and saw a way to do it through *Ghost Hunter's* ability to rip open the seal between worlds. And do not ask me why it wanted to enter our world—because I do not know. Anyway, the rest should be apparent to you.”

“I am sorry, *Monkey Mother*, but it is not. You must know something you’re not telling me. Split souls from Time to Come are very rare according to you, yet in our small village we suddenly had two of them separated by only a few summers. How can that be?”

“I cannot explain that—no one can. The only thing I can tell you is that Fate must have intended for a baby to be born in this world bound to a powerful God/Goddess from Time to Come—which is what *Ghost Hunter* is. My best guess is that *Baby Man* must have been a forerunner.”

“What do you mean by forerunner?”

“Somehow the first baby that came into our world arrived with only memories from Time to Come. That was *Baby Man*. He was a forerunner—an incomplete version of what was to be. Fate is like a blind man trying to model your likeness in clay by feeling your face with his fingers. The likeness may be off a bit at first, but Fate eventually gets the likeness perfect. That is what I meant when I said that *Baby Man* was a forerunner of what Fate originally intended: a baby bound to a God/Goddess from Time to Come. Are you following me?”

“Yes, I am, but there are still a few things I am not clear on.”

“Let me to tell you something that may help you. There are as many worlds in Time to Come as there are stars in the sky—and each of them has its own Gods and Goddesses. They are bound to each other and can never be separated. Just as our world and a world from Time to Come cannot co-exist, neither can the Gods and Goddesses belonging to our world co-exist with those of a world in Time to Come. That is the rule and it can never be broken.”

“If that is so, how did the God-Goddess from Time to Come enter our world?”

“When *Ghost Hunter* was born and ripped the seal between our world and a world in Time to Come, the God-Goddess from that world in Time to Come must have been waiting to come into our world—but couldn’t because the two worlds cannot exist at the same time. But the God-Goddess from Time to Come must have seen that it could come in by momentarily possessing *Ghost Hunter* over and over—which is what it has been doing. There is no other way, because it is like a fish out of water in our world. It dies almost as soon as it enters. Let me say it again: what you are blindly sensing is a powerful God/Goddess from Time to Come. But you are blind to that God/Goddess, just as you are blind to its world from Time to Come.

“What you are sensing,” she continued, “is something like the shadow of that God/Goddess. That shadow feels something like the presence of an unknowable spirit. It is a presence that can only be detected through *Ghost Hunter*’s actions because—in a manner of speaking—this God/Goddess has become a part of *Ghost Hunter*. That is what *Bright Hands* sensed when *Ghost Hunter* screamed at the crocodiles and what you sensed in his cold laugh. As *Ghost Hunter* gets older, this bond will make *Ghost Hunter* truly powerful—and dangerous. Right now, for reasons no one knows, *Ghost Hunter* seems to be continually ripping the seal between our world and the world in Time to Come. He is like a baby who keeps scratching his face. This allows the God/Goddess to keep possessing him, keep replanting its seed in him—but that seed only exists for a very short time in our world. You might say it keeps replanting its seed in *Ghost Hunter* so it can stay alive in this world.

“But because *Ghost Hunter* is a baby and is not really aware of what is happening, the God/Goddess can only act through him by screaming or laughing. Or protecting him from harm—but it is really protecting itself—because without *Ghost Hunter*, the seal between the two worlds would have closed itself long ago. As *Ghost Hunter* gets older and more

aware of what he really is, he may reject the God/Goddess and let the seal close. Then it will no longer be able to possess him and will disappear from this world. But I suspect he will not allow the seal to close and will be capable of doing truly terrible things—or beautiful, healing things—because the God/Goddess can do all of these things: it is both a destroyer and a healer. That is what will make *Ghost Hunter* truly dangerous. There is no telling which face he will wake up with. But that is not the only thing that will make him dangerous. The bond between them is an uneasy one. It cuts both ways. *Ghost Hunter* will be at the mercy of the God/Goddess—and the God/Goddess will be at the mercy of *Ghost Hunter*. In a manner of speaking, each is the source of the other's power. Do you need more?"

"No, I think I understand. But there is one last thing. The three children were possessed—I understand that now—but when we touched their bellies, our minds stopped. How could that be?"

"It happened because what you touched were the bellies of three children possessed by the God/Goddess from Time to Come. If it helps, you can think of the God/Goddess as being something like *Ra*, the Sun God/Goddess."

"You mean it is like *Ra*?"

"No. I just gave you that as an example of its male/female nature and immense power. The God/Goddess from Time to Come is both a destroyer and healer—but it is *not* a creator of life—as *Ra* is. The only thing I can tell you is something you already know—that it has the ability to stop our thinking. As a shaman, you know that stopping thinking must be done to enter the Other World. It is both a destructive and beneficial act. That is what happened when the God/Goddess entered your left side and what happened when you touched the bellies of the three children."

"My mind may have stopped, but I did not enter the Other World."

"That is because the Other World it was intended for was one bound to the world in Time to Come. That Other

World cannot exist in this world. That is why you experienced a feeling of darkness and death—that is what it feels like to *not exist*.”

Chapter 55: WE APPROACH THE FACE ON THE CLIFF

We had been drifting on the wide calm river for almost three moons. Before we had left the village, travelers had told us that once we entered the wide, calm part of the river, our drifting would take us to the great blue water in about two moons, but the only thing we could see ahead of us was the wide river. Either the travelers had been mistaken or we had taken too much time sleeping and anchoring. I decided it was time we took a closer look at this new world. Perhaps the people living there might be able to tell us how far we were from the great, blue water.

I also wanted to know about the large fields of barley grass we saw whenever we came close to shore. We knew barley grass. It grew in the jungle everywhere around our village, but it was scattered here and there. We would take the seeds and toast them on a hot stone. But here, the barley grass grew in large fields that had been cleared of everything else but the barley. The fields were a good distance apart from each other, and we could see the huts of small villages next to each of the fields. We drifted into shore near one of the fields and ran the raft up into the shallows. The entire tribe came running out to see us, yelling excitedly in a tongue we did not understand. They were the same antelope color as the three children had been, but their black hair was smoother and much longer. They were very curious about our dark skin and curly black hair, and kept pointing to them in a friendly, questioning way.

The two cheetahs, however, frightened them. They couldn't decide how close they should get to the raft. I gestured to them to watch me and I began singing to the cheetahs until they rolled over on their backs and let me rub their bellies. The tribe clapped wildly. I then gestured to a small boy to come onto the raft and rub the cheetahs' bellies with me. His eyes grew as large as moons as he bent down to rub their bellies. As soon as he did, the cheetahs began to sing. The

boy was amazed. He stood up quickly and began walking around the raft like a proud warrior to the loud approval of the tribe.

I then gestured to each member of the tribe to come on board, one at a time. To each one, I gestured that I was called *River Mother* by slowly speaking out my name in our tongue while pointing to myself first and then pointing to the river and mimicking a mother rocking a baby in her arms. I then gestured for them to tell me their names in their tongue. When they did, I repeated it until they nodded in agreement. Then I let them kneel down next to the cheetahs and touch their bellies. After each of them had done this, I gestured for them to return to the riverbank and I gestured for a new tribe member to come on board. It took a bit of time, but soon almost everyone had come on board to speak their names and rub the cheetahs' bellies.

The last one to come on board was the leader of the tribe. She had been watching me very carefully from the riverbank. She was not as friendly as the rest of the tribe, but she was not unfriendly either. She was a watcher. She was tall and about my mother's age. But what was truly strange and beautiful about her were her green eyes. I had never seen green eyes before, only black ones. I found myself wanting to stare into them to see where they would take me, but quickly realized that this was not the time. I called to *Baby Man* and *Bright Hands* and *Runs like Cheetah* and told them to gesture and speak out their names to the tribe standing on the riverbank. *Ghost Hunter* was sitting in a small cradle on the center platform, watching everything with the most attentive look.

I could feel something was about to happen, and it did. Right after *Baby Man* and *Bright Hands* and *Runs like Cheetah* had spoken out their names, *Ghost Hunter* screamed out his name very clearly, almost like a grown person. Right then, I knew he had become possessed again,

because *Ghost Hunter* could never have spoken like that by himself. He was but a baby of one summer whose words were still mostly baby babble. The leader with the green eyes immediately went over to *Ghost Hunter* and picked him up so her face was right in front of his. I watched *Ghost Hunter's* eyes grow as large as moons. He was clearly fascinated by her green eyes. She spoke her name to him in her own tongue, very slowly, and then she repeated it three times. Without taking his eyes off hers, *Ghost Hunter* screamed out his name, and then repeated it three more times. That was it—she knew immediately that his voice was not of this world.

She put *Ghost Hunter* back in his crib and turned to me. She was very angry. She called out to an old woman on the riverbank—who was clearly her shaman—to come on board. She spoke to the shaman angrily. They went back and forth, shouting at each other. I did not have to know their tongue to understand what was happening. The leader was demanding to know if we were demons who had come to hurt them, and if so, why had the shaman not warned her. The shaman, in turn, seemed to be offering explanation after explanation, but none seemed to satisfy the green-eyed leader.

I had to act very quickly because I sensed the leader might decide to kill us rather than take a chance. I gestured to her to be patient and told *Bright Hands* to bring out the largest of our antelope hide capes and a bunch of small burnt sticks from the firepot. *Bright Hands* must have sensed what I was going to do because she spread the cape and the burnt sticks out on the deck at the feet of the green-eyed leader. I knelt down and drew a picture of the river on the cape with a burnt stick, starting at our village and ending it at the great blue water. I drew a picture of the moon waxing and waning and then held up five fingers. I then pointed at my village in the drawing and then indicated with a small “X” where I thought we were now.

I then went back and forth several times until the green-eyed leader and her shaman understood that it took us five moons to get from our village to theirs. They were clearly amazed at how far we had travelled. I could see that the chance of us being demons was fading from their minds. Demons would never have taken such a long, dangerous journey. They would have simply appeared.

Explaining our journey was the easy part. Explaining who I was, and who my companions were, was going to be harder. I pointed to the picture of the river I had just drawn, and traced it with my finger, starting at the picture of our village and ending at the picture of the great blue water. Then I pointed to my long body scar and traced it with my finger, starting at the middle of my forehead down to the bottom of my belly, where it ended just above the hair of my sex. I then went back and forth between my body scar and the drawing many times, making sure they understood that they were the same thing, that they were both pictures of the river.

I then pointed to the river itself, and the river banks, and went back and forth between the river and my body scar to make sure they understood that the scar represented the river and my body represented the river banks. I then looked up at the sky and gestured that both the river and my body scar came from the sky, from the Goddesses. I then repeated my name over and over to the shaman. Each time I said "River," I pointed to the river and then myself, and each time I said "Mother," I mimicked a mother holding a baby in her arms.

The leader's green eyes did not move at all, but the shaman's eyes began to slowly widen. I could see she was beginning to understand that my nature was like that of the river that gave them fish to eat and water to drink—that I was here to help them, not harm them. I could see the shaman was right at the edge of understanding—but I was afraid that she was

going to lose it because she also knew that the river—when it flooded violently and unexpectedly—could be a killer. I immediately entered my spirit body and went to her and held her in my arms. I could feel her fill with light as she began to truly understand what I had been trying to explain.

She turned excitedly to the green-eyed leader and explained what she had seen in her vision. The leader hesitated for a moment, asked the shaman a few more questions, then turned to me and held her arms out to me. I embraced her immediately. From that moment on, we were sisters.

Now that I had her trust, I wanted to make her understand that I was on a spiritual journey, not a journey of trade, and that I was being guided by the Goddess *Mafdet*, although I wasn't at all sure if they had the same Gods and Goddesses or if I could even begin to explain my vision of the rock face that had begun my journey. I sensed, however, that this was not the time to go into those matters. I felt it would be wiser to spend some time in her village to learn their tongue. I gestured that we would like to stay in their village for a while and she agreed. *Runs Like Cheetah* leashed the two cheetahs, I picked up a wildly grinning *Ghost Hunter*, gestured to *Baby Man* and *Bright Hands* to join us, and we all hopped off the raft and followed the green-eyed leader into her village.

When we got to the village, *Runs like Cheetah* motioned everyone to stand back. He then sang to the two cheetahs. As soon as they sang back, he unleashed them and they immediately raced off into the jungle to the complete puzzlement of the tribe. It was only when the cheetahs came back a short while later, dragging a small antelope, that they understood. We feasted well that night. At the sleepy end of it—and after much mimicking—I finally understood what the name of the leader was in our tongue. Her name was *Sees Through Night*.

Chapter 56: SEES THROUGH NIGHT

I had planned to spend four or five days in the village—just enough for a small understanding of their tongue—but as it turned out, we spent almost a moon there. *Sees Through Night* was quick to learn our tongue—much quicker than I was in learning theirs—so it wasn't long before we could even talk about things like Time to Come.

In some ways, *Sees Through Night* was very much like the leader of my own tribe, *Moon Under Water*, in that she also had the abilities of a shaman. She told me that she had been learning the shaman's way as a young girl, but that one day she decided she would know the world by *watching* it very, very closely, and not by stopping her thinking—which was how shamans know the world. She then set about becoming a keen observer of how the world worked. She told me she would spend days on end watching the ways of an animal like the antelope. Or the ways of a newborn baby. Or how barley seeds sprout. When the tribe realized how much she knew and how insightful she had become, they elected her leader at eighteen summers and she had continued to lead them since then.

Sees Through Night told me she had chosen to follow the way of *watching* because of a vision she had when she was twelve summers. She told me the vision repeated itself for three days. First it would show her the world with its rivers and trees and animals and people and then it would show her the spirit bodies of each of them. As she already knew that everything had a spirit body from her shamanic training, she did not understand why the vision kept showing them to her until the voice of *Ra* said to her:

“Do not be puzzled, Sees Through Night. You are to know things in a way different from the shaman's way. You are to know things by watching the world.”

She told me she was confused, and replied, “But what does *watching* the world mean, O Great *Ra*?”

Ra then said, “*To watch the world means to look, or smell, or listen, or touch, or taste something very intently, without wavering. If you do this, you will come to know it, to understand its ways. This may take a very long time or a very short time, no one ever knows, but in time, you will come to understand how it will behave today, and the next day, and the day after that, and the moon after that, and the summer after that.*”

Sees Through Night went on about what took place between *Ra* and herself:

“O Great *Ra*, do you mean that I will understand why lions behave as they do, and why the clouds in the sky behave as they do?”

“*Yes, you will understand these things.*”

“Is there anything that *watching* cannot do, O Great *Ra*?”

“*Yes, there are some things that watching cannot do well—prophecy is one. Healing is another. The way of the shaman is better for those, but you will find that the way of watching is very powerful, and unlike the shaman’s way, it is very exact. The way of watching is new way of knowing. It is a kind of thinking, which is something only humans do. The way of the shaman is very different from the way of watching, but it can also be an ally of watching.*”

“But how can that be, O great *Ra*? The shaman’s way *stops* thinking, but *watching* is a way of thinking.”

“The way of watching lies on top of the shaman’s way, like the thin skin of a human lies on top of its rich, blood-filled body, and sometimes, when the way of watching becomes baffled, or lost, faint threads of light will spin out from the belly of the spirit body of the thing being watched to guide your understanding.”

“Will the way of *watching* replace the shaman’s way, O Great Ra?”

“No. The shaman’s way of knowing will always be with you, but it will be used less and less. Humans beyond the great blue water have already begun to know the world by watching it, just as long, long ago they began to know the world by stopping thinking, which is the shaman’s way. Both of these ways are attempts by humans to know things the way we know things, but humans will never be able to know the way we know. Their understanding will always be clouded, no matter which way they choose. ”

My mind was spinning as I listened to *Sees Through Night*. I asked her if she really could know the world by *watching* it, and she told me that she could, just as *Ra* had told her. She fixed me with her green eyes and said, “The way of *watching* is very powerful, just as the shaman’s way is very powerful. But I found that going back and forth between them was not easy because they were so different. I saw I would be better to choose one way, and to only sparingly use the other, so I chose *watching*, and never again returned to the shaman’s way, except to allow the faint threads of light to spin out and guide me if I became confused. I think of myself now as a *watcher* and the shaman’s way as an ally of my *watching*.”

I did not know what to say to her. I too was a leader and lived in this world—as any leader must—but in most matters I had always been guided by the shaman’s way, which required living in the Other World. *Sees Through Night* was a much different kind of leader: she had chosen to live almost entirely in this world.

“If *watching* is so powerful,” I asked her, “why did not you know I was coming?”

“*Watching*,” she replied, “can know the present very clearly and it is very, very good at that—and very exact. I seldom make a mistake in judging the ways and motives of people or animals, even plants, but *watching* is not very good at foreseeing the future, except for very simple things, like when the barley will ripen. For more complex things,” and here her green eyes flashed over my body, “like foreseeing whether the stranger called *River Mother* had come to harm us, I must rely on my shaman.”

She then told me that the shaman’s name was *Night Stalker*. She hesitated for a moment—as if she was unsure whether to go on—and then she suddenly added with another flash of her green eyes, “*Night Stalker* is my mother.”

I was taken aback. They bore no resemblance to each other, although there was something very familial about the way they argued, as though it had been their way for a very long time. Finally, I said to her, “If you rely on your mother to see the future, why were you so angry with her back at the raft? It seemed to me as if you were not satisfied with any of the answers you were getting from her as to who we were and why we had come.”

“Part of my anger,” she replied, “was caused by our being mother and daughter. We are both strong-willed, maybe too strong-willed. We both want our way. I wanted exact answers from my mother, but I was not getting them because in most cases, such answers cannot be obtained by

the shaman's way. My mother is a powerful shaman and had two visions before you arrived. In the first, the river turned into a woman, but that is all *Night Stalker* could tell me. Her second vision was almost the same except *after* the river had turned into a woman, the woman's face changed into a cheetah.

"*Watching*," she continued, "has made me want exact answers, and my mother wasn't giving them to me. We both knew something was about to happen—something that involved the river changing into a woman whose face changed into that of a cheetah—but that was all we knew. We had no idea what that meant—except that something magical was about to happen, something that might help us or perhaps harm us—we had no idea which. It was only when you appeared on the river with your cheetahs that my mother's visions began to make sense—not complete sense—but enough for me to know that the visions were about your coming. What I still did not know is if you had come to harm us. It was only when you went to my mother with your spirit body that she understood your coming would not be harmful to us."

"But if you are always *watching* the world in front of you, how did you know I had gone to her in my spirit body?"

"I glimpsed faint *lines of light* spinning out between the two of you. It was very quick, but it was enough. I also knew because my mother told me right after it happened. She is a powerful shaman and understood immediately that you had not come to harm us. She told me you had filled her with a mother's light and that you had come to help us, just as the river helps us. That is when I embraced you."

Chapter 57: THE VEILED FACE ON THE CLIFF

Sees Through Night and I talked endlessly. I wanted to know more about her mother's visions and asked her if the woman's face in the visions was very dark like mine and she replied her mother had not said anything about the color of the face. As she said that, I felt her green eyes begin to move all over my body as if they were looking for something hidden and then—I cannot really say why—I began telling her about my vision of the face on the cliff.

I told her that when I was a young girl, I was standing next to *Baby Man* in our village and then, suddenly, I was in a faraway place, standing at the bottom of a cliff that rose high above a wide river. The cliff was facing the rising sun. The river was much wider than the river that ran by our village, but I somehow knew it was the same river. At the very top of the cliff there was a mound whose surface contained a vague, huge face that looked something like the human-cheetah face that *Bright Hands* had made of *Mafdet*.

I told her that as I stared up at the vague face, I began rising up until I was looking directly into the huge right eye. Then my right side suddenly stiffened and the eye spoke to me, "*River Mother, it is time.*" It was *Mafdet's* voice. The sound of it filled my body with dark light. The eye spoke again, "*The Veiled Face you see before you has been waiting to become your face since the world began. You must leave your village and come here for the Veiled Face to become your face.*"

Right then, the huge face began to become my face—but not entirely. Some of the cheetah face remained. When I asked the eye what this meant, it said, "*It means you are to become my daughter, the Daughter of Mafdet.*" When I told *Mafdet* that the prophecy had said I was to become a great

leader and prophet in a faraway place, not the Daughter of *Mafdet*, she said, “*It is the same thing.*”

I then asked *Mafdet* if this was the faraway place and *Mafdet* replied “*Yes, you must follow the river north until the Veiled Face appears.*”

I told *Sees Through Night* that I suddenly began rising even higher and I could feel that *Baby Man* was rising with me, but I couldn’t see him. I was so high up I could see the river flowing into the great blue water, but the river was not just one river anymore. It had fanned out like a cobra’s head into many smaller rivers that were all flowing into the great blue water. I told her when I turned around to look the other way, I could see the river becoming thinner and thinner until it disappeared into the green jungle and I remembered thinking—*That is where my village must be*—and then I was being pulled back into my body like a falling rock, and then, suddenly, I was standing next to *Baby Man* who blurted out, “Do not ask me how, *River Mother*, but I saw it too.”

I looked at *Sees Through Night*. Her green eyes had stopped moving. She was looking down at the ground in front of her, lost in thought. When she finally looked up at me, her green eyes were wide in wonder. “And now, *River Mother*,” she whispered, “you are finally here—just as *Mafdet* predicted.”

“I can only hope it is so,” I replied. “We have been travelling for many moons. It has not been easy. There were dangers everywhere. We had to fight our way through or die. Only my faith in *Mafdet* kept us going. We could have turned back or stopped at any number of places along the river, but we kept going until something drew me to your village. As soon as you told me about your mother’s vision of a

woman's face changing to that of a cheetah—I knew that *Mafdet* had brought us together.”

“It must be so, *River Mother*,” she whispered, “because there is such a rock face very close by. It is very faint and seems at times to be that of a human and sometimes a cheetah. It has been there since the world began. You can walk to it in about two days. Both *Night Stalker* and I have seen it. The tribes that live near the cliff call it the face of *Ra* because the face—which is his face—looks toward the rising sun.”

My heart raced, but I was also confused. “But why did you say *his* face? *Ra*,” I said to her, “is a God/Goddess, both male and female, equally.”

“In our stories,” she replied, “that is not so. In our stories, the order and harmony of the world were created by *Ra*, who is a male. Before *Ra* there was nothing except the dark waters of chaos that became *Ra*. The next act of *Ra* was to create a very small Goddess, *Mutir*—which means ‘obey him’—and then *Ra* mated with *Mutir* and gave birth to the ugly Goddess *Mut*—who was both male and female and who created everything that exists out of herself.”

It was as if my understanding of the world had been turned upside down. I did not know what to think. Not only were the names of the Goddesses and Gods different in this tribe, but their story of Creation as well. Finally, I said to *Sees Through Night*, “Your story about the Creation of the world is not like ours. In our stories the Mother Goddess *Mut* is the creator of everything—even herself—out of the dark waters. Before her there was nothing, not even *Ra*. And what of the Mother Goddess *Mafdet*, who is the fierce protector of *Ma'at*, the Goddess of Order and Balance. Without *Mafdet* to protect *Ma'at*, the world would have been plunged into darkness by the Serpents of Disorder.”

Sees Through Night replied, "We know of *Mafdet* and honor her, but in a lesser way. My mother will tell you this as well. But *Mafdet's* place as the protector of *Ma'at* has been taken by *Bast*, the Cat Goddess. The cats are very important to us. They look like the jungle wildcats that have been here forever, but these cats are tame and live among us. They kill the mice that would eat our barley grain after it has been harvested. The cats are the protectors of our barley harvests. They were brought here long ago by the tribes from the shores of the great blue water that came to live among us. They showed us how to plant and harvest the barley that grows in the large fields by the river and how to keep the tame cows and goats they brought with them for milk and meat."

It was becoming very clear to me that the tribe of *Sees Through Night* was not like ours at all. I had not expected that. Not only was their understanding of the Goddesses and Creation different, but their manner of living was exactly the opposite of ours. They did not hunt for meat or gather wild seeds and plants as we did. Instead, they kept tame animals and tame plants and harvested them for food.

I did not know what to think. *Mafdet* had brought me to a place where my understanding of almost everything did not fit. But why? For the first time, I understood how confused and unsure *Baby Man* must have felt when he was born into our village, only to find that everything he knew about the world did not fit.

Chapter 58: I SUMMON MAFDET

As soon as I was alone, I summoned *Mafdet*. My right side stiffened as she entered me. I spoke, “O *Mafdet*, my Protector, I am lost. Why have you brought me to a place whose ways and beliefs are not like ours?”

Mafdet rose up within me: “I brought you here because this tribe has become unbalanced by new ways—the ways of Ra and watching. These ways have come from beyond the great blue waters. They have caused this tribe to forget the true way, the way of the Mother Goddesses. Without it, there can be no Balance. I have brought you here to bring back the way of the Mother Goddesses.”

“How am I to do this?”

“If you make Mafdet come alive again in their hearts, they will return to the ways of the Goddesses. I have become but a dim shadow for them, as have the other Mother Goddesses. Do not be afraid. I am always at your side.”

With that, *Mafdet* left me. I wasn’t sure how I was going to make *Mafdet* come alive in the hearts of the tribe—but I sensed the place to start was with *Sees Through Night* and *Night Stalker*. Although they had assured me they still honored *Mafdet*, from all I could tell it must have been more in thought than in deed. I had not seen any statues of *Mafdet* or any of the other Mother Goddesses in the village—only those of *Bast*, the Cat Goddess. I did not have any doubts that the ways of *Ra* and *watching* were strong in their lives, just as I did not have any doubts they would resist changing those ways. But I also knew they would listen to me. They knew I was no ordinary traveler.

The next morning, I put on my robes and headdress and told *Bright Hands* to ask *Sees Through Night* and *Night Stalker* to come to my hut. By now they had become used to seeing my cheetah tear marks—which I always wore—but the sudden sight of my cheetah headdress and my robe of vulture feathers and silvery cobra skins was something they weren't prepared for. They were clearly startled by my appearance.

"Do not be afraid," I said to them. "I wanted to speak to you like this because I wanted you to see me as I really am—a prophet brought here by the Cheetah Goddess, *Mafdet*. I have already told you of my being guided here by *Mafdet*, but I did not know why until last night when *Mafdet* came to me and told me that the ways of *Ra* and *watching* have made this tribe unbalanced and that I am to restore it."

"Why do you say we have become unbalanced?" *Sees Through Night* asked. "We live in peace with ample food to eat, as do all the tribes around us. The ways of *watching* and *Ra* have made it so."

Night Stalker added, "We are not ignorant, *River Mother*, of the ways of *Mafdet* and the Mother Goddesses. We know that *Mafdet* is the Eye of *Ra* and the protector of *Ma'at*, the Goddess of Balance and Order. We honor *Mafdet*, but as *Sees Through Night* has told you, the Cat Goddess, *Bast*, has become of greater importance to us because of our farming way of life. Without cats, our grain would be eaten by mice and we could starve."

"I understand the importance of *Bast*," I replied, "but *Bast* is only a protector against hunger while *Mafdet* is a protector against Darkness and the Serpents of Disorder. Yet *Bast* has become more important to you than *Mafdet*. I ask you—what is the pain of hunger compared to Serpents of Disorder bringing darkness and chaos to your soul?"

Night Stalker replied, “As you have just said, *River Mother*, there is no comparison, but how can you say we have lost our Balance? Our world is a world of peace and order and ample food. Is that not Balance?”

“It is not enough,” I replied. “If it were, *Mafdet* would not have brought me here. The Serpents of Disorder are at your door and you are blind to it.”

There was a slight flicker in the eyes of *Night Stalker*, as if she almost remembered something. I hesitated, not knowing how to go on, and then it suddenly came to me that seeing a small statue of *Mafdet* might help her remember. I asked *Bright Hands* to shape one out of clay. *Bright Hands* very quickly made a small statue of *Mafdet* with the head of a cheetah and the body of a woman.

Night Stalker examined it and asked me if *Mafdet* was ever shown in any other way. I replied, “Near our village, there is very old stone carving made by the Giants long, long ago. It is in the mouth of the Spirit Cave and shows a running cheetah with the head of a woman. Our old stories of the Giants say it is *Mafdet*, but in our tribe she is always shown with the head of a cheetah and the standing body of a woman.”

Suddenly, *Bright Hands* interrupted me, “*Mafdet* has the womb and heart of a woman, because she is the protector and carrier of life. But *Mafdet* also has the eyes of the cheetah. The fierce eyes of the cheetah see everything. She is the protector of Order and Balance. Nothing can escape her wrath, not even the Serpents of Disorder.”

Then, just as suddenly, *Bright Hands* put the statue down and said, “Let me make a small model of the face of *Mafdet* I made for the burial grounds of our village.” I knew *Mafdet* was moving through her—I could feel it. As *Bright Hands* began shaping the clay, I said, “Many moons ago, *Bright Hands* carved a face of *Mafdet* in a cliff overlooking the

grave of the women and children murdered by a possessed hunter, but she hid it under hides so no one could see it until the burial. When she finally pulled the hides aside at the burial, everyone gasped because the face she had carved looked like both a cheetah and a woman, depending how you looked at it.

The hair was a tangle of coiling cobras. It was terrifying. When I asked *Bright Hands* why she had carved *Mafdet's* face this way, she said to me: 'Her face was meant to be terrifying. This is the face *Mafdet* showed me in the dream that commanded me to carve it on the cliff above the graves. It is a face that will always remind us of her unknowable ways—for it is she who brought this darkness upon us and yet it is she who saved us. Who can say where she is taking us? But there is one more thing I have to tell you, *River Mother*—the face I made is also *your* face. Long ago, when I began making the clay face of *Mafdet* to guide me in my cliff carving, I heard *Mafdet's* voice saying that the face I was making was what *you* will look like when you become a great leader.' When I asked *Bright Hands* if I would really look that way, she laughed and said, 'I asked *Mafdet* that and she said, no, it is what you will look like in the minds of others when they dare to challenge you.'"

There was that slight flicker again in the eyes of *Night Stalker*. Right then, the green eyes of *Sees Through Night* locked on mine. I could feel *Mafdet* moving through both of them. Then the eyes of both of them began moving back and forth between my face and the face *Bright Hands* was making. When *Bright Hands* held up the finished face, *Night Stalker* gasped, "I have seen this face before. Right after *Sees Through Night* told me she was going to follow the way of *watching*, this face came to me saying, '*Mafdet must not be forgotten.*'"

I put my hand upon *Night Stalker's* shoulder to comfort her saying, "Do not be afraid, *Night Stalker*. I have come to help

you remember *Mafdet* so Balance can be restored to your tribe.” As soon as I said that, my right side stiffened and *Mafdet’s* fierce voice rose up again within me and spoke to her: “*Listen to me, Night Stalker. This tribe has become unbalanced. I have sent River Mother to restore that Balance. Trust her. The Serpents of Disorder are at your door.*”

Chapter 59: I DESCRIBE THE CIRCLE OF WISDOM

The ways of the tribe of *Sees Through Night* were so different from ours that I had no idea how to even begin to make the way of the Mother Goddesses come alive again in their hearts. I also knew that even if I succeeded, the tribe would never give up the ways of *watching* and *Ra*. The hunters, for one thing, liked *watching*. It was similar to the way they had always learned the habits of prey. *Watching* seemed easier to them than *stopping thinking*, which they saw as a kind of knowing that belonged to the women.

Yet, somehow, the two ways had to be made to live together, and although that was going to be difficult—as *Sees Through Night* had found out—there seemed no other choice. There was no denying that the ways of *watching* and *Ra* had allowed them to lead a peaceful, healthy life. It did balance their lives in a material way, and was in many ways better than the hunting and gathering of my own tribe where we often went hungry because animals or plants were scarce. Keeping tame plants and animals meant the tribe of *Sees Through Night* never went hungry.

I had to know more about their ways. I went to *Sees Through Night* and asked her when the Circle of Wisdom met in her tribe. She seemed confused. “I do not understand what you mean,” she replied.

“The Circle of Wisdom is how the soul of our tribe keeps it Balance,” I said. “All the members of the tribe gather—the mothers, the hunters, the healers, and the makers all sit in a large circle. The leader of our tribe is *Moon Under Water*. She sits at the head of the Circle of Wisdom. If there are important decisions to be made, only the leaders of each group gather. These leaders are selected for their wisdom. Outside of those special gatherings, the ways of the Circle of Wisdom are always the same. *Moon Under Water* listens to each of the tribe members speak their heart, but says

nothing. She listens to the mothers. She listens to the hunters. She listens to the healers. She listens to the makers. She listens to each of them.

“When they have all finished speaking, she will turn to each of them and speak to them, one after the other, and each of them listens. She will tell them that she has heard the truth, or that she has not heard the truth. No one ever argues with her. To those from whom she has heard the truth she will either say ‘Your truth is good for all of us. We will take your truth and listen to it within ourselves,’ or she will say, ‘Your truth is only for you. Take it within yourself and follow its path.’

“To those from whom she has not heard the truth, she will say, ‘You have wandered from the path of truth. This is not good for you. It is not good for the tribe. There is *darkness* in your heart. It is blinding you, causing you to lose your way. If you allow the *darkness* to stay, it will enter the heart of the tribe. We cannot allow this to happen. You must tame the darkness, or the tribe will do it for you.’”

Sees Through Night looked at me for a very long time and said, “We have nothing like this, *River Mother*. There are rules that we follow—rules that I and the Council of Elders have laid down after much *watching*. If anyone fails to follow these rules, the Council of Elders meets and listens to the offender to decide if there will be punishment.”

I saw immediately that their way could never heal. I said to *Sees Through Night*, “Do not you see the difference between the two ways? Yours is centered on rules and punishment. Ours is centered on openness and truth and achieving Balance in the hearts of the tribe.”

“I see the difference, *River Mother*, but I do not know if *watching* would allow me to determine the truth of what each member has said. I wouldn’t be completely wrong, but I wouldn’t be completely right either. I am wise enough to know this.”

“You speak the truth, *Sees Through Night*. *Thinking* is surely not enough. Only the way of the Mother Goddesses gives you the ability to see the heart directly. Only *feeling—stopping thinking*—allows us to see the truth directly. It is never fooled.”

Sees Through Night looked at me for a very long time then bowed her head and said, “Your truth is good for all of us, *River Mother*. I will take your truth and listen to it within myself.”

Chapter 60: A PROPHECY OF LIONS AT NIGHT

The next time I met with *Sees Through Night* and *Night Stalker* I decided it might help me understand their ways if I compared our story of Creation with theirs. “From what I know so far, *our* story of Creation is very different from yours. I do not understand why this is so, but I do know this: both of us are living our lives in imitation of very different heavens, and the way you are living yours has brought the Serpents of Disorder to your door.”

“In our Creation story,” I continued, “the Mother Goddess, *Mut*, is both male and female and is the creator of everything—even herself—out of the dark waters. Before her there was nothing, not even *Ra*. *Mut* then created the first Mother Goddesses: *Nut*—the Sky Goddess who created the lesser Goddesses and Gods and humans—among them *Ma’at*—the Goddess of Order and Balance who became the eye of *Ra* and dispelled the Serpents of Disorder who threatened to stop *Ra* from sailing across the sky.

“Finally, the fierce cheetah Goddess, *Mafdet*, was created to protect *Ma’at* from any who threatened her existence, because without *Ma’at*, the world would descend into chaos and darkness.”

Night Stalker spoke first, “We are listening to you very carefully, *River Mother*, and hear the truth of your speaking. We have a dim memory of a Creation story that is like yours. One of our storytellers heard it from a traveler long ago and told it to us. But it had no power for us and we have all but forgotten it. Only the story of Creation we told you a few days ago has power for us.

“Let me tell it to you again, but more of it: ‘Before *Ra*, there was nothing except the dark waters of chaos that became *Ra*. First, *Ra* created *Ma’at*—Truth and Balance—and commanded *Ma’at* to become the eye of *Ra*. But *Ra*, the sun, still could not sail across the heavens because of the Serpents of Disorder that lived in the dark waters of chaos, so he commanded *Ma’at* to drive the Serpents of Disorder

away so that Order and Balance could prevail and *Ra* could sail across the heavens each day.

“The next act of *Ra* was to create a very small Goddess, *Mutir*—which means ‘*Obey Him*’—and then *Ra* mated with *Mutir* and gave birth to the ugly Goddess, *Mut*—who was both male and female and who created everything else that exists out of herself: first she created the other Gods and Goddesses, who then gave birth to *Nut*, the Sky Goddess, who oversees us all.

“When that was done, *Ra* ate *Mutir*. It was then that *Nut*, and *Mut*, sensing the growing power of *Ra*, decided they would be safer by becoming servants of *Ra*. In our village and all of the villages around here, *Mut* and *Nut* often go unnoticed in the brilliant presence of *Ra*. They are like old women nobody cares about anymore.”

The more I heard their story of Creation the more I realized it was *something like* our story of Creation but so distorted it seemed like a nightmare. The Goddesses had all but disappeared and *Mafdet* was missing completely. I said, “But *Night Stalker*, where is *Mafdet*, who was created to protect *Ma’at*, the Goddess of Order and Balance? Without *Ma’at*, the Serpents of Disorder would cast the world into darkness.”

“In our stories,” *Night Stalker* replied, “when *Ma’at* became the eye of *Ra*, the all-powerful *Ra* became her protector. *Mafdet* is still known as the protector of *Ma’at* but in name only. She has faded into the background along with *Nut* and *Mut*. Like them, she is like an old woman nobody cares about anymore.”

“But *Mafdet* is not an old woman,” I replied. “It was *Mafdet* who sent me here to protect you from the Serpents of Disorder that are at your door. Did she sound like an old woman when she spoke yesterday?”

“No, she did not, which is why we are listening to you very carefully, *River Mother*. But what are we to do? We cannot

walk away from our story of Creation. We live by it. It is what we know to be true.”

“But I am only asking you to consider that it is not the *only* truth, *Night Stalker*. The story I have told you is also true. It is what my tribe lives by. I am not asking you to abandon your Gods and your story. I am asking you to let the two stories live together in your lives and see if they begin to grow into each other—perhaps strengthen each other. I have no idea what will happen or what the result will be. Only the Goddesses and Gods know that.”

“But how do we start,” *Night Stalker* asked.

“Only *Mafdet* can tell you that,” I replied. No sooner had I said that than I felt my right side stiffen and *Mafdet’s* fierce voice rose up and spoke through me:

“There is no Balance here because you have forgotten the ways of the Mother Goddesses. The Serpents of Disorder are at your door but you are blind to them. Tonight, I will open your eyes to the coming darkness by sending lions to break into the sleeping place of your herds and kill four of them, just as you have killed the memory of the Mother Goddesses—Mut and Nut and Ma’at and Mafdet. Let this be a sign to you of my anger for forgetting their ways. In the morning, after you have found the slain cattle, you must tell your makers to shape many statues of Nut and Mut and Ma’at and Mafdet in the manner of Bright Hands and stand them in your village and in the sleeping places of your herds. You must then assemble your tribe and allow River Mother to tell them of the Mother Goddesses who brought this to pass. If you do this, and all else that River Mother asks of you, the lions will not return. “

With that, *Mafdet* left me as suddenly as she had come. *Sees Through Night* stood up, her green eyes flashing with anger, “You told us, *River Mother*, that you had come to help us,

not harm us. We cannot allow our herds to be killed by lions. Without them we would starve. We will double the hunters who guard them at night and double the thick thorn bushes that surround them. *Ra* will not allow this to happen.”

Chapter 61: THE PROPHECY COMES TRUE

Just before dawn, a pack of lionesses slipped through a small opening in the thorn bushes and attacked the sleeping cows, killing four of them before escaping back into the jungle. The bellowing of the herd woke the hunters, who had fallen asleep towards dawn, thinking the herd safe after a long night's vigil. As they stumbled through the crazed herd in the darkness, they found the four dead cows, their bodies untouched except for their throats, which had been eaten completely away.

The noise also woke the villagers who raced toward the noisy herd. When *Sees Through Night* and *Night Stalker* saw the four dead cows with their throats eaten away, they realized *Ra* had been powerless against *Mafdet*. They quickly decided they must do exactly what *Mafdet* had commanded to prevent another attack.

Thus, when *Sees Through Night* and *Night Stalker* returned to the village, they summoned the makers of the tribe and told them to gather large amounts of shaping clay and wait for *Bright Hands* to show them what to do. *Bright Hands*, who was standing next to me outside my hut, immediately walked over to where the makers had gathered and began showing them how to shape the statues of *Nut* and *Mut* and *Mafdet* and *Ma'at*.

Sees Through Night and *Night Stalker* then came over to me and stood in front of me with their heads bowed. *Night Stalker* was standing to my right and *Sees Through Night* to my left. I reached across my body with my right hand to grasp the right wrist of *Sees Through Night* and then reached across my body with my left hand to grasp the left wrist of *Night Stalker*.

I said to them: "Grab my wrists in the same way I have grasped yours. Now take your other hand and grasp my

wrists in the same way. We are now twined together in the manner of vines bound together as one. In this way we will grow together as friends. I speak the truth when I tell you we were never enemies, nor will we ever be. What happened was not of my will, but the will of *Mafdet*. We must bow to her unknowable ways.

“Let us now bring the tribe together so you can tell them why this has happened. Then, once the statues of *Nut* and *Mut* and *Mafdet* and *Ma’at* have been placed in the sleeping places of the herds and around the village, I will tell them our stories of the Mother Goddesses so they can repeat them over and over for many summers. When I have finished, you must tell the tribe that we will all sit together in a Circle of Wisdom and speak our hearts. You will lead the Circle in the way I have told you.”

“But,” *Sees Through Night* replied, “I am afraid my *watching* will not always be able to see the truth of their speaking. What am I to do if it fails?”

“If *watching* fails you, or the faint lines of light do not appear to guide you, you must return to the way of the shaman by stopping your thinking. You know how to do this. If you have difficulty, *Night Stalker* and I will guide you.”

“Where will you sit, *River Mother*?”

“I will sit on your right and *Night Stalker* will sit on your left.”

“Why is that *River Mother*?”

“Two shamans must always be present to Balance the Circle. The older shaman, the one closest to death, always sits on the left, which is the seat of wisdom. The younger one always sits on the right, which is the seat of power.”

“I understand this, but I still do not understand what you mean by Balancing the Circle.”

“If the Gods and Goddesses need to be summoned to determine the truth of something, each shaman must summon her Protector and ask them what the truth is. *Night Stalker* will summon *Ra* and I will summon *Mafdet*. If both

answer in the same way, the Circle can be sure of the truth of the matter. If they are not the same, the Circle must beware of the truth of the matter.”

“What must the tribe do after the Circle of Wisdom has met and everyone has spoken their hearts, *River Mother?*”

“The tribe must go about their lives and listen within themselves to what has been said. By doing this, the hearts of the tribe will begin to become balanced spiritually—which is what is needed.”

Chapter 62: THE CIRCLE OF WISDOM MEETS

When the tribe gathered the next morning for the Circle of Wisdom, everyone kept asking, “Where do I sit,” or “What are the rules,” or “Where does the Circle start?”

This confusion continued until *Night Stalker* finally said in a loud voice, “Brothers and sisters listen to me. The Circle has no beginning or end. There are no rules as to where to sit. Sit where it *feels* right. If it doesn’t continue to feel right then get up and walk around until your body tells you once again that you have found the right place. You cannot *think* about this. You must *feel* your way.”

The villagers began to find their places and the Circle gradually formed. Some villagers sat with their families, some with their close friends. Some, like the hunters, sat together. Some, like the healers, sat alone, without regard to either friends or family. When the excitement died down and the buzz of gossip finally stopped, all eyes turned to *Sees Through Night*.

Sees Through Night said to the gathered Circle, “A short time ago, *River Mother* came to us from far, far away. She told me of the Circle of Wisdom in which we are sitting today. It is the way her tribe maintains their Balance. I believe it will help our tribe to do the same thing. *River Mother* is a great prophet sent here by the Mother Goddess *Mafdet*, who is the protector of *Ma’at*, the Goddess of Truth and Balance. We know of these Goddesses but have all but forgotten them because the ways of *Ra* and *watching* have been good to us—we live in peace with our neighbors and food is plentiful.

“Yet *Mafdet*,” she continued, “came to *Night Stalker* and told us we had become blind to what our prosperity was doing to us. She told us our tribe had lost its spiritual Balance and that the Serpents of Disorder were at our door. To open our eyes—and as a sign of her anger for our having

forgotten the Mother Goddesses— *Mafdet* predicted that our herd would be attacked by lions and four of our milk-giving cows killed—just as we had killed the memory of *Nut* and *Mut* and *Mafdet* and *Ma'at*. We called on *Ra* to stop this and doubled our guard of the herd, but the lions could not be stopped. You have seen how their throats were torn out. It was *Mafdet* telling us that she and *Nut* and *Mut* and *Ma'at* could no longer speak to us because we had torn out their throats by forgetting them. We must bring the Goddesses back into our lives so they can speak to us once more.

“The hunters who were guarding the herd have said that the attacking lions were all females. This was *Mafdet* telling us that the Goddesses, not the Gods, commanded this attack and that we must never again forget their power. Nor must we be angry with *River Mother* for what has happened. She is a great shaman, but we must not forget that she is but the messenger of this attack. *Night Stalker* and I know this to be true just as we know that she has come to help us heal. This morning, right after the attack, *River Mother* grasped the wrists of *Night Stalker* and myself and said, ‘Grab my wrists in the same way I just grasped yours. The three of us are now twined together in the manner of vines bound together as one. In this way we will grow together as friends. I speak the truth when I tell you we were never enemies, nor will we ever be. What happened was not of my will, but the will of *Mafdet*. We must bow to her unknowable ways.’ *River Mother* speaks the truth. The Circle of Wisdom she has brought to us is the way we will begin to balance our hearts. Let us start. Who among us wishes to speak their heart first?”

There was complete silence. It went on and on until I finally decided that I would have to speak first. “I, *River Mother*, wish to speak my heart. My heart is happy because I and my companions found our way to the safety and friendship of your village when we most needed it. We had been

traveling day and night, by land and by river, for over five moons and were weary from fighting off thieves and lions.

“We were guided here by my protector, the fierce Mother Goddess *Mafdet*, but *Mafdet* never told me why. I know now that it was to help you heal, to help you balance your hearts. By this time, I expect all of you have spoken to those who came with me. They are seated to my right. First, my husband, the mighty hunter, *Runs Like Cheetah*, who is holding our baby son, *Ghost Hunter*, and next to him, *Bright Hands*, the maker of our tribe, who has been helping you shape statues of the Mother Goddesses.”

Murmurs ran through the Circle, acknowledging my companions. Suddenly, the high, squeaky voice of *Baby Man* erupted far to my right. “Excuse me, *River Mother*, but if I may be so bold as to interrupt, you seem to have forgotten me, *Baby Man*, the Messenger and Listener of *River Mother* as well as the Watcher of *Ghost Hunter*. I have been patiently sitting next to *Bright Hands* waiting to be introduced, and may I also say that as wonderful as *Bright Hands* is, you have forgotten that it was I, *Baby Man*, who designed the raft that brought the wonderful *Bright Hands* and the rest of you here.”

Everyone in the Circle burst out laughing and clapping at *Baby Man's* display of cheek. It was all I could do to stop from laughing as I replied, “If I seem to have forgotten you, *Baby Man*, it is only because I was sure that by now everyone in the village knew you only too well with your buzzing around asking everyone what they thought. I am sure many were amused by you, but I am equally sure some wanted to beat you with sticks for being such an insistent pest.”

With that, the Circle erupted into another storm of laughing and clapping. Suddenly, something made me glance down at *Ghost Hunter*. I saw from his distorted face that he was about to erupt into one of his hideous laughs and I quickly

signaled *Runs Like Cheetah* to put his hand over *Ghost Hunter's* mouth—and just in time. I had forgotten that I could no longer joke with *Baby Man* when *Ghost Hunter* was around because *Ghost Hunter* would always burst out laughing. Unfortunately, one outburst was all it would take for anyone to know he was possessed, and this was not the time for me to try to explain the mysterious presence of the powerful God/Goddess from beyond the great blue water.

While all this was running through my mind, *Baby Man* shouted out in a very loud, peevish voice, “Maybe what you say is true, *River Mother*, and maybe it is not, but you should never make fun of one who is so devoted to you—even if he does overdo it from time to time. After all, how am I to be the Listener of *River Mother* if I do not hear the thoughts of everyone? You must remember, *River Mother*, that not everyone is as easy with words as you are, so while it may be true that I sometimes prod and suggest and needle a bit too much, I always do so in your service.”

“Oh, I never doubted that, *Baby Man*. Please accept my apologies if I have unknowingly slighted you. Members of the Circle, let me formally introduce *Baby Man*, who is seated to the right of *Bright Hands*, and who, unlike some of us, is never lost for words or the opportunity to use them. May I proceed now, you rascal?”

Baby Man nodded his assent but with the funniest face—like a squirrel with a mouthful of nuts. That did it. The Circle erupted in one last howl of laughter. As I waited for it to subside, and the Circle began to turn toward me, I could see in their eyes that they were anxious to hear me speak my heart. Finally, when there was silence, I said to the Circle, “I come to you today with a happy heart. But I also come to you with a heavy heart because of your loss. My heart is happy because I know that I am finally among friends, as are those who came with me. My heart is also happy because I am sure, my dear brothers and sisters, that we will become

even stronger friends. I feel deep in my heart that this is not the end of my journey—but the beginning.

“I say this to you because I had a vision long ago as a young girl that I would travel to a faraway place where a face existed upon a cliff high above the river. In that vision, the face on the cliff became my face when *Mafdet* took me as her daughter in my twenty-second summer. That summer is quickly approaching, as is the face on the high cliff, because I now know what all of you have always known—that we are but a short distance from that cliff. Where *Mafdet* will direct me in the years to follow, I do not know, just as I did not know when I turned our raft toward this village that we would become brothers and sisters.”

I waited for a moment and then said, “For all this, my heart is happy. But my heart is also heavy because I know that this village long ago abandoned the ways of the Mother Goddesses in favor of the ways of *Ra* and *watching*. But my heart is also happy because I now know that I was brought here by *Mafdet* to help you make the ways of the Mother Goddesses come alive again in your hearts. I believe that you are the first of many tribes that will come to see that the only way to balance their hearts is through the older way, the way of the Mother Goddesses. If the heart is not in harmony with itself, the Serpents of Disorder will always be at your door, threatening darkness and chaos.”

When I saw in their eyes that they understood what I was trying to tell them, I continued, “The ways of *Ra* and *watching* have been good to you. They have brought you great prosperity, but only the way of the Mother Goddesses and the ways of *feeling* can truly Balance your hearts. Right now, you have plentiful food and are at peace with your equally prosperous neighbors. Prosperity like yours is a kind of Balance, but it is incomplete without the heart being in harmony with itself. In killing four of your herd last night, *Mafdet* reminded you that your prosperity could disappear in the blink of an eye. I know you mourn the loss of those

cows and the plentiful milk and calves they would have brought you for many summers to come. This loss should make you think what would happen if some unexpected attack by an enemy, or fire, or drought, or disease destroyed all of your crops and herds. Where would you be then? You have all but forgotten how to hunt and gather. Brother would turn on brother, father on son, as everyone was swept away in a flood of deceit and violence and thievery and cheating and whatever else it took for you to steal whatever scraps of food you saw in the hands of others.

“Where,” I asked, “would you be then? The way of *Ra* and the way of *watching* would be powerless against the mounting darkness. Only hearts strengthened by the truth and harmony of the way of the Goddesses would be able to withstand it, because just as you felt the harmony of your own mother when she held you as a child, so you will feel the harmony of the Mother Goddesses when you open yourself to their ways, which are the ways of *feeling*. It can begin right here, now, in this Circle of Wisdom.

“When *Mut* and *Nut* gave birth to the First Mother, the Mother who gave birth to us all, the way of the mother and the way of the Mother Goddesses were laid down as one and the same. It is still one and the same. It is the way of Order and Balance, the way of the heart in harmony with itself. My heart is heavy for the loss of your cows and the suffering and doubt it has brought all of you. Yet I need not tell you that our own mothers will sometimes punish us in order to save us. We know this from our own lives. We all know that as children we were sometimes too stubborn or too blind to obey our mothers warning us of an approaching danger.

“*Mafdet* has been just such a mother. When you became so satisfied with your prosperity that you couldn't see the Serpents of Disorder at your door, she punished you by taking your cows. But she now offers you the harmony of her breast and that of the other Mother Goddesses. *Mafdet* is not asking you to abandon the ways of *Ra* and *watching*. There is no need for that. Their ways will find a new place in

your lives, one that is in harmony with the ways of *feeling* and the Mother Goddesses. I, *River Mother*, have spoken my heart.”

With that, I nodded to *Sees Through Night* to continue with the Circle. One by one, the tribe spoke their hearts. Some spoke of their confusion and sorrow as to what had happened, and some spoke of their happiness that the Mother Goddesses had come to restore the harmony within their hearts. But there was also great anger. The last to speak were the hunters. One by one, they spoke of the anger in their hearts for my wanting them to return to the ways of the Mother Goddesses. Each of them declared, in his own furious way, that the ways of the Goddesses were more suited to the nature of women than the nature of hunters. Hunters, they declared, preferred the ways of *watching* because it was closer to the way they had always studied their prey. It was the way of men. It was the way of *Ra*.

Some of the hunters became so enraged that I was sure they would have struck me given the chance. I tried to stay calm, but when I looked in their eyes, I could see the uncontrollable rage of *Antelope Hunter*. I knew this world was different from that of *Antelope Hunter*, but I also knew I was looking at the same anger—a blind, seething anger directed not only against me, but against women. It wasn't an anger caused by some injustice done them by women, or even by the Goddesses, but a blind, deep fear of the power of women to instinctively know the truth of things. Even in my own tribe, women were aware of that fear but always worked around it by acknowledging the superior skills of men as hunters—because in our tribe, the way of the hunter still existed. Hunting set men apart with its demand for great strength, speed, and courage in the face of danger.

But in *Sees Through Night's* tribe, men guarded herds and plowed fields or traded with travelers. The way of the hunter no longer set them apart. They no longer had the

power and pride of hunters. They were hunters in name only, and they knew it. It was only a matter of time before this growing sense of powerlessness turned into a blind, uncontrollable rage that would only be satisfied by turning against the women and dominating them. I saw all this, but I also saw that this rage and lust for domination would grow until it led the hunters into endless wars against their neighbors—wars in which warriors would kill not only other warriors, but also women and children in the most savage way. This was the dark side of the ways of *Ra* and of *watching* that was hidden beneath its blindingly bright prosperous side. The Serpents of Destruction were always beneath it, impatiently coiling and uncoiling in the darkness.

As all this was going through my mind, a very old hunter rose to speak after all the other hunters had spoken of the rage in their hearts. Despite his age, his body was taut and his dark eyes were as sharp as flint. His name was *Bitter Knife*. He rose very calmly, nodded to *Sees Through Night*, myself, and then *Runs Like Cheetah*, who he held in his eyes for a very long time, like a thirsty man drinking cool water. Finally, he said to the Circle, “I am happy in my heart because the great hunter *Runs Like Cheetah* has come to remind us how great a man is when he hunts the God-like animals surrounding him. We all know the great hunter does this by pulling all his skill and courage and cunning together until it catches fire. But even then, the great hunter knows that the God-like ways of knowing and strength possessed by the leopard and the lion and the antelope will always exceed his.

“Yet,” *Bitter Knife* continued, “the great hunter also knows that he has a human mind that allows him to endlessly watch and study his prey. The great hunter will watch his prey for days on end until he finally sees a way to gain an advantage, if only for a moment. He then strikes suddenly, with all his courage and might. Yet, at the same time, the hunter also knows he will not always win, that sometimes his momentary advantage will not be enough—

nor his courage nor his strength—and he will become horribly injured, or killed. That is the way of the hunter.

“We no longer have the way of the hunter in this village. We lost that long ago. We only hear of it in stories of a time far beyond memory. They are stories of what we once were as hunters. We no longer hunt animals as *Runs Like Cheetah* does. Instead, we guard our tame cows and goats and move them from pasture to pasture. We no longer crawl on our hands and knees to surprise the leopard, but plow our fields so more barley can be planted and harvested. We have become dim men, half of what we once were. It has saddened my heart to hear my fellow hunters, one by one, speak in anger because they believe the ways of the Mother Goddesses will threaten the way of the hunter. It saddens my heart because my fellow hunters are fools enough to believe they are still hunters. But we are no longer hunters worthy of the name.

“If my fellow hunters looked into their hearts with the keen eyes of a true hunter, they would see that all this has been brought upon us by the ways of *Ra* and of *watching*. Let there be no mistake about this, we know from our oldest stories that before the time of *Ra* and of *watching*, we lived boldly as hunters. We lived as *Runs Like Cheetah* lives. The ways of the Goddesses have not prevented him from becoming the greatest of hunters, have they? Answer me this, my fellow hunters—who among us in this time of *Ra* can compare to him? The tribes from beyond the great blue waters brought us the ways of *Ra* and of *watching*. We saw in those ways how we could escape hunger and uncertainty, but we fooled ourselves. Oh, yes, we have escaped hunger, but as our bellies grew fuller our manhood grew weaker until today we are nothing but a pack of angry men.

“Do not think we can go back. We cannot. We have become used to the ways of *Ra* and of *watching*. We are trapped. Our numbers grow every day because of our prosperity. Our large numbers are too large now to be fed by hunting wild animals and plants. We must continue to farm and harvest our tame animals and tame plants. We are

trapped with no way out. Even if our village were by some miracle to become far smaller, with fewer mouths to feed, we could still not go back to hunting. We no longer possess the skills, but far worse, we no longer have the keen eyes and ears and scent-smelling of the hunter.

“We have become so lacking in the skills of the true hunter that we weren’t even able to sniff out or hear the approaching lions last night. That would never have happened if we were the hunters we once were. If *Runs Like Cheetah* had guarded our herds against the lions last night, he would have been aware of their coming long before they approached the thorn bushes. What *River Mother* brings to us is the hope of a spiritual prosperity. But both *River Mother* and I know we can never return to what we once were as hunters. Nor can she and her companions ever return wholly to the ways of their Mother Goddess world. They are trapped here with us because they are now part of our world, which is a prosperous half-world compared to the uncertain but full-blooded world in which she once lived. My heart is saddened that I have to speak to you like this, but it is a burden I have been carrying alone, and for too long. If I saw a way out for the way of the hunter, I would speak to you of it, but I see nothing, only a smoldering anger among us for what we have become. I, *Bitter Knife*, have spoken my heart.”

Sees Through Night then turned to each member of the circle and, one by one, spoke to each of them, either telling them that she had heard the truth, or that she had not heard the truth. No one argued with her. To those from whom she had heard the truth she either said, “Your truth is good for all of us. We will take your truth and listen to it within ourselves,” or she said, “Your truth is only for you. Take it within yourself and follow its path.”

When she got to the hunters, she spoke to each of them—except *Bitter Knife*—with the following words: “You have wandered from the path of truth. This is not good for you. It

is not good for the tribe. There is *darkness* in your heart. It is blinding you, causing you to lose your way. If you allow the *darkness* to stay, it will enter the heart of the tribe. We cannot allow this to happen. You must tame the darkness, or the tribe will do it for you.”

Finally she turned to *Bitter Knife* and said, “Old friend, your wisdom marks you as your years do. You have spoken a truth that is good for all of us. We will take your truth and listen to it within ourselves.”

I looked at *Sees Through Night* and nodded in salute to her. She had needed no help in guiding the Circle. But her green eyes were very uneasy. It was almost as if she had read my thoughts about the blind, mounting rage of the hunters, and then I suddenly had a vision of the ground trembling and splitting beneath us in a fiery crack and the angry, demonic jaws of the hunters rising up to swallow us without mercy.

Chapter 63: I PREPARE FOR WHAT IS TO BE

That night I had a dream of *Mafdet*. I said to her, “O Great Mother, I have planted the ways of *feeling* in the hearts of this tribe as you instructed me, but they are still mere seedlings and in constant danger of being crowded out by the ways of *Ra* and *watching*. Only my presence prevents this from happening.”

Mafdet then spoke to me: “*You must stay here until the ways of feeling become deeply rooted. Then you must go to the next river tribe and begin all over again and then to the next and the next until deeply rooted ways of feeling exist among all the tribes between here and the great blue water. Only then will Balance be restored to the tribes of the river.*”

I replied, “I understand, O *Mafdet*, but I also know the time is coming when I must leave these villages to become the Daughter of *Mafdet*. My greatest fear is that the hunters will use my absence to uproot the ways of *feeling* I have planted.”

“Do not fear the hunters—Runs Like Cheetah and Bitter Knife will find a way to quench their anger. And do not be concerned that you must leave these villages to become the Daughter of Mafdet in your twenty-second summer. You are only in your seventeenth summer. This is time enough for you to plant the ways of feeling deep into the hearts of the villagers.”

“But how can I possibly do all that, O Great Mother? The tribes between here and the great blue water are as many as there are antelope on the plain. You never told me of this task—only that I would travel to a faraway place where I

would become the Daughter of *Mafdet*. Is this not going to happen?”

“It will happen, River Mother. My promise to you has never changed. The task before you now was a part of that promise, but I said nothing then because you would not have understood. Tell me, River Mother, could you have ever imagined that villages like this existed when you were a young girl living in the bosom of the Mother Goddesses and the ways of feeling?”

“You are right, O Great Mother. I would not have understood. It still troubles my understanding. How could such a thing have happened? And how could this tribe have turned away from the Mother Goddesses and rejected the ways of *feeling* for the ways of *watching*?”

“Listen to me very carefully, River Mother. You are a great shaman. You know what happens in the Other World must be echoed in this world if there is to be harmony between them. But unlike the animals who are always in harmony with the Other World, humans can sometimes lose their way. That is why the ways of feeling are so important, because only the ways of feeling can bring humans back into harmony with the Other World.

“What has happened in these villages is that they have lost their way—they have fallen out of harmony with the Other World. But this was not deliberate—they did not challenge the Goddesses as the Giants did long, long ago. They did not see that they began to fall out of harmony as soon as they began to

adopt the ways of watching brought here by the tribes from the north—ways that promised prosperity and freedom from hunger.

“To understand this, I must tell you of things I have kept from you until now. Despite what you have been told since the day of your birth, the Goddesses and Gods do not remain the same forever.

“Just as the great star figures decline in the night sky and new figures slowly rise to take their place with every moon, so do the Goddesses and Gods decline and new ones rise to take their place. But unlike the rising and declining of the star figures, the rising and declining of the Goddesses and Gods in the Other World is so slow that it is beyond measure. It is so slow that even we are blind to who these new Gods and Goddesses will be. We know nothing—only that they are slowly rising and we are slowly declining. We know this from our dreams.

“Does it surprise you to learn the Goddesses and Gods dream? Our dreams are not like your dreams—they are not filled with things. They are filled with feelings so huge that they are beyond human understanding. They are feelings of our slowly disappearing and of something new rising to take our place. If you were to ask me what that something is, I can only tell you that it does not feel like us—that it is beyond the feelings that we know.

“The ways of watching came to the river delta tribes when the wandering tribes from the north came here to live among them. The feelings of our dreams tell us that these ways belong to the new Gods and Goddesses that are slowly rising and cannot be stopped. But these ways of watching have

caused the river tribes to become unbalanced. Today, the river tribes are all standing at the door of Chaos where the Serpents of Disorder are coiling and uncoiling, waiting to enter. This cannot be allowed to happen. That is why I sent you here."

"But I have so little time, O Great Mother. Three summers are not enough to go to all of these villages. We have been in this village for almost a moon, but I dare not leave it for another three moons."

"You need not go to each village, River Mother. Take your raft and stop only at those villages that call to you as this one did. When two summers have passed you must return to prepare to become the Daughter of Mafdet. But you are not to return to the village of Sees Through Night. You are to make a new home for yourself and all your companions on top of the cliff that contains the weathered face they call the face of Ra. You will call this place a Settlement. It will be a special kind of village that will be your home and the home of your companions and all your descendents for as long as they live on this earth.

"Do not worry about the river tribes you had to bypass—the deeply rooted ways of feeling that you did plant will spread like vines and their tendril roots will seek out even the most distant heart. But for the vines to spread and take root everywhere there must be storytellers to sing of who you are and why you have come. To do this, you must add a storyteller to your small group of companions—and it must be a man. After you have told him everything of your life and he sets about making your song, the Goddesses will sing through him and fill

his story with truth and beauty. Anyone who hears it will hunger to hear it again and again until it takes root deep in their hearts to guide their lives and feed their dreams.”

“I understand, O Great Mother, but why must the storyteller be a man?”

“The hunters will not turn away from your story if the storyteller is a man. They will trust his stories more than those of a woman because they know that many of his stories will also be about hunters and hunting. And do not forget that your story is also the story of Runs Like Cheetah, the greatest of hunters. Do you understand now?”

“Yes, I understand. Is there anything else I must do, O Great Mother?”

“You must gather your companions to seek their advice. Sees Through Night and Night Stalker must be there—and the hunter Bitter Knife who has much wisdom. You must set before them what I have told you to do and listen to their wisdom. After you have done that, you must go to the weathered face on the cliff. It is waiting to speak to you.”

As soon as I woke, I asked *Runs Like Cheetah* to bring *Bright Hands* to the Circle of Wisdom as well as *Sees Through Night* and *Night Stalker* and the old hunter *Bitter Knife*. As he was leaving the hut, I quickly added, “Bring the young, blind storyteller called *White Eyes* as well.”

I went to the Circle of Wisdom and waited for the others to arrive. The last to come was *White Eyes*. He walked directly to where I was sitting and stood in front of me and said, “I

will sit here, right in front of you, *River Mother*, so I can hear everything you say.”

“As you wish, *White Eyes*—but I must tell you this has never been done.”

“You mean sitting in front of you?”

“Yes, but it is not important that it is *me* you are sitting in front of. We always sit alongside each other so that the Circle of Wisdom is unbroken. But you, *White Eyes*, are sitting inside the Circle of Wisdom. You are not a part of it.”

“If I could see I would agree with you, *River Mother*, but I am blind since birth. There is no inside or outside for me. There are only voices.”

All the time I was speaking to him, there was something about his manner that made me uneasy. I thought at first it was because of the white film that completely covered his eyes, but I suddenly realized it was because his blind eyes kept looking directly at me while I was speaking. Most blind people turn their head to the side to hear you better when you speak to them, but *White Eyes* did not. He looked straight at me—his eyes locked directly on mine. Nor did his eyes wander when he spoke to me, as blind eyes often do, but they remained locked on mine. My mind stepped back to what the *Giants* said about the *Spirit Caves*—“*This is the place where we speak from the Eyes and see from the Mouth.*”

I knew right then that *Mafdet* had guided me in selecting *White Eyes*. I couldn't help but feel that he was both listening to me and speaking to me through his blind white eyes. It made my mind float in the most mysterious, beautiful way. I knew he was the one. I looked directly into his eyes and said, “You are right, *White Eyes*, there is no inside or outside for you—only voices. Stay where you are my young friend.”

I then turned to the Circle and said, “*Mafdet* came to me in a dream last night and told me the Serpents of Disorder were

not only at the door of *this* village but every village between here and the great blue water. She said that after the ways of *feeling* have become firmly rooted here I am to travel downriver for two summers, stopping at whatever villages call to me as this one did and that I am to repeat what I have done here in each of these villages. *Mafdet* assured me that I need not stop at all the villages because if the ways of the Mother Goddesses become firmly rooted they will travel like vines and take root in all the other villages. She then told me to return at the end of two summers to prepare for becoming the Daughter of *Mafdet*, except I was not to return to this village but instead make a new home for myself and my companions on the top of the cliff holding the face.

“*Mafdet* also told that what we have been doing to ensure that the ways of *feeling are* firmly rooted is not enough, not for this village nor the ones I will soon visit. I will repeat her words as I remember them:

‘For the ways of feeling to take root everywhere there must be storytellers to sing of who you are and why you have come. To do this, you must add a storyteller to your companions—and it must be a man. After you have told him everything of your life and he sets about making your song, the Goddesses will sing through him and fill his story with truth and beauty. Anyone who hears his story will hunger to hear it again and again until it takes root deep in their hearts to guide their lives and feed their dreams.’”

I continued, “I am sure that *White Eyes* is the storyteller we need. But he is of this tribe, not ours. I must ask both *White Eyes* and *Sees Through Night* if his joining me is possible.”

“I would have to be blind,” *Sees Through Night* replied, “not to see how attracted you are to *White Eyes*. It is a strong sign. I have no objection, nor, I think, does *Night*

Stalker. But *White Eyes* must agree as well. What say you, *White Eyes*?”

White Eyes turned to face to *Sees Through Night* and said, “I would be honored to sing the story of *River Mother* and to travel with her and her companions. When do you want me to join you, *River Mother*?”

“You have already joined me, my young friend,” I replied. “What is being decided today will determine if we will succeed in defeating the Serpents of Disorder that are at your door and the door of every other village between here and the great blue water. This new journey will be far more important than the journey that brought me here.”

I then turned to *Runs Like Cheetah* and *Bitter Knife* and said, “I am afraid that even with all our efforts, the seething anger of the hunters will one day break out and uproot the ways of the Mother Goddesses. But when I told *Mafdet* of my fear, she said to me, ‘*Do not fear the hunters—Runs Like Cheetah and Bitter Knife will find a way to quench their anger.*’ Is this true? Have you found a way to calm their anger?”

Bitter Knife replied, “Their anger will always be with them, *River Mother*. It is in the stars. But perhaps we can distract them from their anger. *Runs Like Cheetah* has devised a plan that may do just that. I think it a good plan and have agreed to help him introduce it to the hunters first in this village, and then in the other villages. I will go with you and *Runs Like Cheetah* to the other villages, because without me standing at your side, the hunters in the other villages will not listen to you.

“What we will propose to the hunters in this village first, and then the others, is that *Runs Like Cheetah* and I wish to train two young hunters to hunt with cheetahs. Every hunter knows that hunting with cheetahs is the highest honor a hunter can achieve and they also know that only a

few hunters from the river delta have ever achieved it. We know this from our stories.

“It is best,” *Bitter Knife* continued, “that we let the hunters help us in selecting the two young hunters. We will ask them to choose four young hunters they think most promising and from that, *Runs Like Cheetah* and I will select two to train. The other two will help in the care and feeding of the cheetahs but they will also serve as replacements in the event those picked fail to blossom or become injured. *Runs Like Cheetah* and I have decided that the young hunters selected should be no more than twelve summers, preferably ten summers. That way they will still be close to their mothers and not yet heavily influenced by the anger of the older hunters. *Runs Like Cheetah* tells me that his father began training him at eleven summers and he thinks ten summers will not be difficult at all if the boys are strong and willing.

“We know there will be many objections from the older hunters because all of them will wish to be trained, but they will be stilled when *Runs Like Cheetah* tells them the younger hunters will be better because they learn *new* things much quicker. If they still challenge him, he will quiet them by saying he knows this from experience as he was only eleven when his father trained him.”

Runs Like Cheetah broke in here and said, “Having only three moons to train them is a problem. We did not know that *River Mother* will be moving on after three moons, but I think I have a solution. It took my father twelve moons to train me. That was to hunt with two cheetahs, but even with only one cheetah it will take at least six moons. Since we have now learned that *River Mother* will be moving on every three months we will have to train them in steps. The first three months will be in trapping and taming the baby cheetahs. We will then go on to the next village and do the same thing there. But we will take the four young hunters from this village with us and train them how to sing and hunt with their cheetahs while we train the young hunters in

the second village for three moons in trapping and taming the baby cheetahs. Then we will take the completely trained young hunters with us along with the four partially trained from the second village to the third village and do the same thing.

“It is clear that in the beginning we will be behind *River Mother*, but we will catch up by the third village by using the young hunters we have trained completely to finish the training in each new village. We will have to enlarge the raft to carry these young hunters to the next village but once they are done they can then return by foot to their own villages. It is a kind of frog-jumping, but it will allow us to keep up with *River Mother*. This will also form a bond between the young cheetah hunters. They will still belong to their own village but they will also belong to something larger: the brotherhood of cheetah hunters. They will be known and honored throughout the river delta and hunters everywhere will speak proudly of their feats in hunting with cheetahs. All this will help calm the anger of the older hunters.”

Bitter Knife then spoke, “There is something else I must say to you, although it saddens me to do so. The anger of the older hunters may still break out. All it will take is a spark at the right time for a murderous attack on *River Mother* and her companions to take place. I believe the band of young cheetah hunters will remain loyal to *Runs Like Cheetah* and me if this happens. They and their cheetahs will be all we have between us and their rage. You should know this, *River Mother*, for it is the truth.”

“I know it is the truth, *Bitter Knife*. *Sees Through Night* and I fear the seething anger of the hunters greatly, not only for ourselves but for all women. You have spoken wisely.”

“I must ask a favor of you,” *Bitter Knife* replied. “I not only want to join you and your companions on your journey, but to stay with you wherever you choose to live afterwards. I am an old hunter whose time on this earth is getting shorter

and shorter, but I feel I would be valuable to you in advising you on the ways of the river delta people. I ask both you and *Sees Through Night* to grant me this wish.”

Sees Through Night replied, “Old, wise friend, I will miss seeing you every day by the smoky fires, but it is *River Mother* who will miss you even more if you are not at her side in her great journey. But she is not the only one. I have also watched the bond between you and *Runs Like Cheetah* grow stronger and stronger until you have become like father and son. This will be good for you and *Runs Like Cheetah*—and I know you will also be like a father to *River Mother* as well. It is in the stars, as you say. I wish you well.”

Tears came to my eyes—for I had never known my father—and I could see them also forming in the eyes of *Runs Like Cheetah* whose father had been so brutally taken from him by the forces of darkness. We both turned to *Bitter Knife* and told him we would be honored. *Mafdet* had indeed been good to us. We had both grown to love *Bitter Knife*. We knew his love and wisdom would guide us through any dangers awaiting us.

I turned to *White Eyes* and said, “I think it is time for you and I to sit together for a few days so I can tell you of my life as I remember it. *Bright Hands* will join us, for she knows me as well as I know myself and will tell you of things I may have forgotten.”

I then turned to the Circle and said, “When I am finished speaking to *White Eyes*, I want to go with my companions to the high cliff to see the weathered face. It is but two days away and should be easily reached by the river trails. But I would also like my new companions, *Bitter Knife* and *White Eyes*, to go with me—and *Sees Through Night* and *Night Stalker* as well. Will you all come with me?”

Sees Through Night replied, “I and *Night Stalker* and *Bitter Knife* and *White Eyes* would be honored. I know that *Runs Like Cheetah* and *Bright Hands* will be at your side as always, but will *Baby Man* and *Ghost Hunter* also be with you?”

“The Goddesses would not allow anything less.” I replied, to which a high squeaky voice from behind a nearby tree added, “Nor would *Baby Man*, the ever-busy—and if I may be so bold—too often neglected Messenger and Listener of *River Mother*, who hopes you were not thinking about leaving without him and your always unpredictable infant son, since I am also the Watcher of *Ghost Hunter*, in case you have forgotten.”

Right then, *White Eyes* glanced over at the tree and then back at me with a blind smile so quick that I almost missed it. *White Eyes*—as I would soon discover—missed nothing.

Chapter 64: WE JOURNEY TO THE FACE ON THE CLIFF

Now, finally, I was to gaze on the face I had come so far to see. My companions were as excited as I was because they also knew that the face on the cliff was destined to become my face. Some in the group were a bit uneasy starting out because the river trail would expose us to attacks by lions and crocodiles, but as it was only a two-day walk—and we had two great hunters with us—I wasn't particularly worried. Besides, *Bitter Knife* had told me lions seldom attacked humans on this part of the trail as prey was plentiful. But he was quick to add that crocodiles could be a problem—especially at night.

We started walking at sunrise and by late afternoon had covered enough ground to camp for the night. *Bright Hands* and I gathered berries and roots while the others gathered dead wood for a fire that would have to burn all night. *Bitter Knife* and *Runs Like Cheetah* built a rough barrier of thorn bushes around us and we soon had the fire going and grass mats laid out for sleeping. *Runs Like Cheetah* set the cheetahs to catching some rabbits and after eating our fill of them, we quickly fell asleep. Only *Bitter Knife* and *Runs Like Cheetah* stayed up. They would have to keep the fire going all night while they took turns watching for lions and crocodiles—but none appeared. Morning rose up just as peacefully as night had fallen the night before.

We had hoped to see the face before darkness fell the second day, but when the sun got low, *Sees Through Night* said it was still a way off, so we quickly built a sleeping camp and gathered food as we had the night before. It has hard falling asleep with the cliff being so close but eventually we fell into a deep sleep only to be suddenly wakened by *Bitter Knife* warning us that a group of crocodiles had crawled up on the riverbank and were headed toward us. We could see their red eyes gleaming on the riverbank. *Bitter Knife* and *Runs Like Cheetah* began hurling burning sticks at the crocodiles

but they kept coming. When they were a few body lengths from us, *Bitter Knife* and *Runs Like Cheetah* pulled their bows out and began shooting arrows into their mouths—but with little effect. They were about to grab their spears when *Ghost Hunter's* face became horribly distorted and he let out a piercing scream that stopped the crocodiles in their tracks.

My companions had heard that scream before, but *Bitter Knife* and *Sees Through Night* and *Night Stalker* and *White Eyes* had not, and all of them except *Bitter Knife* backed away from *Ghost Hunter* as fast as they could. *Bitter Knife* just stood there looking at *Ghost Hunter* in the most curious manner, as if he had just stumbled onto a jungle creature he had never seen before. *Ghost Hunter* then let out a hideous, demonic laugh, causing *Sees Through Night* and *Night Stalker* and *White Eyes* to back away even more, but it also freed the crocodiles, sending them scrambling back to the river. Again *Bitter Knife* did not move, but turned to me and said, “I have heard many battle cries, *River Mother*, but none like that, and none that could stop crocodiles. You’ve been keeping something from us, haven’t you?”

I had hoped to delay having to explain *Ghost Hunter's* ways—but when I saw there was no way out I said, “You are right, *Bitter Knife*. What I have been keeping from your tribe is this—my baby, *Ghost Hunter*, is possessed by a powerful spirit from Time to Come. We know very little beyond that except that the spirit is a powerful God/Goddess who is both a destroyer and healer.”

Bitter Knife kept looking at *Ghost Hunter* in the same calm, curious manner as I told him this, but I could see that he was watching *Ghost Hunter* very closely with one eye while the other was watching me just as closely. I said, “It is very protective of *Ghost Hunter* because it is through *Ghost Hunter* that it can momentarily enter this world. It screams though *Ghost Hunter* whenever he is endangered—as he was by the crocodiles.”

Bitter Knife took one last quick look at me and then lifted *Ghost Hunter* up from the ground so he could look him directly in the eyes. *Ghost Hunter's* face was still horribly distorted but it did not seem to bother *Bitter Knife* in the least. If anything, a slight smile was forming on his lips as he turned *Ghost Hunter* around in his hands like a hunter examining a small, exceedingly strange animal. Suddenly, his eyes lit up and he said very calmly to *Ghost Hunter*, "Well my little whatever you are, if you can stop crocodiles like that, you can do just about anything, right?"

"Pardon me for interrupting you, *Bitter Knife*," said *Baby Man*, "but as you can see—and I am absolutely sure you can—little *Ghost Hunter* is only one summer or so, which means he's not much for words yet."

"*Ghost Hunter* may be only one summer or so, but he's no baby, are you, my little whatever you are?"

That was all it took for *Ghost Hunter* to begin laughing like a demon again. It made *Sees Through Night* and *Night Stalker* step back even further, but *White Eyes* stayed put this time. His blind eyes darted between *Bitter Knife* and *Baby Man* and me with the same quick blind smile I had seen earlier—he was on the hunt.

Bitter Knife kept looking at *Ghost Hunter* very patiently, like a hunter determining his next move, and then, finally, he said to *Ghost Hunter*, "You have something to say to me, do not you my little one?"

Ghost Hunter grinned, baring his sharp, tiny teeth and began howling, "H-a-w-k, H-a-w-k, H-a-w-k." *Bitter Knife* lifted *Ghost Hunter* high up over his head and began spinning him around in circles like he was flying, which made *Ghost Hunter* laugh so hard he pissed all over *Bitter Knife*. That started everyone laughing, most of all *Baby Man*, who fell down on the ground repeating, "Oh, that was a good one, you little demon, a really good one."

Bitter Knife laughed and wiped his face and said to *Runs Like Cheetah*, “I hate to tell you this, my friend, but I think your little *Ghost Hunter* is going to hunt with hawks, not cheetahs. What do you say about that, *Night Stalker*?”

Night Stalker looked at him as if he had somehow read her mind, “As soon as you spoke of it, I saw him in my mind as a tall, fierce man with hawks. I have heard of hunting with hawks, but I have never seen it done. The tribes from the north tell of hunters far to the east of the great blue water who hunt with hawks. It must have been the spirit from Time to Come who spoke through *Ghost Hunter*. He may grow up to hunt like that. What say you, *River Mother*?”

I replied, “I saw the same thing in my mind as you, *Night Stalker*, but I saw more—I saw that the hawks will be as fierce as *Ghost Hunter* and they will fly with him when he rips the seal between worlds.”

Bitter Knife handed the howling baby to *Runs Like Cheetah* and said with a hearty laugh, “You better make sure he does not decide to hunt your cheetahs with his hawks, my friend. Something tells me they will have a way of swooping down and scratching out the eyes of anything that moves, no matter how swift.”

I shuddered at *Bitter Knife*’s words. He had meant it as a hunter’s joke, but his words were more. They were prophetic. I had no idea how he had seen the future so clearly, but he had, even if he did not know it. Right then, I knew the time was coming when *Runs Like Cheetah* and *Ghost Hunter* would become rivals. One look at *Night Stalker*’s wide open eyes told me I was right.

Bitter Knife was in a good mood. *Ghost Hunter* had somehow intrigued him more than anyone could have imagined. He said to *Runs Like Cheetah*, “Tell me, my friend, why do you even bother to build a fire and thorn

barriers at night when you have *Ghost Hunter* around? He could stop a jungle full of animals.”

Runs Like Cheetah replied, “That would seem to be true, *Bitter Knife*, but I am afraid it is not *Ghost Hunter* who is deciding whether to scream or not. The spirit from Time to Come is the one deciding and we can only guess what that spirit will do. I am afraid we will have to keep building the fires and thorn barriers.”

I decided to add something more to what *Runs Like Cheetah* had said, “*Ghost Hunter* was born with the ability to rip the seal between worlds. That has never happened before, not even in our stories. Somehow a very powerful God/Goddess from Time to Come found the rip made by *Ghost Hunter* and is taking advantage of it to momentarily enter our world. We’re entirely at its mercy. Ripping the seal is like breathing for *Ghost Hunter*—but at his age he doesn’t really know he is doing it. But he will become aware of it as he grows older. It is then I believe he will become a shaman of enormous power, capable of summoning spirits that are unknown to us. If he can control those spirits, I believe he can bring us into a time of great healing. If he cannot, he may tear our world apart. No one knows.”

Bitter Knife’s mood changed immediately. He understood what I was saying—that the matter of *Ghost Hunter* was deadly serious—yet at the same time he seemed to have no fear of *Ghost Hunter* or the spirit possessing him. It was then that I realized why *Bitter Knife* was honored by all the river tribes—he was absolutely fearless in the face of danger, even the powerful God/Goddess possessing *Ghost Hunter*. I said to him, “You’re not afraid of the spirit possessing *Ghost Hunter*, are you?”

“There is nothing to be afraid of, *River Mother*. Not the lion, nor the cobra, nor the crocodile. I know that at any time one of them may kill me. I live my life accepting that. The Gods and Goddesses should be honored for who they

are, but not feared. Do not think me an old foolish hunter who believes he is greater than the Gods and Goddesses. I know they could destroy me in an instant—and for no reason. I live my life accepting that. But there is no need to cower before them. It is only when we journey through our lives as ready to accept our deaths as we are to live that the Gods and Goddesses bow to us if only for a moment.”

I could see the admiration in *Runs Like Cheetah's* eyes for all that *Bitter Knife* had said. I felt the same way—he was indeed the wise father we needed for our journey. I said to *Bitter Knife*, “We will carry your truth in our hearts, *Bitter Knife*, what you have said is good for all of us.”

No sooner had I said that than the first rays of the sun rose over the river. I could feel its warm light touching the face on the cliff as though it were my face. I knew it was time to see it.

After a short time walking the trail, the ground to the left of it began to slowly rise. It grew higher and higher and then, in the distance, high up, on a mound that rose up from the cliff face, the barely visible side of the face appeared. The others saw it too. I hurried to get closer to view it from the front as I had in my vision. When I was directly in front of it, I looked up and saw it was the same large vague face, and depending where you stood, it appeared either to be the face of a human or a cheetah or both. The features were so soft and faint that they appeared to be Veiled—just as my face was at birth. I turned to *Bright Hands* and asked, “Do you see it?”

“Yes, *River Mother*. I see it. It is very faint and keeps changing appearance, depending on where you are standing. But I wasn't prepared for its size. It is as large as the sun.”

“Yes, it is. I have been told that the tribes here call it the face of *Ra*, but I do not think so. It is too round and soft to be the face of a God. It is the face of a Goddess.”

Bright Hands replied, "It is also round—like a cheetah's."

"Yes, you are right—it *is* round like a cheetah's face—so it must be the face of *Mafdet*. But it doesn't look like the face I have seen on statues of *Mafdet*—or the face I have seen in my dreams."

"That is because it is a face about to become the face of the Daughter of *Mafdet*. So it is *Mafdet's* face and your face at the same time—which is to say it is neither one—it is the Veiled Face in the womb of the heavens, waiting to be born. I can feel this in my belly."

I turned to the blind *White Eyes* and said, "I know you cannot see what we are talking about—what can I do to help you see it?"

White Eyes paused for a moment and then replied, "Place one of the cheetahs in front of me, *River Mother*, and then please kneel down with that cheetah on your right."

I called for the female cheetah and knelt down in front of *White Eyes* with her on my right. *White Eyes* looked directly at my eyes and then he placed his right hand on my face and began to run his finger tips over my face. The touch of *White Eyes* was very light—the tips of his fingers felt like a fine mist moving over my face. Then he placed his left hand on the cheetah's face and began to run his finger tips over both our faces. The cheetah purred then suddenly bared her fangs—the fine mist of his fingertips must have frightened her. *Runs Like Cheetah* quickly touched her and she grew still.

When he was finished touching our faces he said, "Thank you, *River Mother*, and I thank you too, my little cheetah. I now know what the face will look like when you become the Daughter of *Mafdet*. It will be a face like no other—it will keep watch on the world when *Ra* travels to the underworld at night and it will greet him when he rises in the morning."

I wanted to climb to the top of the cliff where we would settle after we completed our journey through the river tribes. I knew the view would be like that of a hawk. Everyone wanted to join me to see the view so we began searching for a path to the top. *Bitter Knife* told me there was a good path back where the cliff had begun to rise up from the riverbank, adding that he often used it to go to the top to scan the plains for antelope. We followed him back to where the cliff started to rise and there it was. It was well travelled and we had no problem reaching the top. When I finally got there, I felt I could see to the ends of the earth. When I looked east I could see where the sun rose up over the edge of the earth and when I looked west I could see deep into the jungle and antelope plains where the sun set. If I looked south to where we had come from, I could see the wide river getting smaller and smaller until it finally disappeared into the jungle and when I looked north I could see the river branching off into other smaller rivers that threaded through the green river delta toward the great blue water.

Runs Like Cheetah immediately saw it was an ideal location for hunting and he began asking *Bitter Knife* many questions. As for myself, I could clearly see the site gave me a wide, deep view of many of the villages I was planning to visit. More importantly, the people in those villages could look up after I had left their villages and know I was up here, watching over them.

Baby Man was keeping himself busy, standing at the edge of the cliff, pointing out the river villages below to *Ghost Hunter*. When I asked *Baby Man* what he was saying to *Ghost Hunter* he said, "Oh, only if he remembers seeing this or that village because his demon must be used to looking at the world from high above like this. I know I am. When I dream of my world in Time to Come, the view looks something like it does from here, like I am a high flying hawk—but I travel much higher and farther in my dreams

because I can look down and see the great blue water and all the land surrounding it.”

White Eyes was busy taking in what everyone was saying, but his blind eyes locked onto mine when he heard me asking *Bright Hands* for her opinion of the site for our new home. I added that *Mafdet* had said it was to be called a Settlement—because it was to be a special kind of village. *Bright Hands* told me it would be fine except water would be a problem. It would have to be hauled up from the river and kept in large jars, so farming and herding would not be possible, except on a very small scale. I told her that the lack of water did not particularly bother me because I did not see the Settlement as being a typical village—with farming and herding at its center. I told her if we needed food and water beyond what we could hunt and gather ourselves, I was sure the surrounding tribes would be glad to supply us with whatever we needed.

I told her that the Settlement was to be a spiritual village—a crossroads—where people from the river tribes could come to honor both *Ra* and the Mother Goddesses. Then I told *Bright Hands* to think about how the Settlement could be laid out so it would be just to the south of the high mound containing the Veiled Face of *Mafdet*. I told her that I wanted the Settlement to signify the Balance that had been restored to the hearts of the river tribes through the Union of *Ra* and the Mother Goddesses.

She looked around the site, thought for a moment, then said to me that it could be signified in many ways, through the locations of statues and altars and the like, but it was most important that all the huts and structures and paths and altars and statues be perfectly balanced so that if you were to stand in the center of it, the north, south, east, and west parts would be in perfect balance—they would mirror one another. As always, *Bright Hands* knew exactly what was needed. I knew that when the time came, not one brick or

path or statue would be put in a place that did not signify Balance.

I saw that the face of the mound began a short distance back from the cliff face beneath it, providing a rough, slim ledge just big enough to get a foothold. *Bitter Knife* said that villagers who visited the face often edged out on it to leave bread and barley beer for *Ra*, but they always did so with a vine rope around their waist because one slip meant sure death. I asked *Bright Hands* if there was any way she could raise me up from the ledge so I could touch the vague face—the eye was much higher than I could reach. I told her that I wanted to see it as I had in my vision when I rose up from the ground and the right eye spoke to me. *Bright Hands* took a look at the slim ledge and said, “It is a long way down if you slip off the ledge, *River Mother*. The least dangerous way is to put a vine rope around you like the villagers do and then put *Runs Like Cheetah* and a few of the young hunters on the top of the mound with the other end.”

I realized that if I stepped out onto the ledge from the south, the right eye of the face would be just above me—the same eye I had seen close up in the vision. My heart began to race. I asked *Bright Hands* to hurry. She made a vine rope long enough to secure me, and that being done, I made a loop, wound it around my body, and handed the other end to *Runs Like Cheetah* and the young hunters and waited for them to climb to the top of the mound. Then I stepped out onto the ledge. It was so narrow that I had to face the cliff and press against it with my hands as I edged out toward the eye above me. When I was finally beneath it, I told the young hunters to start pulling me up. Suddenly, *Mafdet* entered my right side saying, “*This is my right eye which sees everything, as will your right eye when you become the Daughter of Mafdet. Touch it.*”

I yelled to the young hunters to pull me up higher, and then I stretched my arm up as far as I could until it hovered over the corner of the vague eye. I tried to touch it but couldn't. It was as if some invisible hand were stopping me.

"Touch it!"

I suddenly became afraid.

"Touch it!"

I gathered up all my strength and courage and lunged toward the eye. As soon as I touched it, I lost all control and went limp. I could feel my body pulling away from the ledge into a dark light and then I felt the loop suddenly tighten hard around me and then voices from high above me were telling me to hold on, I was safe. When they finally hauled me back up over the top of the cliff, I still couldn't move or speak. I lay there, vaguely aware of everyone standing over me, but my mind wasn't there. It was filled with memories of *Mafdet* coming to *Antelope Hunter* in his dreams and teaching him how to sing like a cheetah, and then her coming to me and telling me I was to be a great leader, and then memories of her allowing *Antelope Hunter's* hatred of me to explode into the bloody murdering of our women and children, and then *Mafdet* commanding *Bright Hands* to carve a terrifying face of her, and all the time I kept hearing *Bright Hands* defending the carved face, saying to me, '*This is the face Mafdet told me to carve. It was meant to be terrifying. It is a face that will always remind us of her unknowable ways.... There is one more thing I must tell you, River Mother—the face I made is also your face.*'

As soon as I felt stronger, we made our way down the cliff to begin our journey back to the village. All along the way, *Bright Hands's* words kept coming back to me—"*There is one more thing I must tell you, River Mother—the face I made is*

also your face.” It did not matter that at the time she had added, *“It is the face you will have when you become a great leader—but do not worry, you will not really look like that. It is how your enemies will see you when they challenge you.”*

It would have been far more truthful for her to have simply said to me, *“It is your fate to have two faces, River Mother. This is your other face—the dark one Mafdet gave you.”* By this time in my life I had come to understand why I could kill if I had to, and why—despite my shamanic powers—I lacked a healer’s abilities. It was because I had long ago moved into *Mafdet’s* dark light. She was my dark sun and I was her dark shadow on earth. Just touching her eye reminded me of that. Yet I never recoiled from that power and violence because I knew they were needed to protect *Ma’at* from the Serpents of Disorder who were always coiling and uncoiling, threatening to drag all of heaven and earth into eternal darkness. If I had not acquired some of her darkness and power, I would have stayed a small girl in a small village.

Over the years, my childhood dream of becoming the Daughter of *Mafdet* had become much darker. Yet, no matter how dark it became, I never doubted it was my fate to restore the spiritual Balance of the river delta tribes, just as I never doubted that the Serpents of Disorder were always coiling and uncoiling in the eternal darkness beneath them. I also knew that just as I had defeated those forces in the past, I would defeat them in the river delta because *Mafdet* walked with me in all things. But what I never knew with any certainty was how many of those who walked alongside me into those dark battles would survive to see the world again.

Chapter 65: WE BEGIN

We had but three moons to plant the ways of *feeling* before leaving for our next village, so I and my companions set about doing what we had to do. *Runs Like Cheetah* and *Bitter Knife* called the hunters together and told them of their plans for taking four young hunters under their care and then training two of them as cheetah hunters. They told the hunters this was to be repeated in many villages throughout the river delta area.

Surprisingly, there were no objections to the age limits, which was a sign that the older hunters realized they no longer had the flexibility and prowess that would be required. *Bitter Knife's* sharp speech to them at the Circle of Wisdom had obviously had an effect, which could only mean that their attention would be on the young hunters—and not the ways of the Mother Goddesses—and that was all to the good.

The hunters seemed delighted that such attention was being paid to their ways, but favoritism began to show its face when the older hunters were about to select the four young hunters. *Bitter Knife* soon put an end to it by saying to them: “If this wasn’t so important in restoring the spirit of our hunters, I would let you select your favorite nephews and the like. But this is not a silly game. Do you want some slow-witted relative you favor to reflect badly on the hunters of this tribe when he fails to rise to the physical and spiritual level required of cheetah-hunters? You must select the four you think most promising. Even then, there is no way of knowing if the two we choose will be successful. We can only hope so. That is why we asked you to select four.

“If you need guidance in this,” he continued, “look at *Runs Like Cheetah*—he is still a young man, only a few years older than the boys we will train. If the young hunter you are going to push forward doesn’t compare favorably with what you see in *Runs Like Cheetah*, you should think twice.”

Within a few moments, the hunters had selected the four most promising boys. *Bitter Knife* looked over at *Runs Like Cheetah* and winked. He had known all four boys since birth and knew they were the very best the tribe could offer. *Runs Like Cheetah* approached the four boys and said, "Before you can train a cheetah, you must catch one. The cubs you will catch are fast like the wind. And their mothers are even faster. The mothers are fierce and will fight to the death to protect their cubs. Only the most cunning hunters are capable of trapping the cubs and not harming the mother. To harm the mother would break the spirit of the cubs. This must not happen. The cubs must accept you as something like a relative who has come to watch over them. As time passes, and you learn to sing to them from your soul, they will bond with you and forget their mothers. You will then be their mother, the one they will turn to for everything. Everything. It is *you* who will feed them, teach them to hunt."

"In two days," he continued, "we will go into the jungle just before the sun rises. Tomorrow, you will learn how to make the nets and ropes you will need to trap the cubs. The day after that we will show you how to use them. All the hunters, young and old, are welcome to watch this. But on the third day, only the four young hunters will go with us into the jungle. If you are selected as one of the four, you must bring your knives and spears. You will use them only to save your life if the mother cheetah attacks you and then only at the last moment. We will not come back until we have trapped two strong cheetah cubs. This will not be an easy task, but I assure you we will do it. Sleep well, young hunters." With that, *Runs Like Cheetah* turned to *Bitter Knife* and winked. Their faces glowed. They were more excited than the boys.

Baby Man knew from the start that he had to make many changes to the raft. He realized we would have to go upstream from time to time so he drew pictures in the sand of the four long paddles he wanted and instructed two

makers from the tribe how he wanted them made. Then he drew pictures of how he wanted the raft to be lengthened and widened so it could easily carry the four young hunters as well as all my new companions. The cutting and shaping of bamboo went on day after day and always in the middle of it was *Baby Man's* high squeaky voice yapping at the two makers, "No, not that way, this way! Here, let me show you!" *Ghost Hunter* loved the whole show.

Our plan was for *Sees Through Night* and *Night Stalker* to come to the next village with us to tell them how we had restored the spiritual balance in their village. All of us felt this would make it much easier for us to be accepted and that *Sees Through Night* and *Night Stalker* could return to their village by land once we had been firmly accepted by the new villagers. When the ways of the Mother Goddesses had become rooted in the new village, we would then take the leader and shaman of that village with us to the next village and repeat the process. Like the cheetah hunters, the leaders and shamans were going to do a little frog-jumping.

But the most important thing that had to be done was the creation of the story *White Eyes* was to sing of my journey. *Mafdet* had told me we would not succeed without it. Each morning, *Bright Hands* and I would sit with *White Eyes* and I would speak to him about my life. *Bright Hands* would often interrupt with another view of what happened, which I thought helpful, but sometimes I wondered if she was confusing *White Eye*. I asked him if this were so.

He replied, "No, *River Mother*, it doesn't confuse me. It allows me to see you as others see you. Anyway, I am not the one who is really listening. Oh, my ears are hearing everything that is being said, but the one who is really listening is the part of my soul that makes me who I am. I call that part the *Storyteller*. In a way, the *Storyteller* even hears what is not said. Do you understand?"

“I think so,” I replied. “What you are saying is that the *Storyteller* never misses anything, not even the silences that can say so much.”

“Yes. Exactly. The *Storyteller* is always paying attention—to everything. It never sleeps. Right now, the *Storyteller* is already weaving your story, but that story is invisible to me except for small glimpses that appear from time to time—like stars peeking through a dark, cloudy sky. I somehow know all those stars are finding their proper place behind that cloudy sky because I can feel them doing so, just as I also know that one day they will all be aligned. When that happens, I will begin to sing your song. Until then, even I will be a bit in the dark as to what my song will be.

“It may surprise you,” he continued, “that I yield in such a way to the *Storyteller* within me, but there is a part of the human soul that makes us who we are, which—as you must know—is the part that makes you a great shaman and leader. Perhaps you have a name for it—the *prophet*, or perhaps you are only aware of its presence but have never named it. Its mark is that it is continually surprising you with its wisdom. The part of me I call the *Storyteller* is continually surprising me with its ability to weave stories that stun the heart with their beauty and their truth. In speaking to you of this, I am simply acknowledging the mystery of being human—as opposed to being an animal. A lion is always a *lion*. As great as the lion may be, its soul is simple compared to that of humans. Human souls can have different faces, which is why the Gods and Goddesses are so attracted to us. *Mafdet* is your Protector. She is attracted to you because of *who* you are. Despite what you think of *Mafdet’s* role in guiding your life, you should be aware that *your* dark light attracted her as much as *her* dark light attracted you.”

I was taken aback by the wisdom of young *White Eyes*. Everything he said cut me like a flint. It was as if his blind white eyes could see right through my soul. I asked him, “You speak of truths beyond your years, *White Eyes*. Tell me, who is your Protector?”

“That is not easily answered, *River Mother*, because unlike your Protector, *Mafdet*, my Protector makes herself known only through the beauty and truth of my stories. I can only *feel* her attentive presence. I have come to believe it is *Mut*, the First Mother, the one who created herself and then everything under the heavens.”

As he said all this to me, his blind white eyes were fixed firmly on mine as if to say, “Fear not. I will mirror the truth of who you are.” Right then, *Mafdet’s* prediction about the storyteller I would select raced through my mind: “*The Goddesses will sing through him and fill his story with truth and beauty. Anyone who hears his story will hunger to hear it again and again until it takes root deep in their hearts to guide their lives and feed their dreams.*”

All doubt left my body. I took *White Eyes* by the hand and said to him, “When will you begin to sing of my life? I want the people of this village to hear it many times before we leave.”

“I will sing of your life when the *Storyteller* is ready.”

“When will that be?”

“Shortly after you and I and the *Storyteller* are satisfied with everything you have told me.”

“But in three moons we will leave for a new village and then to other villages after that. How can my story be finished when my journey has not finished?”

“I did not say your story would be finished—only that I would sing of your life. And like your life, it will remain unfinished until you die and maybe it will remain unfinished even after that. I need not tell you, *River Mother*, that unlike the heroes we sing of in our stories, the stories themselves do not die and are always changing in different ways. You might say they are never finished because the *Storyteller* is never finished.”

“What do you mean the *Storyteller* is never finished?”

“Each storyteller has a different soul and therefore a different *Storyteller*. As we travel, other storytellers will hear my

singing, and if my story interests the *Storyteller* within them, a new song will be spun out within them, just as the *Storyteller* within me is spinning a story that I will sing for you soon. The new stories spun out by the other *storytellers* will have a different flavor than mine. Things will be added, things will be lost. The story may get better or it may get worse, there is no telling. This goes on long after your death and it only stops when the song being sung is no longer of interest to the *Storytellers* within all of us. Your story will be no exception to this.”

I continued to be surprised by the deep wisdom of *White Eyes*—it cut through me like a knife of light. I told him I was satisfied with what I and *Bright Hands* had told him and asked if he was satisfied.

“Yes, *River Mother*, I am satisfied. We have been talking for almost two moons. It is enough. I can feel it is time for me to begin singing. Last night, when the clouds broke in my mind, a most important star appeared. It was the beginning of your story. It will lead to the other stars that have appeared. But first there is something I must do. I must sing your story over and over again through the night to see if all the stars appear. I would like *Bright Hands* and *Baby Man* to take me out on the raft tonight and throw the anchor stone out. This way I can feel the great river running and surging beneath me, which will aid me in singing. I like *Bright Hands*, she is a skilled maker, and will understand what I am going through. As for *Baby Man*, I love his company—I can no more resist the rascal than you can. Besides, he is the Listener of *River Mother* is that not so? I’d like to hear what he tells you afterwards. But promise me you will not let him tell you anything until we can both hear what he has to say.”

I called out to *Baby Man* who was sitting outside my hut, “Did you hear all that *Baby Man*?”

“I tried not to, *River Mother*, which is why I always sit far outside your door as you have instructed me I do not know how many times. But I must tell you, *River Mother*, that unlike your own voice, which is very low, the voice of *White Eyes* is so clear and high that I couldn’t help but hear it. I will fetch *Bright Hands* and get the raft ready. We will take *White Eyes* out on the river whenever he wants to go.”

All though the night, I could hear *White Eyes’s* high, clear voice drifting off the anchored raft into my hut, but he was so far away I couldn’t make out the words. It did not matter. I would hear them soon enough. The sound of his song brought back memories of the high, sad songs of *Moon Traveler* drifting like dreams across the village of my birth. But the sound of *White Eyes’s* voice was not sad. It was bright and brave and new.

The next day, the entire village assembled to hear *White Eyes*. When he heard me greeting some of the villagers, he turned toward me and began to sing:

*“I sing of River Mother,
The great Prophet
And Mother
From far, far away.*

*“I sing of River Mother,
The great Prophet
Who came to us
From far, far away
Where the river begins.*

“I sing of River Mother,

*Who came to us
From the land of Mut,
Who is the First Mother,
And the Mother of herself
And everything that lives
In the star-filled heavens
And on the crawling earth.*

*“I sing of River Mother,
And I sing of Mafdet,
The fierce Cheetah-Mother Goddess
Who is the guardian of Ma’at,
The keeper of Order and Balance.*

*“I sing of River Mother,
And I sing of Mafdet
The Protector of River Mother,
Who veiled the face of River Mother
so everyone would know
the Goddesses walked with her.*

*“I sing of River Mother,
And I sing of Carries the World,
Who gave birth to River Mother
Who came into the world
Crying against the light
So that everyone would know
The Goddesses walked with her.*

*"I sing of River Mother,
And I sing of her grandmother,
The great shaman Monkey Mother,
Who ripped the veil from the face
Of River Mother with a flint
and cut a bloody river
Down her face and body
So that everyone would know
The Goddesses walked with her.*

*"I sing of River Mother,
Who Mafdet commanded
To follow the River
To a faraway place
Where Mut pressed
the Veiled Face of Mafdet
Into a cliff high above
The moving waters of the River
When the world was born.*

*"I sing of River Mother,
Being told by Mafdet
That she, River Mother,
Would be the Daughter of Mafdet,
When the Veiled Face on the high cliff
High above the waters of the River
Became the face of River Mother.*

"I sing of River Mother,

*Who came to save us
From the Serpents of Disorder
That are always coiling and uncoiling
In the Darkness beneath us.*

“I sing of River Mother.....”

The song went on and on. It was beautiful. The villagers were completely caught up in it, moving and swaying to its rhythms. The song of *White Eyes* was so spare—compared to this story that I am telling you now—that it felt like the story of somebody else. Then I realized it was the story of my soul, the part of my soul that *White Eyes* called the *Prophet*. As soon as I realized this, my mind went back to the day *White Eyes* had fixed his blind, milky eyes on mine as if to say ‘*Fear not. I will mirror the truth of who you are.*’ Once again, *Mafdet’s* prediction about *White Eyes* went racing through my mind: “*The Goddesses will sing through him and fill his story with truth and beauty. Anyone who hears his story will hunger to hear it again and again until it takes root deep in their hearts to guide their lives and feed their dreams.*”

I could truly feel the Goddesses singing through him, and although it was the story of my own life, it was as if I had never really heard it before. Day after day, as *White Eyes* sang, I could feel it slowly taking root in my heart to guide my life and feed my dreams.

Chapter 66: WE VISIT THE NEXT VILLAGE

When we finally boarded the raft and began drifting downriver, we must have looked like a floating village. Standing in the front of the raft were *Runs Like Cheetah* and *Bitter Knife*. Behind them were the four young hunters with their cheetahs and ropes and nets, and then in the center, sitting on top of the center platform were myself and *Ghost Hunter* along with *White Eyes*, *Sees Through Night*, and her mother, *Night Stalker*. Then in the rear, working the two long steering paddles, were *Bright Hands* and *Baby Man*.

When we came to a village near the face on the cliff, I let it pass. Something told me I should go to the village on the east bank just beyond the cliff. I asked *Sees Through Night* if she knew the leader there and she said she did, that he was a great hunter. I was taken aback and asked, “You mean the leader is not a woman?”

“No, *River Mother*, nor is the shaman. Both are men. You will see more of this as you travel north to the great blue water. These villages were the first ones the light-skinned tribes from the north settled. Those tribes brought with them the ways of *watching*. As those ways were adopted, it was only natural that hunters sometimes became leaders. This hasn’t happened everywhere, but as far as I know, about half the tribes have male leaders now, although the shamans remain mostly women.”

I called to *Runs Like Cheetah* and *Bitter Knife* to come to the center of the boat. I asked *Bitter Knife*, “Do you know the leader of the village on the east bank just beyond the cliff?”

“Yes, *River Mother*, he is a great hunter and has killed many lions. His name is *Lion Hunter*. He is known throughout the river delta as the bravest of hunters, but he is sometimes *too* brave.”

“What do you mean *he is too brave*? How could a hunter ever be too brave?”

“There are times when being brave cannot be separated from being rash, or foolish. *Lion Hunter* likes to get very close—too close—to the lion before lunging with his spear. No one gets as close as he does, but he has lost his left eye and two of his left fingers because of this. The lost fingers aren’t any great matter because they are on his left hand, but the loss of his left eye means he cannot judge distances anymore. If he doesn’t change his ways, one day he will lose his life.”

“Thank you, *Bitter Knife*, you have told me what I need to know. I think it would be best if I meet him with my cheetah headdress and silver cobra robe. I am going to need all the help I can get. Here is what I would like to happen as we approach *Lion Hunter’s* village. I will stay hidden under the center platform with *White Eyes* and *Ghost Hunter*. I want *Sees Through Night* and *Night Stalker* and you, *Bitter Knife*, to be standing in the front of the raft. *Lion Hunter* will recognize the three of you and realize we are friends. I think *Runs Like Cheetah* and the four young hunters and their cheetahs should be standing further back—perhaps in front of the center platform.

“When we run up on the riverbank, I’d like you, *Bitter Knife*, along with *Sees Through Night* and *Night Stalker* to get off and greet *Lion Hunter* and briefly tell him that you have come with visitors from far away to see him. Then I’d like you to signal *Runs Like Cheetah* and the four young hunters and cheetahs to get off to meet *Lion Hunter*. When this has been done, I will come out of the center cabin. I would like you, *Sees Through Night*, to tell *Lion Hunter* that I am a great prophet who has come with a message for him. After you have done this, *Bright Hands* will come forward to walk with me and help me keep my balance as I get off the raft—as it will be difficult with my robe and headdress. Finally, *Baby Man* and *White Eyes* and *Ghost Hunter* will get off the raft and follow behind me as I walk up to greet *Lion Hunter*.”

I turned around to the rear of the raft and yelled, “Did you hear all of that *Baby Man?*”

“Of course I did, *River Mother*. How could I not have heard everything? After all, I am *River Mother’s* Listener and have the ears of an elephant.”

“*Bright Hands*, did you hear what I want you to do?”

Yes, *River Mother*, but I did not need the ears of an elephant to hear it.”

When the village finally came into sight, the women and children began gathering and waving to us from the water’s edge. Then the hunters arrived and stood silently behind them watching our approach. After we ran the raft up on the riverbank, everything went as planned. When I finally emerged from the center platform, a wave of whispers ran through the crowd. I took my time getting off. I wanted *Lion Hunter* to get a good look at me—and I can assure you he did—but you would never know it from his expression, which remained calm and watchful.

I told *Lion Hunter* how happy *Runs Like Cheetah* and I were to be at his village. He nodded without saying anything. He was stalking me, I could feel it. I let him go on stalking me for a few moments and then I turned to *Runs Like Cheetah* and asked him to tell his two cheetahs to stand in front of *Lion Hunter*. *Runs Like Cheetah* sang briefly to the cheetahs and they walked over to *Lion Hunter* and stood in front of him. I sang to the cheetahs. They laid their bodies down on the ground and turned over on their backs, exposing their bellies. I said to *Lion Hunter*, “The cheetahs come in friendship, *Lion Hunter*, just as we do. They would like you to rub their bellies and whisper softly that you will not kill them. Is that not right, my brave cheetahs?”

The cheetahs began chirping like morning birds. *Lion Hunter* slowly knelt down and began rubbing their bellies. The cheetahs purred back like happy cubs. *Lion Hunter* stood up

with a slight smile on his face and said to me, “Can you train lions to do this, *River Mother*”?

“I am afraid only the great *Lion Hunter* would be capable of that,” I said with a slight bow. With that, I could feel his spirit body relaxing as we walked back to the village. I knew right then that we were going to become fast friends. I knew it was going to be a long three moons, but I also knew it was going to be fruitful. We had gained another ally, and a powerful one at that.

As it turned out, the shaman—who was called *Six Fingers* because he was born with six fingers on each hand—was very fond of *Night Stalker*. Although he was much younger than *Night Stalker*, he had known her since he was a young boy and listened carefully to what she told him about the ways of the Mother Goddesses and the ways of *feeling*. He trusted *Night Stalker* like an older sister and accepted everything she said and was soon gathering the makers together to work with *Bright Hands* in creating statues of the Mother Goddesses.

Six Fingers was also extremely close to *Lion Hunter*, who relied heavily on him for the shamanic gifts he lacked. When *Six Fingers* and *Sees Through Night* and *Bitter Knife* sat down with *Lion Hunter* to explain how the ways of the Mother Goddesses and the ways of *feeling* had spiritually balanced the tribe of *Sees Through Night*, there was no need for me to say anything more to *Lion Hunter*. He looked at me and said, “I believe this would be good for our tribe. What can I do to help you bring these ways to us?”

I replied, “I would like to establish a Circle of Wisdom and I would like you to lead it. I would also like you to gather up your healers and storytellers and any others that the villagers look up to so I can talk to them about the Mother Goddesses. I would also like *White Eyes* to be free to sing his stories to the villagers at any time and for your storytellers to

make their own stories of those they hear *White Eyes* singing.”

Lion Hunter nodded and said, “It will be done. I will speak to those you have mentioned and then you may start. *Bitter Knife* and *Sees Through Night* told me of the Circle of Wisdom. I think I will need the assistance of *Six Fingers*, but otherwise I am ready to lead it. I know it will help balance our tribe as it has helped balance the tribe of *Sees Through Night*.”

What surprised me was the immediate acceptance of the plan to train young cheetah hunters. What I had first seen as a mere diversion turned out to be much more than that. It erased almost all resistance to the ways of *feeling* and the Mother Goddesses. Part of this was due to the greatness of *Runs Like Cheetah* and *Bitter Knife*. The hunters in the village were simply in awe of them, not to mention the skill of the four young hunters and their cheetahs. It was as if the Gods had come down to visit them.

Runs Like Cheetah—a great hunter steeped in the ways of the Mother Goddesses—had been able by his mere presence to completely sweep away any suspicion of those ways from the minds of the hunters in the village. No matter what these lesser hunters felt about the ways of the Mother Goddesses, they dared not contradict these three great hunters when they said that the ways of *feeling* and the Mother Goddesses were good for hunters and would bring about a spiritual Balance that would stop the Serpents of Disorder from rising up and dragging the tribe into darkness.

But it wasn't just the greatness of the three hunters—it was the way they enjoyed each other's company as well as that of the young cheetah hunters. It was evident that if *Runs Like Cheetah* had accepted *Bitter Knife* as his father, he had done the same thing with *Lion Hunter*. I had never seen *Runs Like Cheetah* so happy since he was a young boy. What's more,

Runs Like Cheetah was as quick to laugh and joke as the two older hunters were to remain silent. Yet they couldn't resist the good nature of *Runs Like Cheetah*. He was like a small, bright sun *Bitter Knife* told me once. It felt good just standing next to him. *Six Fingers* told me he had never heard *Lion Hunter* laugh until *Runs Like Cheetah* came. You could hear the three of them laughing like boys all day and night. Those good spirits spread throughout all the hunters. It was aided greatly by the fact that the "frog jumping" of the young hunters to help train those in the next village had created a great bond between them. The young cheetah hunters walked together, ate together, slept together, and hunted together. Just the sight of them filled the older hunters with a pride they had long ago lost.

Sees Through Night and *Night Stalker* were so clear in explaining the change that had taken place in their village and how the ways of *watching* and *Ra* complemented the ways of *feeling* and the Mother Goddesses that there was little I had to do when I sat down with the villagers and talked to them about my life and the ways of the Mother Goddesses.

Indeed, when it came to time to have our first Circle of Wisdom, there were few questions from the villagers. They were so ready to join in that there was no need for me to go first and give an example. Although *Lion Hunter* had *Six Fingers* next to him and would sometimes turn and whisper for advice, he led the Circle as well as *Sees Through Night* had. Beneath his scarred face was a hard-earned wisdom that served him well.

But the one who really opened the hearts of the tribe was *White Eyes*. His high, brave voice filled the village day and night. As *Mafdet* predicted, the villagers hungered to hear his singing again and again. I could feel it taking root in their hearts to guide their lives and feed their dreams. There was no greater tribute to the greatness of his story of *River*

Mother than what happened when we finally left the village. As we began drifting downriver, we could hear the faint, faraway voice of one of the village storytellers singing of *River Mother*.

Chapter 67: RA AND MAFDET SPEAK

Many moons passed. We had time for only one more village before we had to return home. The seven villages we had already visited had accepted the ways of the Mother Goddesses—and just as *Mafdet* had predicted, they had taken root and were spreading to the other villages in the river delta. By this time, we had drifted far downriver. *Bright Arrow* told us if we kept drifting we would enter the great blue water. That night, *Mafdet* came to me in a dream and said: “*The last village on the east bank just before the great blue water is where you must go. Be prepared.*”

Bright Arrow, the leader of the last village we had visited, was with us now. He was known as the quickest of hunters, able to draw an arrow and shoot it in the blink of an eye. Also still with us was *Lion Hunter*, who had decided he would stay with us until we returned to our new home above the face on the cliff. We now had four great hunters on board, in addition to the four young cheetah hunters. If there was to be trouble, we were prepared.

I soon spied the village in the distance. It was on the east bank of the river as *Mafdet* had predicted. I asked *Bright Arrow* if he knew the leader there. He replied, “Yes, *Lion Hunter* knows him too. His name is *Dark Singer*. He is different from most leaders in that he is a storyteller. He leads his people by singing stories to them, and is very good at it. His tribe seldom is in disagreement about anything. *Dark Singer* says that is because his songs feed their hearts. He is very agile and very strong—only a few hunters have ever bested him in wrestling. I have been told it is very difficult to change the mind of *Dark Singer* on anything. His shaman is called *Dark Moon*. They are very close.”

I again decided it would be wise to approach the leader first with *Bright Arrow* and *Lion Hunter*—as they both knew *Dark Singer*—followed by *Bitter Knife* and *Runs Like Cheetah*

and the four young hunters and their cheetahs, then myself with *Bright Hands*, followed by *Baby Man*, *Ghost Hunter*, and *White Eyes*.

As we approached the village I could see there wasn't the usual gathering of women and children at the riverbank. Nor were there any hunters—only the lone figure of *Dark Singer*. I knew right away that we were going to be challenged. After we ran the raft up on the riverbank, everything went as planned. *Bright Arrow* and *Lion Hunter* greeted *Dark Singer* and told him I was a great prophet who had come with a message for him. When I finally emerged from the center platform, I took my time getting off. I wanted *Dark Singer* to get a good look at me.

I told *Dark Singer* how happy *Runs Like Cheetah* and I were to be at his village. He said nothing. I let the silence stand between us for a few moments and then I turned to *Runs Like Cheetah* and asked him to tell his two cheetahs to stand in front of *Dark Singer*. I sang to the cheetahs. They laid their bodies down on the ground and turned over on their backs, exposing their bellies. I said to *Dark Singer*, “The cheetahs come in friendship, *Dark Singer*, just as we do. They would like you to rub their bellies and whisper softly that you will not kill them. Is that not right, my brave cheetahs?”

The cheetahs began chirping like morning birds. *Dark Singer* ignored them and said to me, “I know of your cheetahs, *River Mother*, but I have no desire to rub their bellies. I am honored to be in the presence of these four great hunters, but you, *River Mother*, are not welcome here. We have no need for ways of the Mother Goddesses and the ways of *feeling*. *Ra* and the ways of *watching* have always guided our lives and will continue to do so. I wish for you and your companions to leave us and return to your raft.”

I nodded to my companions to return to the raft and then I climbed up and stood at the front of the raft facing *Dark*

Singer. Right then, I felt *Mafdet* enter my right side. I immediately stiffened and she spoke through me:

“Hear me, Dark Singer. The Serpents of Disorder are coiling and uncoiling beneath this village. The ways of Ra and watching must be balanced by the ways of the Mother Goddesses and the ways of feeling. This is why I have sent River Mother to you. Beware of turning her away. I, Mafdet have spoken.”

I could see the spirit body of *Dark Singer* weaken as *Mafdet* spoke to him. He clearly had not expected such a direct confrontation. Yet he gathered himself up and said to me, “I accept you as a great prophet, *River Mother*, and I have clearly heard the words of the fierce Goddess *Mafdet*. But *Ra*, our Protector, has told us your ways are not good for us. You and your companions must go.”

Right then, *Mafdet* spoke again: *“Hear me, Dark Singer. One of your herd will be killed by tomorrow if you do not allow River Mother to enter your village. I, Mafdet have spoken.”*

Again I could see the spirit body of *Dark Singer* weaken as *Mafdet* spoke to him. But again, he gathered himself up and said to me, “We have heard what *Mafdet* did to the herd of *Sees Through Night* when she refused to listen to you. We know the power of *Mafdet* is mighty, but the power of *Ra* is also mighty. Our shaman, *Dark Moon*, has told us that *Ra* will protect our herd.”

He turned around to face the village and called out for *Dark Moon* to come to the riverbank. In a few moments, I saw *Dark Moon* approaching from the shadows. He was dressed in a huge lion robe and a mask that completely hid his face.

It was black with a very thin white crescent, like the moon just before it goes dark.

Dark Singer said to *Dark Moon*, “*Mafdet* spoke to me saying one of our herd will be killed by tomorrow if we do not allow *River Mother* to enter our village. What does *Ra* say?”

Dark Moon summoned *Ra*: “Speak, O great *Ra*. *Mafdet* has told us that one of our herd will be killed by tomorrow if we do not allow *River Mother* to enter our village. Will our herd number the same tomorrow as today?”

I could see *Dark Moon*’s spirit body brighten as *Ra* entered him and spoke:

“Your herd will number the same tomorrow as they are today. I, Ra have spoken.”

Dark Singer motioned to *Dark Moon* to return to the village, then said to me. “I shall return to this riverbank tomorrow, *River Mother*. You will see then that our herd will number the same as today. Then you must bow to the power of *Ra* and leave my village and never return.”

I replied, “And what if one of your herd is killed by tomorrow, *Dark Singer*? What will you do then?”

“That will not happen, *River Mother*. *Ra* has spoken. I will return in the morning to bid you goodbye.”

“I will be waiting for you right here on the front of the raft, *Dark Singer*—and *Mafdet* will be waiting with me.”

When morning came, *Dark Singer* walked out of the shadows of the village, stood in front of the raft and said to me, “Morning has come, *River Mother*, and none of our herd has been killed. Our herd still numbers the same as it did yesterday. *Mafdet* has no power here. *Ra* has stopped her. You must go.”

I replied, “*Mafdet* predicted one of your herd would be killed by tomorrow. Tomorrow is not just the morning, *Dark Singer*—tomorrow is all of today until darkness.”

“I will have none of your woman’s trickery with words, *River Mother*. You must go. Now!”

He no sooner said that than one of the hunters guarding the herd came running to the riverbank, shouting, “*Dark Singer! Dark Singer!* The hunters guarding the herd were watching a cow giving birth to a calf when a lioness leapt over the thorns, ripped out the calf’s throat and then leapt back into the jungle so quickly we could not stop her.”

I could see *Dark Singer* was shaken. I quickly said to him, “*Ra* is not as powerful as you believe *Dark Singer*. *Ra* had predicted that your herd would number the same when tomorrow came, but it became greater by one, did it not? Unfortunately, that new one is now dead. On the other hand, *Mafdet* predicted one of your herd would be killed and that has happened. What do you say now, *Dark Singer?*”

“This is more trickery—the word trickery of women. A calf is not a cow.”

“I am sorry *Dark Singer*—but that is the word trickery of a *man*. A calf is a cow, is it not?”

Dark Singer was furious. I saw very clearly that *Mafdet* had been more powerful than *Ra*, but I also saw that the strange way in which she had fulfilled her prophecy was a sign I had to take a new course if *Dark Singer* was to be truly convinced.

I said to *Dark Singer*, “Let us not be caught up in what you call the trickery of women. It is known throughout the river delta that you are a great storyteller, that you feed the hearts of your tribe with your singing, is this not so *Dark Singer?*”

“What kind of new trickery are you up to with this flattery, *River Mother?*”

“It is not trickery, *Dark Singer*, but respect for the power of storytellers. Let us do this. You will go back to your village and sing your stories of *Ra* and *watching* to your tribe, and my storyteller—the blind *White Eyes*—will remain on the raft and sing the story of *River Mother* and the Mother Goddesses. His voice is high and clear. Your tribe will hear it. You and *White Eyes* will do this for three days and nights. Then we will let your tribe decide which story they wish to guide their lives and feed their dreams. Is this not fair?”

Dark Singer could not back down and still keep his pride. *White Eyes* looked directly at him with his blind, milky eyes and said. “It would be an honor for me, *Dark Singer*, to sing my stories alongside yours. I am young and untested, but I am willing to accept the challenge.”

The spirit body of *Dark Singer* brightened with courage and then suddenly darkened with uncertainty. He had undoubtedly heard of *White Eyes* and was aware that his story of *River Mother* was being sung by storytellers across the river delta—but he was also aware of his own powerful ability as a storyteller. After all, it was the way he led his tribe.

“I accept the challenge, *White Eyes*. When three days and nights have passed, we will see on the fourth day which story the tribe wishes to guide their lives and feed their dreams.”

Dark Singer returned to his village and the singing began.

Chapter 68: THE SINGING ENDS AND BEGINS AGAIN

Dark Singer sang first. We could hear him very clearly from the raft, so I was sure the singing of *White Eyes* would be heard in the village. When *Dark Singer* finished, *White Eyes* began. They traded places in this way throughout the day and into the night. Each of them ate or napped while the other was singing and by the second day their singing began to fill the jungle with a strange beauty. Even the birds grew still.

By the second night, the villagers were no longer sleeping in their huts but were lying outside letting the singing flow over them like mist—or smoke. Then, as the night progressed, something unexpected happened—one by one, the villagers began to move closer and closer to the raft. By daybreak of the third day, they were halfway between the raft and the village. On the morning of the fourth day, the singing stopped and a crushed *Dark Singer* went to his tribe and said, “It is clear to me that you want the song of *River Mother* to guide your lives and feed your dreams.”

I could hear him saying this from the raft and replied, “You are too modest, *Dark Singer*. What you have just said is not so, because your tribe placed themselves halfway between your song and the song of *White Eyes*. What your tribe is saying by this is that they want both your song of *Ra* and *White Eyes*’ song of *River Mother* to guide their lives and feed their dreams.”

The tribe murmured in agreement. I looked at *Dark Singer* and said, “All we ask of you, *Dark Singer*, is that you allow us to enter your village so that we can make the way of the Mother Goddesses come alive again to balance the way of *Ra*.” *Dark Singer* extended his hand and said to me, “Come to our village with your companions, *River Mother*, so that we can begin. We have wasted too much time fighting each other. It is time for me to rub the bellies of your cheetahs.”

As we climbed down onto the riverbank, *Dark Moon* jumped out of the shadows, screaming. “*River Mother* has bewitched you *Dark Singer*. I told you long ago how she tortured and maimed a great cheetah hunter of her tribe because he dared to challenge her ways. Is your mind so clouded by her trickery that you have forgotten him? Here, look at him again!” With that, he motioned to someone in the shadows and the crippled *Antelope Hunter* shuffled out, his eyes blazing with hate. I was astounded by the lies of *Dark Moon*—but even more astounded that the crippled *Antelope Hunter* had found his way to such a distant place.

I turned angrily to *Dark Singer* and said to him, “What *Dark Moon* says is a lie. *Antelope Hunter* was indeed a great hunter of our tribe. He is the father of *Runs Like Cheetah* but he has hated me since I was a child. As I grew into a young woman, his hatred became so strong that he traded his soul for that of an enraged lion and attacked our tribe in an attempt to kill me. He did not succeed, but killed many women and children before he was trapped in a net. His life was spared because *Mafdet* said he was to live alone and without companions in the jungle. Our tribe punished him by crippling his hands and feet so he could never murder again. That is the truth of the matter, *Dark Singer*. As for you, *Dark Moon*, why are you telling such lies about me?”

With that, *Dark Moon* shook his spear at me and ripped off his mask to reveal he was the Lion Shaman—the demonic shaman who had turned *Antelope Hunter* into a furious beast. Suddenly, I do not know how, I understood that just as *Mafdet* had predicted I would become a great prophet and leader in a faraway place, so *Dark Moon* must have had a vision of my coming to the river delta to challenge the ways of *Ra*—and told *Dark Singer* that I had to be stopped. Then, as he travelled upriver in search of me, fate guided him to the weapon he was looking for—the gullible, hateful *Antelope Hunter*—who *Dark Moon* transformed into a

murderous beast who could think of only one thing—killing me.

As all this flashed through my mind, *Dark Moon* suddenly pushed his spear into the crippled hands of *Antelope Hunter* screaming, “Spear her in the belly! *Ra* commands you to kill this witch who threatens all hunters!” The crippled *Antelope Hunter* lunged toward me, but *Runs Like Cheetah* moved like the wind and speared him dead through the heart. *Dark Moon* was stunned, and then I saw his spirit body gathering itself to cloud the mind of *Runs Like Cheetah*, but *Bright Arrow* was too quick and struck *Dark Moon* so hard with his fist that he collapsed on the ground like a dead man.

Runs Like Cheetah turned to *Dark Singer* and said, “I would kill *Dark Moon*, but it is not my right to do so. He is *your* shaman, but he is also a liar who has dishonored you by not telling you the truth of what he really did when he reached our village. *River Mother* was never a hater of hunters. How could she be when she loves me with all her heart? We have been as one since we were children. It is true that *River Mother* came here to challenge the ways of *Ra*—but only to balance them with the ways of the Mother Goddesses. Look at the four of us: *Bitter Knife*, *Lion Hunter*, *Bright Arrow* and myself. We are all great hunters. Do you think for a moment that we would come here with *River Mother* and stand by her side if she threatened the way of the hunter? Do you?”

I had never seen *Runs Like Cheetah* in such a state. His face rippled with anger and grief. *Dark Singer* did not move a muscle. Finally he said to *Runs Like Cheetah* in a low, soothing voice. “I hear the heart’s truth in your voice. It is unmistakable. I will deal with *Dark Moon* so that he never again threatens *River Mother*. But if by some slip of fate he does so, I command you to kill him on sight. *Dark Moon* is a powerful shaman with many skills. I rely on him greatly. If this were not so, I would kill him right now for lying to me. His vision was indeed correct about your coming, *River*

Mother, but for some reason he did not see the entire truth of your coming. I see now it was incomplete—for you did not come here to do away with the ways of *Ra*, but to balance them with the ways of the Mother Goddesses.

“*Dark Moon* must have surely seen you were not a hater of hunters when he reached your village, but something blinded him to it and he became twisted with hatred for you. I never found him to be a liar before. He has been a friend and my right hand in guiding the tribe, but it is clear I can no longer trust him in the same way as before. I will have to watch him very carefully. This change in *Dark Moon* seems to me to be the handiwork of the Gods and Goddesses. What do you think, *River Mother*?”

“I am afraid you are right, *Dark Singer*, but which of them was behind all this is hard to say, is that not so?”

With that, the healing began as it had in the other villages. *Dark Moon* was no longer a threat, and the murderous *Antelope Hunter* was finally dead, but I was also sure that throughout the river delta there were many more shamans like *Dark Moon* whose visions were even now portraying my coming as a threat to the ways of *Ra* and the ways of *watching*. I sensed it was just a matter of time before that hatred erupted into a murderous rage among the hunters.

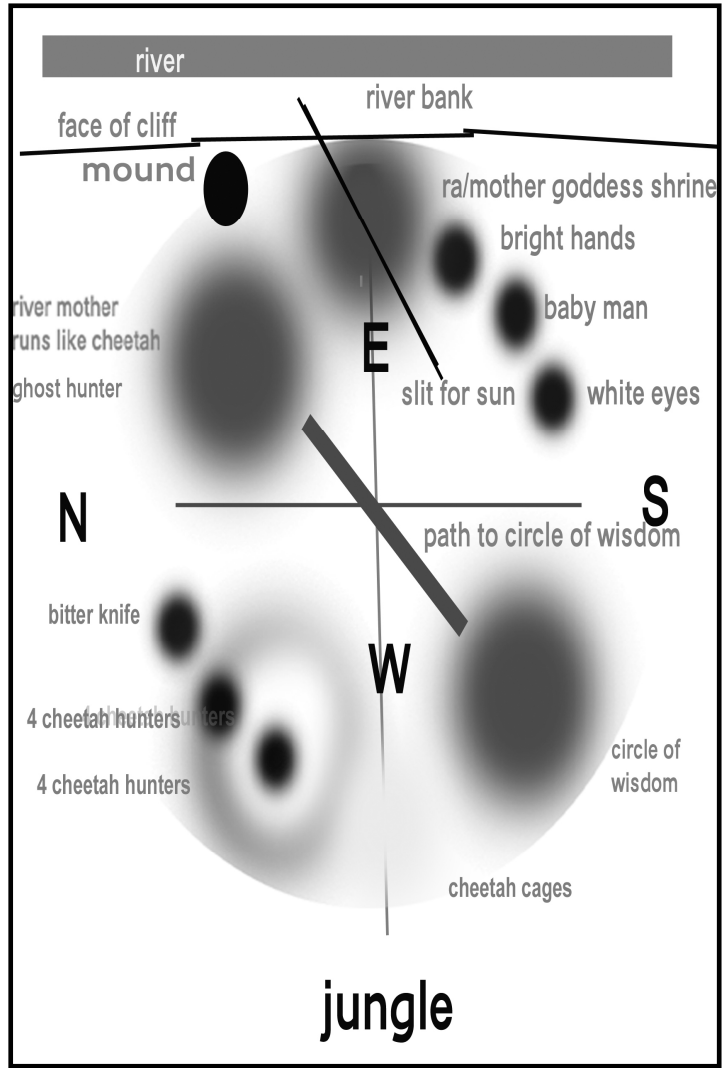
One of the things we did before we left was to arrange to take one of *Dark Singer's* cheetah hunters with us, as well as one of *Bright Arrow's* cheetah hunters who had come with us to assist in training the new cheetah hunters. *Runs Like Cheetah* told me it would be wise to take one from each of the eight villages as we returned home, so that we would have eight new cheetah hunters in our new home on the cliff top.

“It will bind the other cheetah hunters in the eight villages to us,” he said, “and we may need all of them if there is an uprising from those who refuse to accept the way of the Mother Goddesses. In addition to the cheetah hunters of

Sees through Night—we will also have three cheetah hunters from each of the eight villages who will be loyal to us.”

It was clear that *Runs Like Cheetah*, like myself, sensed that sooner or later the hatred we had seen in *Dark Moon* would erupt elsewhere in the river delta. We had stopped *Dark Moon*, but we also knew there were other villages where that hatred could grow unchallenged. One thing we both knew is that we could not let that hatred destroy the Balance of the other villages, and if fighting was the only way to protect that Balance, we stood ready. We left the village of *Dark Singer* at daybreak three moons later and began our long journey home to the face on the cliff. As we paddled upstream through the early morning mist, we could hear the strong voice of *Dark Singer* filling the air with the stories of *River Mother* and *Ra* until they were the only thing we could hear.

MAP OF THE SETTLEMENT



Chapter 69: WE BUILD OUR NEW SETTLEMENT

It was fortunate that we picked up the eight additional young cheetah hunters on the way back because paddling upriver was much harder than any of us had imagined. We made eight more paddles for them because we found out we needed all twelve young hunters paddling at once to overcome the river current. When we finally reached the riverbank below the face on the cliff, I knew the young hunters were exhausted—but none of them wanted *Runs Like Cheetah* and *Bitter Knife* to see it. They readily filled water jars from the river and carried them to the top of the cliff. It was a stiff climb and it was going to be a daily chore for them until we built holding ponds for rainwater on the top of the cliff.

But the day we landed, there were no holding ponds, nor was there food other than the roots, and nuts, and berries we quickly gathered in the jungle. A few of the young cheetah hunters realized what we had gathered was not enough and immediately took their cheetahs into the jungle to hunt rabbits while some of the others went back down to the river to fish. We ate well that night and slept under the stars, happy to be home—as bare as it was.

It wouldn't be bare for long though, because the next morning *Bright Hands* set about drawing plans for the Settlement in the sand. She must have been thinking about it for some time, because by noon she had a large rough plan finished and called me over to show it to me.

She had balanced the Settlement as I had requested. It was laid out in a circle divided into four equal parts. On the edge of the cliff, just to the south of the mound holding the Veiled Face, she had drawn a large circular Shrine to *Ra* and the Mother Goddesses. Then, further to the south of the Shrine, she had drawn three small huts for *Bright Hands*, *Baby Man* and *White Eyes*. To balance that, she had drawn a large hut

for *Runs Like Cheetah*, *Ghost Hunter*, and myself behind the mound holding the Veiled Face and just to the north of the Shrine. Then, from our hut, she had drawn a path leading to the Circle of Wisdom, which, she told me, signified the important role I was to play whenever the Circle met.

To the west, she had drawn a large round cage containing sleeping, eating and training places for the cheetahs. The cheetah cage was to be built like a huge upside-down bowl made of very long bamboo trunks. Just to the north of the cheetah cage, she had drawn three small huts, one for *Bitter Knife*, and two for the twelve young hunters. Living side by side with the cheetahs was very important, because the cheetahs needed to be constantly comforted and spoken to by the young hunters in order to keep a strong bond between them.

Bright Hands told me this was why she had drawn a small cage outside our hut for the two cheetahs of *Runs Like Cheetah*. *Runs Like Cheetah* had told her they were almost one soul together and that the cheetahs would become confused and sick, maybe even die, if they were kept away from him with the other cheetahs.

I liked the way the settlement was balanced. I had privacy, but the huts of *Baby Man*, *Bright Hands*, and *White Eyes* were just to the south, close to my hut. The Shrine to *Ra* and the Mother Goddesses was also just to the south of my hut, while the mound holding the Veiled Face of *Mafdet* was just to the east in front of my hut.

Bright Hands was very excited about the large circular shrine to *Ra* and the Mother Goddesses. She had placed it directly opposite the cheetah enclosure to signify the importance of the Cheetah Goddess, *Mafdet*, in guiding our daily lives. She had also made the entrance to the Shrine on its north side—the side facing my hut—so I could greet those entering the Shrine.

Bright Hands then explained that she was going to make a thin slit in the front and back walls and the roof of the Shrine that would allow light from the rising sun and setting sun on the longest day to shoot a beam of light onto the statues of the Mother Goddesses she would place inside. She said the shrine would be large enough to allow many visitors to enter it and see the statues lit by the sun.

I asked her what would happen on all the other days and she said the slits would still allow light in, but not in the piercing way it would when its rays entered straight through the slits on the longest day. She explained that she would make a stone carving of my face and place it facing directly east, but the long slit would face northeast so the sun's rays on the longest day would shine through the slit in a long, bright beam that would light up the large column made of double-faced Mother Goddess statues in the center of the Shrine.

When I asked her what she meant by "double-faced," she said the statues would have no backs but two fronts. She would place *Mut's* likeness on the bottom facing east-west, with *Nut* above her, then *Ma'at* above her, and then *Mafdet* at the top. When the sun rose on the longest day, the faces of the Goddesses would be illuminated by a long thin streak of light from top to bottom in the morning and the same thing at sunset. *Bright Hands* again seemed to know exactly what was needed to express the Balance between *Ra* and the Mother Goddesses. It was clear to me that the shrine would bind *Ra* and the Mother Goddesses together in a way that every visitor could understand.

Bright Hands explained that the double-faced Mother Goddesses also emphasized the circular design of the Settlement as a whole. She explained that everything in the Settlement was to be round—just as the sun and the womb were round. Everything would speak of Order and Balance. I asked *Bright Hands* how long it would take to build

everything. She said the entire Settlement could be built in one moon, with our sleeping huts coming first, then the other structures and statues. She said the only thing that would slow things down would be the great amount of clay that would have to be hauled up from the riverbank and that all the young hunters would be needed for the task.

I called the others together and used the drawing in the sand to explain what *Bright Hands* had designed, and that she thought it could be done in one moon if the young hunters did not become too exhausted hauling clay up from the riverbank. On hearing this, the young hunters jokingly puffed out their chests and reassured *Bright Hands* that only death could slow them down, and then only for a day or so. *Baby Man* added that he was ready to help and that he was sure *Runs Like Cheetah* and *Bitter Knife* were as well and wanted to know what they should do.

Bright Hands replied, “You, *Baby Man*, can best help by gathering bamboo trunks and tying them together to make the skeletons for the cheetah cage and the other structures and huts so that I can apply clay to them. You have a good mind for figuring out how the bamboo skeletons should be tied to keep their form. *Runs Like Cheetah* and *Bitter Knife* could best help by hunting to feed us because everyone is going to be very hungry working at such a pace.”

White Eyes piped up that he would mind *Ghost Hunter* by singing stories to him and that he would also make up a new story about the Settlement being built and sing it while everyone worked. I then said, “Well everyone has a job, what about me? I have none. What can I do?”

Bright Hands replied, “You can help me in placing the clay on the bamboo skeletons. It is not as easy as it looks, especially forming the windows and doors.”

With that, the work began.

Chapter 70: WE CELEBRATE

The young hunters worked day and night hauling clay up from the riverbank, and just as *Bright Hands* had predicted, the new Settlement was finished in one moon—but there were some surprises.

The first was that the outside of the Shrine to *Ra* and the Mother Goddesses was completely white. It was beautiful. When I asked *Bright Hands* how she did it, she said she had learned how from one of the makers in *Dark Singer's* village. She said he showed her how to take a certain soft stone, the same kind of stone in the cliff, and pound it into a white powder which he then mixed with sand and water to make a white paste that hardened.

She then suggested to me that perhaps all the huts and structures should be painted with the white paste—but only the top halves— so that the Shrine would be the only completely white structure. She added that the white reflected the sun and made the inside cooler, so that most would want it for their huts, but that they would have to apply it themselves as she was still busy with some details of the Shrine. When I told this to everyone, they all wanted to do it, so within days everyone had a white top on their huts.

But there were more surprises inside the Shrine. The first was that when you walked through the door, which was on the north side of the Shrine, you were immediately met with a large white wall so you couldn't see anything but white when you first walked in. It was only when you walked around it to get inside that you could see the inside of the Shrine itself.

The second surprise was that the inside of the Shrine was also painted completely white so that there was a soft light everywhere, even though the Shrine had no windows, other than a high narrow slit facing northeast to southwest, where

the sun would rise and then set on the day when *Ra* stayed longest in the sky.

The statues she had made of the Mother Goddesses were also a surprise. She had not painted them white, but left them the color of the dark brown clay of the river. They were also four-sided and not two-sided as she had first told me. When I asked her why the Mother Goddesses were not white and two-sided she said, “I wanted the Mother Goddesses to be more circular and four sides was the best way to do it. That way, no matter where you are in the Shrine, the Mother Goddesses are always looking at you. And I kept their colors dark because that is the way we have always shown them, as being dark just as we are dark. But there is still another reason—on the longest day the first beams of light coming in the slit will show up better on the dark Mother Goddesses. But *River Mother*, you haven’t asked me about the clear stone hanging from the ceiling high above the Mother Goddesses.”

I looked up. She was right. I had not seen it, but high above the head of the Mother Goddesses was a small clear stone. *Bright Hands* said to me, “The maker at *Dark Singer’s* village also gave me that clear stone. It reflects sunlight. I have positioned it and the slit so that when the beam of light first enters the slit on the longest day, it will hit the clear stone first and be reflected all over the inside of the Shrine.”

I replied, “I can hardly wait to see it. How long away is the longest day?”

“About three moons.”

“Are you sure you have the slit positioned properly?”

“It is very close,” she replied. “But I will have to watch the sun closely before the longest day and I may have to make adjustments. It will not be difficult. I suggest you send word out to the tribes in the river delta that we have built a Shrine to *Ra* and the Mother Goddesses and that they are invited to visit it on the longest day when we will have a Celebration

for the Shrine and the new Settlement of *River Mother* and her companions.”

Bright Hands never disappointed me. She *was* my other half, the half who seemed to know what I needed before I did. I hugged her and told her so, and she said to me, “I am your other half, *River Mother*, because I love you. How could I not love you? And if I am your other side, then you are *my* other side. Do you understand?”

“Yes, *Bright Hands*, I do. We shall be joined as such until the day we die and in the hereafter when we are joined together again one more time.”

I called to *Bitter Knife* and said to him, “I want to send the eight young hunters and their cheetahs back to their villages by raft to announce the Celebration for the Shrine we are going to have on the longest day. *Bright Hands* thinks the raft trip will take no more than a moon and the longest day is about three moons away. Are the hunters capable of doing this without you?”

“Yes, *River Mother*. There are two of them who have become leaders that the others will listen to as though they were me. I would trust them with my life. We will need to gather enough meat for the cheetahs to eat on the first few days of the trip. After that, they can hunt in each village. It will be good for the older hunters in the village to see them do this. And it will be good for them to see how accomplished the two young hunters from their own tribe have become. It will strengthen their hunter-pride.”

“Yes, *Bitter Knife*, it will. You always speak with wisdom. It will also strengthen their hunter-pride because it will be a hunter from their own tribe who is extending my greetings and inviting them to the Celebration. It will show the village how much *River Mother* trusts their young hunter—that he has become an esteemed member of our group.”

“You are right, *River Mother*—it will do all these things. I will speak to the young hunters. They will leave in two days. I would like to have *White Eyes* go with them. Perhaps he could make a song about the journey he could sing to the hunters while they paddle. They very much like his songs. One last thing—I myself would like to go to my old village—the village of *Sees through Night*—to invite them to the Celebration.”

“Of course, *Bitter Knife*. Tell *White Eyes* that I wish him to go with the young hunters. It will not be a hardship for him. He loves the motion of the paddles and the water and all the villages love the stories he sings. His presence will make the arrival of the young hunters a very special occasion.”

The young hunters completed the trip in less than a moon, bringing back gifts of smoked meat and fish and roots and honey and barley flour and barley beer from the villages they visited. They told me they paddled all the way—downriver as well as upriver—so they could quickly return to tell me how excited the villages were about the coming Celebration.

The young hunters had not exaggerated. A few days before the longest day, members from all nine villages began to arrive by foot and by raft, bringing more gifts of food and barley beer. When they saw the white Shrine and then the eight cheetahs playing with the young hunters in their huge circular cage they became very excited and began to praise *Ra* and *Mafdet* for bringing this about. They also somehow realized that the Settlement itself was sacred—perhaps it was the presence of the white paint on all the structures, so they built small sleeping shelters for themselves outside the Settlement in the clearing at the foot of the jungle.

The dancing and singing and feasting went on for two days and then, when late on the second night *Bright Hands* announced that tomorrow would be the longest day and

that *Ra* would send his rays into the Shrine to become one with the Mother Goddesses, everyone grew still. *Bright Hands* gave everyone instructions how to walk one by one through the entrance door and then go to the right to get around the white wall and then to walk around the Mother Goddesses and then back out around the opposite side of the white wall and back through the door.

As *Bright Hands* did not want any of the villagers inside the Shrine until the longest day, she took some villagers and made some of them pretend they were the door and the white wall and the tall column of the Mother Goddesses. Then *Bright Hands* walked through the imaginary Shrine to show them the way they should walk through the Shrine in the morning. She repeated the example several times until everyone understood.

The next morning, when the first dim glow of the sun appeared to the east, *White Eyes* sang out, "*Ra* is rising," but half the villagers were already gathered up around the Shrine. *Bright Hands* stood at the door and as soon as she saw the tip of the sun above the horizon, she let a small group of villagers in and said to them, "Wait inside until the beam of sunlight enters the Shrine, and then walk slowly around the Mother Goddesses and then back out the door as I showed you yesterday."

When the tip of the sun rose a bit higher above the horizon, I could hear the villagers inside begin to whisper excitedly and then shout praises to *Ra* and the Mother Goddesses as the beam of sunlight hit the clear stone above, scattering reflected light all around the inside and then even louder praises as the sun rose and the beam of light slid down, bathing the Mother Goddesses in light. Some of them became so entranced they couldn't move. *Bright Hands* had to tell *Baby Man* to go inside and get them moving so the others could enter. As each group of visitors came out of the Shrine, I was waiting for them. I asked them to wait with me

until everyone had passed through so we could all go to the Circle of Wisdom to praise *Ra* and the Mother Goddesses.

When we assembled in the Circle of Wisdom, I asked *Six Fingers*—the shaman of *Lion Hunter*—to sit on my right in the seat of power, and *Night Stalker*, the shaman of *Sees Through Night*, to sit on my left in the seat of wisdom. The Circle of Wisdom was very crowded. It was over four people deep. When I asked who would like to speak first, the green-eyed *Sees Through Night* rose and spoke, “The leaders of all the tribes have asked me to speak for them, and I am honored to speak my heart for them as well as for myself. I cannot tell you how glad we all are that *Mafdet*—whom we had all but forgotten—sent *River Mother* here to restore Balance to our hearts. She saved us from the Serpents of Disorder that were coiling and uncoiling beneath us, waiting to pull us down. How could we have become so blind to not see what the ways of *Ra* and *watching* had done to us? It is true those ways had given us tame plants and tame animals to harvest for food. Those ways were good for us because we would never again be hungry, but they also caused our hearts to wither.

“I am shamed to admit I once thought *watching* could do everything for us, but I learned from *River Mother* that the ways of *watching* could never replace the ways of *feeling*. *Watching* and *feeling* must live together for our hearts to be balanced. Children cannot grow straight and strong without both a mother and a father to guide them. Nor can we grow straight and strong without both *Ra* and the Goddesses Mother to guide us. The hard eye of *watching*—the hunter’s eye—must be balanced by the soft bosom of *feeling*. *Watching* aligns us with the things of this world—the habits of animals, the tracks of the stars—but only *feeling* aligns us with the intent of the heart and the intent of the Gods and Goddesses—their moods, their dreams.

“I also want to say how happy we all are to have *River Mother* as a wise and good friend, but also to have her

companions as equally wise and good friends. I speak of *Runs Like Cheetah* and *Bright Hands* and *Baby Man* and *Ghost Hunter*, and now *White Eyes* and *Bitter Knife*, who have become the new companions of *River Mother*. They have all made our lives brighter. I have spoken my heart, *River Mother*.”

I said to the green-eyed *Sees Through Night*, “Your truth is good for all of us, *Sees Through Night*. We will take your truth and listen to it within ourselves,”

Then the wise *Bitter Knife* slowly rose to his feet and said, “The hunters, old and young, have asked me to speak my heart for them as well as for myself, and I am glad to do so. *Sees Through Night* has spoken the truth about *River Mother* and the ways of the Mother Goddesses, but my heart moves me to speak about *Runs Like Cheetah*. Every hunter knows there is no one like *Runs Like Cheetah*. He is as fast as the wind and strikes with the fierce speed of the two cheetahs who are his constant companions. These are all great things in a hunter, but even greater is the spirit of *Runs Like Cheetah*. It was he who was the first to understand me when I said that the pride of our hunters was being crushed by the burden of herding and growing and harvesting—which required neither courage nor skill but only mindless, endless labor.

“And it was he who was the quickest to understand me when I said that the ways of *Ra* and *watching* had brought us to the point where we could never again become the hunters we once were—that the crushing burden of herding and growing and harvesting would become larger and larger until we would lose whatever hunting skills we once had. He also saw that when we lost those skills, we would lose our hunter’s pride as well. And it was he who quickly saw that the pride of our hunters could be restored by teaching the best of our younger hunters to hunt with cheetahs. Is there any hunter among us whose heart doesn’t brighten at the sight of these young cheetah hunters? Because

of *Runs Like Cheetah*, they have become so skilled at tracking and killing that each of them is equal to ten ordinary hunters.

“All our young hunters,” *Bitter Knife* continued, “cannot become cheetah hunters, only the very best will be able to master that skill. But with each new generation, four more will be chosen and of those two will win out and become cheetah hunters. I also know that every father will strive to raise his sons to be as strong and wise and skilled as possible in the hope they may be chosen. Because of this, we will have a new pride in all our young hunters, and not just those chosen. I must also speak to you of the happiness I feel in my heart whenever I see *Runs Like Cheetah*, and I know the other hunters feel the same. But we are mere hunters and cannot show you the happiness we feel in the same way that *White Eyes* does when he sings. I speak for all the hunters when I ask *White Eyes* to help us show our happiness by making a story about *Runs Like Cheetah* that expresses our happiness.”

I said to the wise *Bitter Knife*, “Your truth is good for all of us, *Bitter Knife*. We will take your truth and listen to it within ourselves,”

No sooner had I finished saying this than the hunters began shouting for *White Eyes* to make such a story. The blind *White Eyes* stood and faced *Bitter Knife* and said to him, “There is no need for me to make such a story, *Bitter Knife*, for I have already made one. I have been making it for many moons but have waited until the right time to sing it. That time is now. Even though I have never seen *Runs Like Cheetah* with my eyes, my heart is happy whenever he greets me, or I catch his scent, or hear him joking and laughing with others. I speak my heart when I tell you that he has always moved through my dreams like a God.”

With that, *White Eyes* moved to the center of the Circle and began to sing of *Runs Like Cheetah* in his high, clear voice:

*“I sing of Runs Like Cheetah
The great cheetah-hunter,
Who runs like the wind,
Who hunts without fear,
Who leads with his heart,
Who laughs with his eyes.*

*“I sing of Runs Like Cheetah,
The great cheetah-hunter,
Who protected the women,
Who protected the children,
Who protected the helpless,
From the rage of his father.*

*“I sing of Runs Like Cheetah,
The great cheetah-hunter,
Who has come with his mate,
The Great Shaman River Mother,
to save us from the Serpents
Coiling and uncoiling
In the darkness beneath us.*

*“I sing of Runs Like Cheetah.
The great cheetah hunter.
Who”*

As he sang I could see tears coming from the eyes of *Runs Like Cheetah* and the other great hunters who loved him like a son—*Bitter Knife* and *Lion Hunter* and *Bright Arrow*—and then from the eyes of the young cheetah hunters who loved him like a father, and then finally from the older hunters for

what he had done to restore their pride. With that, the Circle disbanded and everyone went back to their huts to dream.

Chapter 71: *BRIGHT HANDS CONFESSES*

The next evening, as I was sitting outside my hut, watching the last of the visitors leave the Settlement, *Bright Hands* came over to me whispered, “I must confess to you, *River Mother*, that I have done something false.”

“And what is that, *Bright Hands*?”

“I lied to you—and to everyone who came here.”

“About what?”

“Today is not the longest day. Yesterday was.”

“How do you know that is so? Maybe you are mistaken.”

“I am never mistaken, *River Mother*. Surely you know that by now. I know because after the longest day the sun begins to come over the horizon ever so slowly towards the north. This morning the sun rose over the horizon ever so slowly towards the north. I am sorry but I missed by one day.”

“But you seemed so sure. You said that you could make adjustments.”

“I did make adjustments, *River Mother*, but not exactly like you think. I knew shortly after we landed at the village of *Sees Through Night* that *Ra* was going to play a role in what you did, so I set about marking the exact angle of the rising sun from the North Star for the longest day over the next two summers. It is not easy because the North Star is only visible at night and the rising sun’s position on the horizon is only visible at daybreak, so you have to find a tree or a mountain top that mirrors the position of the North Star and then measure the angle between the sun and the tree or mountain top at sunrise. I recorded that angle for each of the two longest days I observed. I carved those angles on two different flat stones I kept with me. They matched almost exactly so I knew they were very good.

“The problem,” she continued, “was that the thin slit on the Shrine had to be positioned so that it only admitted a strong beam of sunlight on the longest day and not the day before or the day after. After we built the Shrine, the lines on the two flat stones told me approximately where the sun would rise on the longest day so I placed the slits in the wall

of the Shrine to match the lines. But I knew the only way to have the slit exact was to see what happened when the sun rose the next summer on the longest day and then adjust the slit if needed. But there was no time to do this. You are approaching your twenty-first summer and *Mafdet* came to me in a dream and told me that the Celebration had to be now. When I told *Mafdet* I needed another summer to be exact she said that I would find a way. And I did.”

“What was it?”

“I made the slit much wider than it should be. Then I told everyone they could not enter the Shrine until the morning of the longest day. I did not know if the longest day was going to be two days ago, or one day ago, or today, but on any of those days the sun would pour through the slit at daybreak. “I took a guess when I told you the longest day would be today, but I guessed wrong. Yesterday was the longest day. But everyone was so awed by the Shrine and waiting to enter it that no one really noticed. I did not mean to dishonor *Ra*. I did the best I could.”

“You can make it up to *Ra* next year, *Bright Hands*. The Gods are only concerned with intent, and your intent was true. Besides, *Mafdet* told you to find a way, did she not? Perhaps she can find a way to soothe *Ra* if he does get angry. Let’s have some barley beer and call *Baby Man* over to amuse us.”

Just then I heard a noise in the dark bushes just to my left.

“*Baby Man*, is that you over there?”

“Yes, *River Mother*, it is me, sitting where I should be sitting.”

“Have you been listening to us?”

“Yes, *River Mother*, I have. How could I not be? Have you forgotten that I am the Listener of *River Mother*?”

“I know you are, you little rascal. Did you hear any of what we were talking about?”

“A bit, *River Mother*.”

“What bit was that, may I ask?”

“Oh there was something about *Bright Hands* never being mistaken—which I find hard to believe—and then something about the spangles of the North Star whatever that means, and then something about *Ra* being angry at *Mafdet* for I do not know what, but I have all but forgotten most of it by now.”

“Let’s hope you have. Come over and tell *Bright Hands* and myself some entertaining stories. We will give you some barley beer to loosen your tongue.”

“My tongue never needs loosening *River Mother*. You should know that by now. By the way, exactly how much beer are we talking about?”

“Enough to keep you gabbing until daybreak, you little rascal. Now get over here!”

“You must have read my mind, *River Mother*, but then again that wouldn’t be hard for you, would it?”

“No it wouldn’t. Nor would my slapping you across the head even though I cannot see you.”

“No need for that, *River Mother*. I am already running to your side with a better story than even *White Eyes* could tell.”

Chapter 72: *BRIGHT HANDS DESCRIBES MY FACE*

The one thing that *Bright Hands* had not finished in time for the Celebration was the sculpture of my face that she was going to place on the Shrine facing east. I did not say anything at the time because I presumed she had been too busy with other things. But after almost a moon had passed, I asked her if she was still going to make the face sculpture and she said, “Yes, but I want to talk to you about it before I start because I am still unsure how to shape it. It would be easy to make a mere likeness of you, but *Mafdet* wants something else. We have to make a decision how to carve your face because we are running out of time. The longest day was the beginning of your twenty-second summer. On the next longest day, you will begin your twenty-third summer. Sometime in your twenty-second summer, you are to become the Daughter of *Mafdet*.”

“I know this is so, *Bright Hands*, but I have no idea when that will happen or how.”

“That’s not important, because *Mafdet* has said it will happen. What is important is that you will then no longer be a mere human. You will become a Goddess—a living Goddess moving among us. The face I place on the Shrine facing east toward *Ra* should reflect that. I was unsure how it should look until *Mafdet* came to me in a dream and told me I must start. I asked *Mafdet* what your sculpted face should look like.”

“What did *Mafdet* say?”

“She said it should be the face of a Goddess, a Mother Goddess. When I asked her what she meant by that, she said, ‘*The face must be the face of her name—River Mother.*’

I was even more puzzled until I remembered what *Monkey Mother* said to you when you were a girl of three summers. Do you remember what she said?”

“Of course I remember—how could I forget. She said, “Your children will be *river things*, but I could never figure out what that meant. Even *Monkey Mother* did not know.”

“That’s because it was a riddle. A riddle you couldn’t solve at the time—nor could anyone else. Do you not remember when you wanted to know if *river things* meant fish, or water, and *Monkey Mother* told you no, that no one knew what it meant and then, when you were older—around nine summers—you told me *Runs Like Cheetah* began teasing you about being called *River Mother*?”

“Yes, I remember it like it just happened. *Runs Like Cheetah* was laughing at me, saying, ‘*How can you be River Mother? You are just a little girl. You do not even have breasts,*’ and he began pretending he had breasts and I said to him,

‘*Breasts do not matter. My children will not be children like you and like me.*’

‘*What will they be then?*’

‘*River things.*’

‘*You mean water?*’

‘*No, not water.*’

‘*You mean fish?*’

‘*No, not fish.*’

‘*What are they then?*’

‘*No one knows.*’

‘*When will they be born?*’

‘*I do not know.*’

‘*How can you be a mother then? Mothers know everything. You do not even know what your children will look like, or when they will be born.*’

“At the time, I did not know what to say. He began looking at me strangely—like he knew something I did not—and then he said, ‘*Let me look between your legs, maybe I can see what the river things will look like.*’ As soon as *Runs Like Cheetah* said that, my right hand leapt up and pressed itself hard against his chest. Then a fierce voice spoke

through me, saying, *'River things cannot be seen. They are things of the spirit.'*

"I was startled and asked *Runs Like Cheetah*, *'Did you hear that?'*

'Yes,' he replied. He was very frightened. I took his hand and placed it down against my lower belly where the scar ended. He tried to pull his hand away but I held it tight. I said, *'Keep your hand there. Can you feel where the scar ends?'*

'Yes, I can feel it.'

'Close your eyes and take your hand and follow the scar up my body very slowly until it stops just above my eyes.'

"I waited for his hand to move. When I could feel it begin to rise up, following the winding scar, I closed my eyes. He was trembling. Finally he stopped—just above my eyes. I opened my eyes and asked, *'Did you see anything?'* His eyes were still closed. He said, *'How could I? My eyes were closed.'*

I replied, *'Did you feel anything?'*

'Yes, the scar felt alive, like it was moving.'

I said to him, *'That is how river things feel. When it is time, they will swim up and be born just above my eyes.'*

'How do you know this?'

'I can see it in my mind,' I said.

'Can I open my eyes now?' He was still trembling.

'Yes, open them and look at me.'

He tried to look away. I said, *'Do not be afraid. Look at me—what do you see?'*

'Someone who looks like you, but is not you.'

'That is what River Mother looks like.' I said to him."

"Exactly," *Bright Hands* said. "You somehow understood—even as a young girl—that the face of *River Mother* is the face of someone *who looks like you but is not you*. That is what the carved face of *River Mother* will look like—someone who looks like you but is not you."

“I understand that—just as I did then—but I still cannot imagine what the face will actually look like.”

“You will though, because I have solved the riddle of what your children being *river things* means.”

“Oh, you have, have you? What is it?”

“It has to do with your not being a girl anymore. You’re a woman—you have children now.”

“You mean *Ghost Hunter*?”

“Yes, but you have more children than *Ghost Hunter*. Do not you see that your children are the river delta people that you saved from the Serpents of Disorder? You became their mother when you planted the ways of *feeling* and the Mother Goddesses in their hearts. You may see yourself as the prophet who brought Balance to their lives, but they see you as their mother.”

“I believe they also see me as a prophet. How could they not?”

“They do, but not in the way you think. A prophet doesn’t protect as a mother does. They see you as a mother who was able to protect them because you could see that the Serpents of Disorder were waiting to destroy them. Do you see where I am going? These are not word tricks.”

“Yes, I see what you mean, but what does this have to do with the sculpture of my face?”

“What it means is that the carved face of River Mother must reflect the fact that the people of the delta no longer see you as just a prophet, a mere human. They see you as a mother who is more than human, a mother who protects their souls and feeds their hearts with the ways of *feeling*. In a way, they already see you as a Goddess, a Mother Goddess.”

“Only the Gods and Goddesses can say that I am a Goddess.”

“Yes, that is so. But humans often feel the intent of the Goddesses, and begin to think it long before the Gods and Goddesses come to us and actually tell us. Is that not so?”

“Of course, but what does that have to do with the sculpture of my face?”

“It means that your sculpted face cannot be a mere human face. Your human face has a river scar carved on it and cheetah tears painted on it. Both are signs—human signs—meant to tell other humans who you are. A Goddess does not need these signs. The painted cheetah tears are beautiful, but they are a human thing, a sign that told others your Protector was the fierce Cheetah Goddess, *Mafdet*. The river scar was given you at birth by *Monkey Mother*. She carved it down your face and body because *Mafdet* seized her hand and made her cut you. It was a sign meant to remind you—and those who saw you—that you were a special human.

“The scar also divides your body, just as the great river divides the land into the east—where *Ra* is born—and also into the west—where *Ra* dies and returns to the heavens. I see the scar dividing your body in the same way. It is a sign meant to remind your children that they can make that same journey from birth to death and immortality through the ways of *feeling*.”

I replied, “I have never looked at the scar in such a way, *Bright Hands*, but it is as you say. Again you have seen what I needed to see, and I thank you. But I must also tell you that I have been thinking much on this lately—that the journey of *Ra* is our journey as well. Just as *Ra* dies each night to be reborn the next morning, so each of us, after our deaths, takes a similar journey through the underworld to become immortal—and, if we so desire, to become reborn again.

“Only special *ways of feeling* can help the shaman guide the dying through the underworld to become immortal. *Monkey Mother* taught me these special ways when we were burying the women and children murdered by *Antelope Hunter*. It was her last great gift to me. These special ways of *feeling* require that shamans *stop thinking* to the point where they almost do not exist. It is not for the weak of heart. These special ways of *feeling* have been all but forgotten by the shamans of the river delta. To master them requires great skill and courage, but our shamans must

master them if they are to guide the dying safely through the underworld so they can become immortal. Now is the time for me to teach it to them.”

“Yes, *River Mother*, you are right. I believe showing the shamans how to do this is the last great task that awaits you. But right now, I want to return to the task at hand, which is to make a face for you that is the face of a Mother Goddess. What I have been trying to tell you is that the river scar on your face is a sign, a human thing, and does not belong on the face of a Goddess. I will not carve it because of that. There is no need for the scar to set you apart, because being a Goddess sets you apart.”

“I understand what you are saying, *Bright Hands*, but all the Goddesses have unique faces that say who they are. What will mine look like now that I will have no river scar nor cheetah tears on my face?”

“Your sculpted face will look exactly like what *Mafdet* said it should look like: your name—*River Mother*.”

“But what does that mean?”

“Ah, that is what has been holding me up, my dear *River Mother*. It is another riddle—like *Monkey Mother’s* riddle that ‘*your children will be river things*.’ I believe I have the answer though. When *Mafdet* said your face should be your name, a strange thing happened in my mind. Your face became more motherly—it broadened slightly, the way mothers’ faces do with time. But your face, besides broadening, changed slightly in other ways: the top of your head became flatter and your jaws and chin became wider. I did not understand this at first until I realized that it was how a cheetah’s face looks when you view it from the front. The cheetah’s head is flatter than a human head, and its wide whiskers make the cheetah’s jaws and chin look wider.

“This is how I will carve your face. When people look at it, they will be reminded of both a cheetah and a mother. They will also see a Goddess, because *Mafdet* showed me in my mind that your eyes were to be carved larger, just as the

all-seeing eyes of the Gods and Goddesses are always larger than those of humans. Your face will be the face of the Goddess *River Mother*, the Daughter of *Mafdet*.”

“But *Mafdet* said my face should be that of my name—*River Mother*. I understand now how my face will be carved to show me as a *Mother Goddess*, but how about the *River* half of my name. How will that be shown?”

“It will be shown by placing your sculpted face on the Shrine gazing out at the great river. Even at night, long after *Ra* has descended in the west, your carved face will still be gazing east at the great river—the Mother of us all. What better way to say that you and the river are one? Am I not right?”

“Oh, yes, you are. It is a perfect way of saying it. But when will I see this face?”

“I should have it ready in a few days if you approve of how I want to make the face.”

“I do, *Bright Hands*, but I am bit dizzy. I have become so used to my face that I may not recognize this new one when you show it to me.”

“Do not worry, *River Mother*. You will recognize it. It is the face that you and I have been waiting for all our lives.”

Chapter 73: THE FLOOD VISION

I had just fallen asleep and was dreaming of *Ghost Hunter*. In the dream, he was a grown man flying with his hawks, ripping the seal between worlds, when *Mafdet* appeared to me and said,

“The great blue water will rise up like a monster in a matter of days and flood the river delta, destroying everything in its path. Only those who escape to high ground will be saved. The great blue water will begin to rise on the far side of the great blue water in the dark of night and reach the delta at sunrise. Here, let me show you what will happen, so you can protect your people.”

I suddenly lifted out of my body and then I was high in the night sky travelling north at great speed over the great blue water. The great blue water went on and on until it seemed it would never end and then I saw a great fire in the distance. I went to it and saw it was coming from a huge mountain on the south side of an island. Roaring streams of fire and smoke were streaming out of it while spears of lightning rained down on it from the sky.

Suddenly, the entire side of the mountain collapsed and plunged into the great blue water. The flat water suddenly bulged like a huge bubble, rising up to a height of many men, and then it dropped down into a great crescent-shaped wall of water that began speeding like the wind towards the east and south. I raced ahead of it and waited near the river delta. The sun was just rising as it approached and I saw that its height had dropped to that of about five men. I remember thinking, *‘It doesn’t matter—nothing will survive.’* It was still dark enough to see the North Star, so I extended my arms straight out, my left hand pointing at the North Star and my left at the rising sun and commanded my arms to

not move because I knew *Bright Hands* would want to see their position. Just then, the giant wave hit the beach like a huge, dark wolf, swallowing up the delta and even the mighty river in its enormous maw.

I could see men and women and children screaming as they struggled to keep from drowning, but only a few were strong enough to stay on top as the huge wall of water swept in and destroyed everything in its path. And then, just as suddenly, the huge wave slowly withdrew, pulling the dead bodies of humans and animals with it, leaving them on the mud like dead fish and then, just as suddenly another giant wave hit, picking up everything once again and sweeping up everything in its hungry maw. This time, when it withdrew, only a few living things remained. The beautiful green delta was gone. There were dead muddy bodies and cows and smashed huts everywhere. I looked for the cliff where our Settlement was and saw it had remained high above the flood waters, safe from its terrors, and I knew then if I could get the villagers to it in time, I could save them.

Then clouds of dark ash and rain came falling from the sky, darkening the sun to a bloody red. The sight of the dark, body-littered mud and the bloody sun was more than I could bear. I began to cry uncontrollably, which put me in great danger. I immediately willed myself down to my sleeping body. I could hear myself screaming as I reentered it. *Runs Like Cheetah* was sleeping next to me and jumped to his feet. He immediately reached for his spear, "What is the matter, *River Mother*?"

Before I could answer him, *Bright Hands* appeared in the door, her eyes wide with fear, "What is it, *River Mother*? I never heard you scream like that!"

The moonlight was streaming through the opening in the top of our hut. It must have been about midnight. I was still

lying on my mat with my arms straight out, still fixed in position. I do not know what I looked like, but they were both looking at me as if I had come back from the dead. I could see it in their eyes.

“I am fine,” I said, “but I have just seen things I had never hoped to see. It was a vision of the destruction of the river delta. *Mafdet* showed it to me. The entire delta is going to be destroyed by a huge wall of water as high as five men that will flood the delta, destroying everything. Only the highest ground, like ours, will be safe against it. One day very soon, just before dawn, the great wall of water will race in unannounced from the great blue water. It will be swift and deadly. Everything in the delta will be destroyed. Everything. Our villages, our farms, our herds, our dreams, the green delta itself will be reduced to black mud littered with the bodies of the dead and dying.”

Bright Hands replied, “Then we must gather the villagers and their herds and grain here, where they will be safe. When will the flood come, *River Mother*, do we have time to do this?”

“I do not know,” I replied, “we must look at your sun-rising tablets. I commanded my arms not to move so they are fixed in the same position they took in the vision. My left hand was pointing at the North Star and my right at the rising sun the morning of the flood.”

Bright Hands’ eyes filled with fear. “From what I can tell by your arms, *River Mother*, we have but days. Do not move—stay exactly as you are. *Runs Like Cheetah*, come with me, the sun-rising tablets are many and they are heavy.” When they returned, she told *Runs Like Cheetah* to help me stand up so my arms could remain locked in position. She needn’t have bothered. They were locked so tight I wondered if they would ever return to normal. *Runs Like Cheetah* stood me up, and walked me out into the bright moonlight.

Bright Hands slowly turned my body until my left hand pointed at the North Star. She then bent down beneath me and looked at the rising sun tablets until she found one where the positions of the North Star and the rising sun were close to the positions of my arms. She then lined that tablet up so the line pointing at the North Star on the tablet was pointing exactly to the North Star and then looked up and down from the tablet to my right arm to find the sun-rising line whose direction was the same as my right arm, and marked it with a flint.

She said to me, "All right, *River Mother*, I have the tablet lines now that match the position of your arms. It is about the middle of the night right now. When the sun rises, we will check its position on the horizon against the sun-rising line on the tablet matching your right arm and we will know how many days we have until the flood. It could be only a few or it could be much more. You can bring your arms down now, *River Mother*, your work is done."

"I do not know if I can, *Bright Hands*. I was so determined to fix my arm muscles in the right position that I may not be able to relax them for days. To tell you the truth, I feel foolish standing like this with my arms stretched out like a tree."

Bright Hands looked at me and laughed, "If you think that's bad, wait until you try to eat." That set *Runs Like Cheetah* to laughing and the whole idea of my being like this for days was so ridiculous I began laughing with him and soon none of us could stop and then from somewhere in back of my hut I heard the high, squeaky laugh of *Baby Man*.

"*Baby Man*, I said, "what are you doing here in the middle of the night?"

"Oh how soon you forget, *River Mother*, that I am your Listener, even if your arms are sticking out like the branches of a crazy tree. Who could stay asleep with you screaming like a cobra was on your chest?"

“I am afraid what I was screaming about was far more dangerous than a cobra, *Baby Man*.”

“Yes, it would seem so. I couldn’t help but hear about the flood. After all, I am your Listener.”

“Oh you surely are, but nothing must be said of this until *Bright Hands* checks the position of the rising sun and we have met at the Circle of Wisdom.”

All of us then walked in the darkness to the edge of the cliff overlooking the river and waited for the sun to rise. *Bright Hands* again fixed the sun-rising tablet on the North Star before it was blotted out by the rising sun and peered into the darkness across the river. At the first appearance of the sun, *Bright Hands* knelt down and examined the sun-rising lines etched on her tablet and said, “We have seven to eleven days before the flood comes. I cannot be any more exact than that. Of course, this assumes that your arm positions are correct, *River Mother*.”

“I can assure you they are, *Bright Hands*. I knew our lives depended on it when I fixed them. Here, feel my arms—they are as hard as rocks. I may look funny but I do not feel funny. I hurt from their being so hard and tight. But my arms are of no importance. We must all go to the Circle of Wisdom immediately. *Runs Like Cheetah*, please wake everyone up—if they are not already awake—and tell them to come to the Circle. *Baby Man* and *Bright Hands* will help you. Be quick.”

Chapter 74: THE CIRCLE DECIDES

I could tell by the expressions of those arriving at the Circle that *Baby Man* must have done more talking than he should have. He was a good Listener, but a very bad Messenger. Secrets leaked through him like water. After everyone had seated themselves, I was left standing because it was difficult to sit down with my outstretched arms so I began speaking immediately.

“Hear me, my companions. Do not waste your time wondering why my arms are sticking out like the branches of a tree. I will explain that later. There is something much more important that we must act on immediately. The delta is in great danger. It is about to be destroyed by a great wave that will rise suddenly out of the great blue water. It will be as high as five men and will completely destroy the green river delta, reducing it to a mud flat littered with the bodies of the dead and the dying. *Mafdet* showed me all this last night in a vision. *Bright Hands* tells me the wave will strike in seven days. This means if the people in the delta villages do not get to high ground within six days they will surely die.

“Only those on very high ground, like ours, will be safe. Our Settlement is the only high ground that most of the villagers will be able to reach before the flood hits. We can save them by bringing them up here with whatever part of their herds and their grain they can take with them. We have six days to do this. On the seventh day the flood will hit. There is no time to waste in discussion. There is only time to act. Do you agree?”

The members of the Circle all nodded their assent. I turned to the eldest among us, the great, wise *Bitter Knife*, and said to him, “*Bitter Knife*, how long will it take by water and how long by land for the eight young hunters from the villages to reach the farthest villages near the great blue water?”

Bitter Knife replied, "As you know, we have only one large raft. I would send that raft down the eastern river branch with four of the young hunters. If they stay in the center of the river where the current is fastest, they can reach the farthest villages in less than a day and a night. I would not send all of them that far though, but have each of them get off when they get close to their own villages. They should all take their cheetahs to show they are your messengers. If the young hunters start at noon today, the four young hunters on the raft should each be at their own villages sometime between morning and evening tomorrow. The raft should be abandoned at the farthest point. It will be faster to travel back by foot than to try to row against the current without a full crew of eight.

"The other four young hunters" he continued, "I would send on foot along the banks of the western river branch, two on the west side of the branch and two on the east side of the branch. Again, with time allowed for rest and eating, they should reach the farthest Settlement in three days and nights, but only one young hunter need go that far. The others need only go as far as their villages. So my answer to you, *River Mother*, is this: the young hunters can reach all eight of the villages you went to a few years ago within two to three days and nights. That leaves those villagers three to four days and nights to get back to the safety of our Settlement with their children and herds and grain. I am afraid that it will be too short a time for many of them. The young hunters are strong and swift of foot, but many of the villagers will be old or women or children and will be much slower, especially if they are carrying their belongings and grain. The herds will slow them down even further."

I replied, "The Circle thanks you for your wisdom, *Bitter Knife*. The truth of your speaking is good for all of us. We will take your truth and listen to it within ourselves." I then turned to the young hunters in the Circle, "Hear me, my young hunters. When you reach your villages you must

waste no time gossiping with your friends but go straight to the leader of your tribe tell him exactly what I am going to say to you now: *'Hear me, O great leader. I speak to you as if I were River Mother. These are her words for you: The great Mother Goddess Mafdet has shown me a vision of a great flood that will strike the entire river delta in three days. It will be unlike anything you have ever seen. Hear me when I tell you that a great wall of water as high as five men will suddenly rise up out of the great blue water and will descend on you like a hungry wolf, swallowing everything before it. Only those who follow my messenger back to the safety of our Settlement on the high cliff will be saved. Hear me when I tell you that you must bring only the most necessary of your possessions, some grain and perhaps a cow. Anything more and you will never make it here before the flood strikes. You have three days and nights starting right now as you are listening to my words. If you have time to tell your neighboring villages, tell them what I have told you. Hear me when I say you must leave now or perish. I, River Mother, who loves you and has never misled you, have spoken.'*"

I then turned to *White Eyes*. "Can you repeat that *White Eyes*?"

"Yes, I can, *River Mother*."

"Repeat it to the young hunters then."

White Eyes faced the young hunters and told them that when they reached their villages they must not waste time gossiping with their friends but go straight to the leader of their tribe and say these exact words, *'Hear me, O great leader. I speak to you as if I were River Mother. These are her words for you: The great Mother Goddess Mafdet has shown me a vision of a great flood that will strike the entire river delta in three days. It will be unlike anything you have ever seen. Hear me when I tell you that a great wall of water as high as five men will suddenly rise up out of the great blue water and will descend on you like a hungry wolf,*

swallowing everything before it. Only those who follow my messenger back to the safety of our Settlement on the high cliff will be saved. Hear me when I tell you that you must bring only the most necessary of your possessions, some grain and perhaps a cow. Anything more and you will never make it here before the flood strikes. You have three days and nights starting right now as you are listening to my words. If you have time to tell your neighboring villages, tell them what I have told you. Hear me when I say you must leave now or perish. I, River Mother, who loves you and has never misled you, have spoken.”

I then said to *White Eyes*, “Well done, *White Eyes*. Now take the young hunters aside and repeat those exact words to them until they know them like their own names. Once that is done, they can begin their journey.” I then turned to the young hunters and said, “Once *White Eyes* dismisses you, you must start on your journeys immediately. Gather your cheetahs and spears and race with all your might to your villages. Run until you drop and then get up and run again. The lives of many depend on you. Our hearts are with you.”

I then turned to the rest of my companions in the Circle and said, “We must prepare for the arrival of the villagers. As *Bitter Knife* has told us, many will be overtaken by the flood and die, but many will make it here. I expect them to arrive with only a basket of grain and a cow or two. I have no doubt that they will throw away everything else to get here by the sixth day. *Runs Like Cheetah* and *Bitter Knife* must begin hunting immediately—for those who arrive will be tired and hungry. Excuse me, I almost forgot something—*Sees Through Night* and her tribe must be told. They are but a short distance upriver. The best thing would be for you, *Runs Like Cheetah*, to run there and tell her what is about to happen. You could be back here by late tonight.”

A big grin spread across *Runs Like Cheetah*’s face, “Do I have to repeat your words as the young hunters must?”

“Of course not!”

His grin grew even wider, “Good. Then I guess I will not have to bring my two cheetahs to prove that I am your messenger, right?”

“Of course not!”

“One last thing. Will I have to hold my arms out like you, like the branches of some crazy tree when I give them the message?”

With that, he broke out laughing like a small boy and soon the entire Circle was laughing with him. I could never resist his laughter. It is what I loved best about him—even above his bravery. I realized how absolutely crazy I must have looked with my arms stuck out, shouting orders, and I burst out laughing too. It felt good.

I said to the Circle, “The next few days are going to be grim, maybe more than we are prepared for. It is good for us to laugh, especially for me. It lessened the vision’s weight. It has been a dark time for me. I do not know how much help I can be until my arms relax, but I and *Bright Hands* and *Baby Man* will make as many shelters as we can to protect the survivors from the dark ash that will rain down from the bloody skies after the flood. The first survivors who arrive as well as those young hunters who return early can assist us in this, as we must have shelter for the survivors. Come, let us begin.”

With that I had turned to leave the Circle when I heard *White Eyes* say, “But *River Mother*, you have not given me a task. I want to help. I am blind but I can do many things.”

“Forgive me, *White Eyes*, my heart has been so burdened, I did not want to think about the sad song that even now you must be composing.”

“It will indeed be a sad song, *River Mother*, but it is also going to be a song of joy and courage and rebirth, for do not our oldest stories say that out of the ashes, the Fire Bird of rebirth always rises?”

“Yes, they do, *White Eyes*. Thank you for reminding us. We will take this truth and listen to it within ourselves. Is there anything else you wish to say?”

“Yes, *River Mother*. I may be blind but I have the hearing of ten hunters. Let me sit by the edge of the cliff and listen for the approach of each tribe. Many will arrive in the dark. I will sing a song of hope to comfort them as they approach. My song will also signal you that they are about to arrive so you can be prepared to help them find shelter. I know they will be weary.”

“Yes they will be. And so will we, my companions—but we must not show it. If we are brave, the darkness about to descend on us will turn to light. Come, let us begin. ”

Chapter 75: THE SURVIVORS ARRIVE

On the second night, just before dawn, I heard the high sound of *White Eyes*' voice shouting, "The tribe of *Sees Through Night* is approaching. There are many cows." Then I heard him break into a welcoming song,

*"River Mother welcomes you
To the safety of her bosom
And the safety of her home,*

*"Come up, come up,
Climb the path slowly,
Come up, come up,
Climb the path slowly,*

*"Come up the path
Slowly, slowly,
River Mother is here
To comfort your heart
With her waiting heart
To comfort your hands
With her waiting hands."*

When *Sees Through Night* and her tribe reached the top of the cliff, I was there waiting for her. At the sight of her, my stiff, outstretched arms suddenly relaxed. She looked exhausted and *Night Stalker* even more so. I welcomed them both with a long embrace. *Sees Through Night* said to me, "We left as soon as *Runs Like Cheetah* reached us. We walked day and night to get here. I know we could have taken our time, but *Night Stalker* and I also knew you needed help preparing for those who have much longer distances to travel."

I replied, "As always, *Sees Through Night*, you have seen through all the confusion. We surely have to build more shelters than we have, but I see now we will also have to build more thorn enclosures to protect the cows. I had expected each village to bring only a few cows and few jars of grain, but I see now that those villages close to us will bring their full herds and much of their grain. The grain is not a problem though—we can store it in the Shrine to *Ra* and the Mother Goddesses. The Shrine is large and dry and the cats living there will guard it—the mice are everywhere."

With that, I walked *Sees Through Night* and her tribe to the shelters we had prepared for them just beyond the borders of the Settlement. *Bright Hands* started a fire and brought them water and fruit and antelope meat. Our first arrivals were safe. Eight more villages remained to be brought to the high ground of the Settlement. The morning of the fourth day, *White Eyes* sang out, "The village of *Lion Hunter* and *Six Fingers* is approaching from the north. There are many cows."

I was prepared for the cows and grain this time. The village of *Lion Hunter* was also near us but just to the north, and I was glad that they too had walked day and night to get here quickly. We needed more and more hands to prepare for the others. When *Lion Hunter* reached the top of the cliff, I thanked him for coming so quickly. He replied, "We walked day and night because I knew the other villages were far away and knew you would need help feeding and sheltering them. Where is *Runs Like Cheetah*?"

"He is to the west," I replied, "hunting with his cheetahs. He will be returning soon and could use another hunter. He has only *Bitter Knife* and a few of the hunters of the tribe of *Sees Through Night* to help him."

Bright Hands came to join us. *Sees Through Night* and *Night Stalker* were with her and they greeted *Lion Hunter* and *Six Fingers*. *Bright Hands* said to *Lion Hunter*, "We have

prepared shelter for you and your cows next to *Sees Through Night* and *Night Stalker*. You will find water and fruit and antelope meat waiting for you, as well as a fire. Is there anything else you will need?"

"Yes, *Bright Hands*, there is. As soon as we have eaten and rested, my people want to do whatever you ask of them. We have come to help, not rest."

Six more villages arrived on the sixth day, some late at night. They were all weary from travelling the long distance to the Settlement. When they reached the top of the cliff, each of the few last villages talked of older members who had fallen by the way, unable to continue. The only thing they could do for them was to quickly lift them up in a tree and hope that the water wouldn't reach them. As far as possessions, these villages were arriving with only 1 or 2 cows and a small amount of grain. They had wisely abandoned the rest in order to reach the Settlement before the seventh day.

Only the village of *Dark Singer* had not shown up. It was the farthest away, where the river meets the great blue water. I feared for the people of his village as well as for the young hunter I had sent there. He would have had to steer the huge raft all by himself, and if he had been swept out into the great blue water, *Dark Singer* would never have known what was about to happen to his village.

By midnight of the sixth night, I was sure something had happened. If everything had gone as planned, *Dark Singer* and his village should have arrived, despite the long distance. I was tempted to go out of body to search for them, but something told me to wait. I had *Bright Hands* build a large fire near the cliff to guide them in from the darkness. Then, shortly before dawn, *White Eyes* sang out, "The village of *Dark Singer* is approaching from the north. There are only a few of them and no cows."

When *Dark Singer* reached the top of the cliff, only the young hunter and a handful of the younger villagers were with him. They were exhausted. *Dark Singer* took me aside and said, “Your young hunter lost control of the raft at night and was swept onto a sand bar far downriver from us. He had to swim to shore with his cheetahs and follow the river north for a night and a day to find us. When he did, we had just enough time to get here if we walked day and night. *Dark Moon* refused to leave, saying it was another of your tricks. Many of the hunters sided with him. But that is not the worst—many of the women and children are still far behind, walking in the darkness. There was nothing I could do but try to make it here soon enough to get help for them, but it may be too late.”

Just as he said that, the first rays of the sun appeared over the horizon and then a few moments later we heard a dim roar from the distant north. I looked at *Dark Singer* and said, “I am sorry, *Dark Singer*. It indeed may be too late. The great wall of water has already hit the beach. The great wall of water itself will only make it part of the way into the delta—but then like a snake it will seek out the low river branches and begin travelling over them at great speed, flooding the riverbanks where your villagers are walking. But we still may be able to save them.”

The river current leading to the great blue water had already slowed down due to the tremendous flood-snake rushing against it to the north. I called out to four of the young hunters to join *Dark Singer*, and said to them, “When we see the river begin to rise, it means that the flood snake is about to hit us with all its strength. We will have to turn back immediately or be drowned.”

Just as I said that, the most curious thing happened. As in my vision, the first flood wave must have begun to recede, because the downriver speed of the current suddenly began to increase as the great wall of water receded. I knew we

had been granted some time before the second wall of water hit the beach. I shouted to the young hunters to run faster, and then, finally, we saw the stragglers.

They were old women and men and mothers with their children. We quickly tied the vines around their waists and told them to run as fast as they could, that safety was just a short distance away. All of us then ran back to the cliff path as fast as we could, with two of the young hunters taking up the rear to help up any who stumbled. We were about halfway to the cliff path when I saw the river slowing down again as the second flood-snake hit it downriver.

Then, the second flood-snake was upon us and the river began to rise, flooding the riverbanks. We were almost to the cliff path and just as we turned to lead the stragglers up, the flooding was suddenly upon us. Some of the stragglers made it up the path but the very last ones began to be carried away by the rising water— but the vine ropes held, and one by one the young hunters pulled each of them up to the safety of the path.

Once everyone was safely put away, I went back to the edge of the cliff to watch the churning river. By now it was full of dead bodies and smashed huts as huge whirlpools began to form out of the force of the flood-snake against the river current. Then, out of the chaos, I saw our broken raft spinning crazily past us. Hanging onto it was the Lion Shaman, *Dark Moon*; screaming and raising his fist up against us until a large whirlpool caught the raft and dragged it down. When it reappeared in the distance, the Lion Shaman was still hanging on. He had once more survived to carry his dark hatred into the world. I looked down at *White Eyes* sitting at the edge beside me. He must have heard the Lion Shaman screaming up at me from the river because he looked at me with his blind eyes and said to me very quietly, “The Darkness is always with us *River Mother*, but so is the Light. That is why we are here. Is this not so?”

And then he walked to the center of the Settlement and began to sing the story of *River Mother* to the survivors. *White Eyes* had told me it was the song of my soul. I never tired of it. This time he had added something new:

*“I sing of River Mother,
The great prophet
And mother
Who led us
Against the terrible rising
Of the great blue water.*

*“I sing of River Mother,
The great prophet
And mother
Who saved us from
The Great Flood
That came upon us.*

*“I sing of River Mother,
The great prophet
And mother
Who saved us
from the dark river
coiling and uncoiling
beneath us.*

*“I sing of River Mother,
And the terrible rising
Of the great blue water...”*

Chapter 76: THE SURVIVORS SIT IN THE CIRCLE OF WISDOM

After a few days, the flood waters receded. Below us, the river delta looked like a lake of black mud, littered with the dead and the dying, while flocks of circling vultures descended from the bloody skies to pick their bones.

All but a few of the older villagers were back to strength, but the sorrow for lost family members filled the hearts of those who had lived near the great blue water. Although we sent the young hunters far back along the trails to see if those left in the trees had survived, only a few had. There was no sign of the rest of them. What's more, no one had any idea if any villages other than the nine villages had survived. I knew that the survivors would soon find out when they returned to what was left of their villages.

What was very clear to me was that all the survivors had to meet in the Circle of Wisdom so we could agree on what we should do next. I sent *Baby Man* out that afternoon to announce we would gather in the Circle as soon as the sun came up. When I arrived at the Circle of Wisdom, it was already five or six people deep. There was complete silence. I said to everyone, "We have been through a great trial but we have survived. Many of you have thanked me for saving you, but it was *Mafdet*, not I, who saved you. *Mafdet* gave me a vision of the great flood that allowed *Bright Hands* to figure out when the great wall of water would come. Once I knew that, it was only a matter of sending *Runs Like Cheetah* and the eight young hunters racing out to the nine villages to tell you to come here quickly. There was some hope that the flood might not hit until a few days later, but it did not.

"What we must do now is rebuild your villages as quickly as possible. The young hunters will assist those who need the most help. But there is something else we must discuss. That is the loss of our herds and grain. Some of the

villages close to us suffered no losses, but we have been fed by their grain and herds during these last few days and need to replace what we have taken from them. It is equally important that we must be better prepared for disasters that occur from time to time, like fire, or locusts, or the river flooding out of control. In the past, we have suffered together when these things have happened, sometimes to the point where many have died of starvation. This need not be. We all saw how the grain we stored in the Shrine as well as the herds brought here were able to feed those who arrived with nothing. I am going to ask you to consider that we establish communal grain storage here—and also a suitable herd of cows, both male and female. Both will be available to all if we suffer from another disaster. Who will speak first?”

Dark Singer rose and spoke, “My village has been hurt the most. When we return, we will have no grain and two female cows. We can hunt and fish until our herds are replenished but we will need a male cow for that, and it will take many summers with only two female cows. We can gather plants and roots and nuts until a new crop of barley can be planted and harvested, but the new crop will take many moons to mature and we need the barley for our beer and bread. If we had communal grain storage and a communal herd that we could use for breeding stock right now, we could begin not only to plant and breed as soon as we reached our villages, but the communal grain would allow us to make bread and beer immediately. I say it would be wise to do such a thing. What do the rest of you say?”

The old, wise *Bitter Knife* rose and spoke, “It is clear it would be a good thing. But each village should contribute the same amount so things will be equal. Is that not so?”

The Circle murmured in agreement. *Bitter Knife* continued, “But what if a disaster hits only one or two villages, which can happen. Who is to replenish what they must take.

Should they be aided by the other villages? The wise answer, I believe, is for the others to aid them until they have recovered enough to fully restore what they have taken. Is that not so?”

Again, the Circle murmured in agreement. *Bitter Knife* continued, “And who is to keep records of who contributes, and how much, and who has taken, and how much? The wise answer, I believe, is for *River Mother’s* Settlement to set up and keep records of such things so there will be no arguments later on as to who gave what and who took what. *Bright Hands* keeps many records now of the sun rising and setting, the same thing could be done with the communal grain and herds. Is that not so?”

Again, the Circle murmured in agreement. *Bitter Knife* continued, “These are all things we have never done before. There will be many more—let me give you a very important one. How large does the communal grain storage and breeding herd have to be so as to be truly helpful but not so large as to be wasteful? All of these things and many more cannot be decided today. The leaders of all the villages should discuss all this within their villages and return here in one moon to come to an agreement. Is this not the wise thing to do?”

Again the Circle murmured in agreement. *Bitter Knife* continued, “One last thing. The tribe of *Sees Through Night* and others have shared their grain and seeds with those who came here with almost nothing. A record must also be made of this and the tribes who borrowed must eventually give back what they borrowed to those whose grain and seed were taken. *Bright Hands* can see that these records are kept as well. This way there will be balance among the tribes. Is this not so?”

Again the Circle murmured in agreement. I rose and said to *Bitter Knife*, “My wise friend, you have spoken the truth of

what we must do and what we must decide. If everyone agrees, we will meet back here in one moon and come to an agreement. Is this not the wise thing to do?”

The Circle murmured in agreement. I then said to *Bitter Knife*, “The Circle thanks you for your wisdom, my old, wise friend. The truth of your speaking is good for all of us. Until we meet again in one moon, we will take your truth and listen to it within ourselves.”

I then asked the Circle if anyone else wished to speak. *Bright Hands* rose and said, “I wish to speak of something of great importance. As you know, *River Mother* will begin her twenty-second summer on the next longest day, when *Ra* is in the sky longest. As on the last longest day, we will have a great Celebration of *Ra* and the Mother Goddesses here at the Shrine and we all look forward to it. As you also know, *Mafdet* has predicted that *River Mother* will become the Daughter of *Mafdet* during her twenty-second summer, and when that happens, the Veiled Face on the cliff will become the face of *River Mother—the Daughter of Mafdet*. Neither *River Mother* nor I know *when* this will happen in her twenty-second summer, or *how* it will happen. The Goddesses may descend and carve it themselves as they carved the Veiled Face when the earth was born. Or *Mafdet* may command me to carve it. I believe this is the way it will happen because it is the way it has happened in the past—but who is to say?

“Some of you know what I am about to tell you, but many of you may not. When *River Mother* was but a young girl in her village, *Mafdet* came to me in a dream and showed me how she wanted her face to be carved onto a small stone cliff over the graves of women and children who had been savagely murdered by an enemy of *River Mother*. The height of that face was about half the size of a man’s arm. Then, when we were about to build this Settlement, *Mafdet* came to me again in a dream and showed me the face of *River Mother* I was to carve of stone and place on

the Shrine facing east toward the rising sun. The face *Mafdet* showed me this time was larger, about the size of a man's arm, and it was different from the first face that *Mafdet* had commanded me to carve on the stone cliff overlooking the graves of the murdered women and children. I believe this larger face is also the face *Mafdet* wants me to carve over the Veiled Face if she commands me to do so.

"Many moons ago," *Bright Hands* continued, "when *Mafdet* showed me the face I was to make in the cliff over the grave of the murdered women and children, she also showed me how to carve it in stone without making mistakes. Unlike clay, which can be reshaped if mistakes are made, stone cannot. One cut too deep and the face is ruined. By now, all of you have seen the small carved stone face on the front of the Shrine. As you know the Veiled Face on the cliff is much larger—about the height of ten men's arms and about as wide as seven men's arms. This will be the size of the carving of the face of the Living Goddess *River Mother*, the Daughter of *Mafdet*. Based on how long it took me to complete the small stone carving of *River Mother's* face for the Shrine, I believe it will take twelve carvers to complete it within six moons, or twenty-four carvers to complete it within three moons.

"If two to three makers join me from each of the nine tribes, we can do it in time if *Mafdet* commands me to do it. I can teach you how to carve in stone and not make mistakes just as *Mafdet* showed me many moons ago. We will have to work from the small ledge beneath the Veiled Face and sometimes we will have to hang from vines attached to the top of the mound. The work will be very hard and very dangerous. Some may fall and die. Can the makers stand if they want to assist me if *Mafdet* commands me to do so?"

Almost thirty makers stood, and *Bright Hands* said to them, "Good. We will wait for a sign from *Mafdet*. If we are chosen to carve the face, the stone face of the Mother

Goddess *River Mother* will gaze over the river into the rising face of *Ra* until the end of the world.”

I turned to *Bright Hands* and said, “My good, constant friend, you have honored me again, as have the other makers who have stepped forward. Indeed, we must now wait for a sign from *Mafdet* as to which course the Goddesses will choose. The Circle thanks you for your wisdom. The truth of your speaking has been good for all of us. We will take your truth and listen to it within ourselves.”

Chapter 77: THE LEADERS MEET

One moon after the survivors had left the Settlement to return to their villages, the leaders of the nine tribes and their shamans came back to decide how the communal grain and herds should be set up. These are the names of the leaders and their shamans:

Sees Through Night and *Night Stalker*
Dark Singer (alone)
Lion Hunter and *Six Fingers*
Bright Arrow and *Moon Frog*
Hard Eyes and *Clear Water*
Eyes Like Hawk and *Yellow Moon*
Dark Thunder and *Speaks to Snakes*
Stone Fist and *Night Runner*
Many Words and *Drifting Shadows*

I asked *Bright Hands*, *Bitter Knife*, *Runs Like Cheetah* and *White Eyes* to also sit in the Circle. When we had all assembled in the Circle of Wisdom, I asked the shaman *Six Fingers* to sit on my right in the seat of power, and the shaman *Night Stalker* to sit on my left in the seat of wisdom.

I spoke first, "I and all of my companions are honored by the presence of such wise leaders and shamans. Today we must decide how to set up the communal grain and breeding herds that *Bitter Knife* spoke of so wisely when we last sat here. Let us begin."

Sees Through Night spoke first, "Since I became leader of our tribe, I have kept a close watch on our grain storage. Our tribe numbers about thirty men and thirty women with about thirty children of all ages. I believe this number is about the same for all the tribes when they are healthy and strong. In one moon, we use about twelve large jars of grain to make our barley bread and beer. Each of our harvests produces enough jars of grain to last us twelve moons. Since

we have two harvests— as do all of you—our tribe grows enough jars of grain to last us twenty-four moons. This is twice what we need—so at each harvest we store six moons of grain for disasters, and then trade the rest. The disaster grain is not touched unless it is needed. If it is not needed, we let it stay in storage until a new harvest comes in. At that time, our newly harvested grain replaces that which was set aside for disasters and our old disaster grain is traded.

“Based on what we do,” she continued, “I believe six moons of grain should be set aside for each tribe. *Bright Hands* must keep the counting for us. For each of the nine tribes, we will need six moons of grain. Again, each moon requires 12 large jars of grain. I think the Shrine is large enough to contain that number of jars. It will take up about half the empty space in the Shrine. If there is no disaster within each six moons period, each of the nine tribes will take their old grain back from the Shrine and replace it with new grain. What is needed is counting that insures that only six moons worth of grain for each tribe will ever be kept in the Shrine. If *Bright Hands* can do this, I believe we should set up the communal grain in this way. What do the rest of you say?”

The leaders voiced their approval as did *Bright Hands* and *Bitter Knife*. *Sees Through Night* then said, “The breeding herds of cows are a different matter. They will be used to help restore herds lost to disasters. I believe we should keep a communal breeding herd of one male and one female per tribe. Thus a breeding pair or maybe two or three can then be given to any tribe that needs to rebuild their herd. Those breeding pairs must be given back to the communal herd as soon as possible. The communal herd, of course, will increase all by itself, and to keep its size down to one breeding pair per tribe, breeding pairs should be given back to each tribe as many times as is necessary to keep the communal herd to its original size. One last thing, members of the Settlement must be assigned to constantly tend the communal herd and *Bright Arrow* must keep good counts of

the cows as they come and go. If *Bright Hands* can do this, I believe we should set up the communal breeding herds as I have described. What do the rest of you say?”

Bitter Knife spoke first, “The ways of *watching* have allowed *Sees Through Night* to clearly see how the communal grain and seeds and herds should be set up. I can find no fault in them. But these communal tasks are completely new to us and require very good counting, something we never had to do before. If the communal storage fails, it will fail because of the failure of the counting. Is this not so, *Sees Through Night*?”

Sees Through Night replied, “Yes, *Bitter Knife*, that is so. We have placed that burden on *Bright Hands*, but have heard very little from her. Speak to us *Bright Hands*.”

Bright Hands replied, “Both of you are correct: If the counting fails, the communal storage and sharing will fail. I have kept records of where the sun rises and sets on the horizon for years now. The counting for the communal storage will have to be equally accurate. But counting for the communal storage will be far trickier, because it will involve constantly dealing with the nine tribes who will almost always question the counting of their grain—and their cows. The sun never talks back, but I can assure you that the tribes *will* talk back, and argue when they think the count is not exact, or that they have been cheated. If we are to succeed, I will require an assistant. I know this may sound strange to you, but I believe *Baby Man* would be very good at this as he is very good in dealing with people, even very difficult people. And he seems to have a natural ability to keep good counts. Perhaps this is because he is from Time to Come.”

Just then, *Baby Man*, who must have been sitting in the shadows, shouted out in his high, squeaky voice, “*Bright Hands* is correct—I seldom make a mistake in counting even if I am talking to four people at once. I am also much faster thinker than most people— so difficult people are easy for me to handle as I am always two steps ahead of them. If you

need proof, look how easily I handle *River Mother*, who as you all know, can be as hard to handle as a hive of mad bees.”

That last remark made the entire Circle burst into laughter. I couldn't help but laugh too because there was truth in what *Baby Man* had said about me. I replied to the Circle, “I do not know how good *Baby Man* is at counting—we will have to take *Bright Hands'* word for that—but I can assure you the little rascal has a way of getting people to do what he wants. *Baby Man* is now my Messenger and Listener and Watcher of *Ghost Hunter*, but if everyone agrees, I will now give him a new title and make him Keeper of Counts. What do the rest of you say?”

Everyone laughed their assent. *Baby Man* puffed out his chest and belly and began walking around the Circle, bowing and thanking everyone over and over. It was unbelievably funny although I do not know if he intended it to be. You could never tell with *Baby Man*. I said to the Circle, “Oh, there is one more title that I am going to give *Baby Man* if you all agree. It is an important one. It is this: I now announce that he is to be Herd Tender and Cow-Flop Picker Upper.” The Circle roared and shouted their enthusiastic assent.

I turned to *Baby Man* and said to him, “The Circle thanks you, *Baby Man*. The truth of what you have said has been good for all of us. We will take its truth and listen to it within ourselves, but only for a short while.” With that, the Circle roared and disbanded, As I walked back to my hut I couldn't help chuckling to myself, *Oh, I got the little rascal good with that one,*

Chapter 78: LAZY DAYS

Baby Man took his Keeper of Counts title very seriously, maybe too seriously. He set up a high platform with a sunshade outside the door to the Shrine. The platform faced directly into my hut, and he took to sitting on it day and night.

I tried to pretend I did not notice, but my curiosity eventually got the better of me so I walked over to his platform and looked up and asked him why he had done this. He said, “When I travel in my dreams to my world, I have seen men sitting on high platforms counting jars of grain being put on boats. I have built a platform like that so that I too can be sitting high up when I count.”

“What you’re telling me is that you believe you have to be sitting up high to keep counts.”

“Yes, *River Mother*, I do, but I am really not sure why. Maybe being high makes you look important so no one will argue with your counting. Or maybe it is because when you’re high up, people cannot wring your neck if they do not agree with you.”

“Having your neck wrung seems to be a constant problem for you, doesn’t it?”

“It seems so, *River Mother*, but what can I do? I am who I am, if you know what I mean. But now, with so many of your titles now hanging around my neck, I believe people will think twice before trying to wring it—at least I hope so.”

“But in your case, my little fat friend, you can never really be that sure, can you?”

“If you say so, *River Mother*—after all, who am I to say otherwise? But I’d like to remind you that I am not exactly nobody, because I am now not only your esteemed Listener and Messenger and Watcher of *Ghost Hunter* but also your Keeper of Counts and Picker-Upper of Cow Flops. Is this not correct, *River Mother*?”

“Oh, it surely is, you fast-talking rascal, but I believe you are being a bit slippery here with me, are you not?”

“Oh no, *River Mother*. Believe me, I am not being slippery here at all. But there are a few other matters of which you should be aware. Despite the fact that you long ago told me I must sit on the ground outside your door with my back to you and far enough away so I could never hear you talking to those inside your hut, I have to tell you I can no longer do that that now because of my new title of Keeper of Counts.”

“And why is that?”

“It would be impossible.”

“Oh, is that so? You mean being Keeper of Counts requires that you have to face my hut when you’re sitting here keeping count?”

“Yes, exactly, but you need not be worried, *River Mother*. I am sitting so high up now I really cannot see inside your hut and I am also a bit further away now, as you can see, which will make it even harder to hear you talking.”

“That’s very reassuring, *Baby Man*, but explain to me exactly why it is you have to face my hut when you’re keeping count?”

“Oh, I knew you’d ask that, *River Mother*, and here is the answer—and it is a good one I can assure you—when the villagers approach the door to the Shrine with their grain, I want to be facing them so I can look them directly in the eyes to see if they are up to any trickery. To do that, I have to be facing your hut, as that is where the path to the Shrine is. It is as simple as that.”

“Well then, perhaps you could change the path.”

“Oh, I would not want to do that. *Bright Hands* wants the paths exactly as they are—I am sure you know that as well as anyone.”

“Well, let me tell you something I also know, my little friend. If I ever catch you peeking into my hut while you are perched up there like a fat crow, I am going to pluck your black feathers one by one.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t expect anything else, *River Mother*, but if I may take a bit more of your time, there is one last thing and that is this—even though I will not be as close to your hut as

before, you will not have any problems calling me to be your Messenger.”

“And why is that?”

“It is because you have a very loud voice at times, maybe a bit too loud if I may say so, which is usually the case when you call for me to be your Messenger.”

“Oh, I see. Tell me this then—will you always be up there and me down here talking to you like this?”

“I am afraid so, *River Mother*. Things are changing. As you know, Counting is very important now, so it is also important that your Keeper of Counts does not make any mistakes, and to do that I have to be sitting up here for the reasons I just told you. And please, do not think me too bold, but there is one last thing that seems to have slipped by you—you did not ask the Circle to set up grain storage for the Settlement itself. I thought I should bring your attention to this.”

“Why do we need grain storage? We have plenty of hunters here. Our food comes from hunting and fishing, not farming.”

“But when the villagers come here from time to time to visit the Shrine, they bring gifts of grain so you can make bread and beer, is that not so?”

“Of course they do. Are you going to keep asking me these stupid questions?”

“To some my questions may seem stupid, but not to others—if I may say so. What I was trying to make clear to you is that those gifts of grain allow you to always have plenty of beer to drink, right? I know this because we often sit together drinking your beer while I tell you what I have heard as your Listener. Think of what it would be like listening to me without beer, which could happen if a disaster comes and the nine villages take all their grain back and no visitors come here bringing gifts for a long time. Do you see now why the Settlement must have its own grain storage?”

“Of course I do. There could be times when we would have no grain to make beer, and I must agree with you that

listening to you go on and on without beer would give me a very bad headache.”

“There is no need to go that far, *River Mother*, but it would assuredly not be as pleasant as it is now, is this not so?”

“Get on with it, you rascal. What exactly are you proposing?”

“Simply that we set aside a small amount of each village’s disaster grain for the Settlement.”

“But the Circle has not decided this.”

“There is no need to get the Circle involved. They have more important things to consider.”

“But we cannot do this without the consent of the villagers.”

“That will not be a problem, *River Mother*—let me explain why. When *Sees Through Night* brought her disaster grain and breeding cows, I asked her if any of the villages had restored any of her grain that they had consumed during the flood. Do you know what she told me?”

“I cannot imagine—tell me.”

“She said no one had restored her grain, but she did not expect that to happen for at least twelve moons, because those who had consumed her grain were from the north and would have lost most if not all of their grain to the flood, which means they would have to plant a new harvest or two before they could restore what they consumed, and besides, she said, it was a very small amount, about a half jar for each of the six or so villages who needed grain during the flood. That is what she told me.”

“So?”

“So this: I told her when those villages brought their first disaster grain here, I would tell them that I was going to take a half jar from each of them and put it in the storage of *Sees Through Night*, as they owed her that amount, and that I would keep count of everything I had done in case there were questions later. Do you know what *Sees Through Night* said?”

“No and please get on with it and tell me what *Sees Through Night* said.”

“She said that would be fine with her. And do you know what else I asked her?”

“I can hardly wait.”

“I asked *Sees Through Night* if she would also like me to take a half jar from her disaster storage and put it in a special disaster storage for the Settlement itself, as we had no farming here. Do you know what she said?”

“Tell me.”

“She said that would be fine with her,”

“What have the others said?”

“The same thing, *River Mother*, believe me. They all know that they would never have survived the flood nor had the ways of *feeling* restored to their tribes without you and your companions, which includes me by the way—your fat little beer-drinking Listener.”

After that little encounter, I was more convinced than ever that *Baby Man* would be able to talk his way out of any dispute concerning the grain storage and breeding herds. He also proved to be a very, very good Keeper of Counts, just as *Bright Hands* had predicted. *Bright Hands* showed me the clay tablets he had made after she had showed him her sun-rising stone tablets. She said that *Baby Man* told her that he had seen the Keepers of Counts in his world using tablets like hers but they seemed to be made of clay, because he saw the counters removing marks from them with water. The markings, he said, seemed to be of two kinds as far as he could tell. One set of markings was to keep count, and the other seemed to say who the grain belonged to, or to who it was being traded to, or maybe both,

She told me that he then invented a mark for each village and put the marks on each clay tablet that showed a count of grain stored or removed by that village. She said the count marks for counting looked like the small sticks we sometimes use for counting. One column of counts was for grain stored, one column for grain removed. Then she told me *Baby Man* had made the same kind of clay tablet for the

breeding herd belonging to that village. They showed the count of cows they gave or removed and that next to each count he had put a mark that stood for male or female.

Then she said, "Here, let me show you what they look like." and she took me over to *Baby Man's* platform and asked him to give her the tablets for *Sees Through Night*, that she wanted to show them to me. He handed them to her. They were about as big as a small child's chest and were simply amazing. *Bright Hands* said to me, "Here is the marking for *Sees Through Night*. None of the other markings are like it. And here is the column for stick counts for jars of grain added. And here is the column for stick counts for grain removed. There is only one stick in that column, and it is half the size of the other sticks. That means it is half a jar. And there is a special mark beside it. It is the mark for *River Mother*. That means the half jar went to the storage for the Settlement. I never would have thought of this. It must be because he is from Time to Come. Do you see how clever he is?"

"Yes, he is very clever—maybe too clever for his own good."

I looked up at *Baby Man*. He was beaming from ear to ear. I said to him, "I see we are in good hands with you as my Keeper of Counts, *Baby Man*. I congratulate you." I thought his beaming smile was going to go completely around his head. He was home at last in his counting perch, and he knew it.

The moons passed and the grain and breeding cows came and went as the villages began to grow back to what they had been before. These were lazy days. The sun rose, the river flowed, the grain grew, the herds mated. I could feel Balance being restored to the delta villages each time the sun rose and set.

One day *Bright Hands* said to me, “In two moons it will be the longest day. We must prepare for its Celebration. Do you know what else will happen that day?”

“Yes, of course, I will enter my twenty-second summer. It is the summer when I will become the Daughter of *Mafdet*.”

“And the face on the mound on the cliff will become your face—finally.”

“Yes, finally,” I said, and then, “Nothing will ever be the same after that, will it, *Bright Hands*?”

Bright Hands smiled and replied, “No, *River Mother*, nothing will ever be the same—not you, not me, not even the heavens.”

Chapter 79: THE SECOND CELEBRATION BEGINS

Bright Hands assured me that the second Celebration would take place exactly on the longest day, and I had no doubt that it would. She seldom made mistakes and when she did, she never made the same one twice.

We had sent the young hunters out to all of the villages to make sure they all got here on time—and a few days before the longest day, they began to arrive, including some villages I had never seen before. After *Runs Like Cheetah* and I had greeted them, *Bright Hands* took the villagers to the places she had prepared for them. Although many were tired after their journeys, they began to dance and feast as soon as they heard *White Eyes* singing in his high, clear voice.

I noticed all of them had brought gifts of grain and beer, including the new villages, which pleased me because it meant that the ways of the Mother Goddesses were spreading throughout the river delta. By the number of grain jars being carried by those hurt most by the flood, it was clear they had harvested enough not only to return the grain they had borrowed, but also to begin building up their own disaster storage. *Baby Man* was already buzzing around the Settlement telling each of the villages when it would be best to come to the counting platform. He was a very busy boy.

By now, the villagers were all very familiar with the Settlement, so when they weren't dancing or feasting they would usually wander over to those places that interested them the most. The shamans almost always went to the shrine, the makers to talk to *Bright Hands*, the leaders to talk with me, and the hunters to talk with *Runs Like Cheetah* and *Bitter Knife*. But it was the twelve young hunters and their cheetahs that attracted the most attention. The young cheetah hunters from the different villages immediately went to be with them while the children raced around the cheetah cage screaming and laughing like little monkeys. Even the

older hunters eventually drifted over to the cheetah cage because of the high spirits there.

The night before the dawn of the longest day, everyone was feasting and singing and dancing, anxious to greet *Ra* when the sun rose at dawn. It was clear that almost all the villagers intended to not sleep so they wouldn't miss the first rays of the sun. There was a lot of bargaining going on among them as to their positions on the line entering the shrine at dawn. Everyone seemed anxious to be the first to see the first beam of light fall onto the Mother Goddesses. I am sure many remembered how long the line had been at the last Celebration, so the bargaining became quite heated until *Baby Man* pushed his sizeable baby belly into the middle of it and informed everyone that from now on, positions would be determined by the size of the special gifts of grain each of them was willing to make to the Shrine and that he would begin counting and recording those special gifts and assigning line positions as soon as they lined up at the counting platform.

At first, the villagers did not know what to say, as counting was new to them, and they rightfully thought that counting only had to do with disaster grain. One angry villager let *Baby Man* know that it was none of his business and that they would settle who would go before who as they always had, by arguing and bargaining among themselves, to which *Baby Man* replied, "That is the old way. It will no longer do. Things are changing. We must prepare for what is to come. What will you do when the number of villages coming here is ten times the number today? The ways of the *Mother Goddesses* are spreading. Just look at the new villages that have come to this Celebration. You will turn into a pack of monkeys trying to argue and bargain. I know you are concerned about giving what you did not have to give before, but the gifts will go to the Shrine, which was built for all of you."

The same angry villager replied. “Why does the Shrine need gifts? It doesn’t eat. What you really mean— you fat meddling little fool—is that the gifts will go to *you*, right?”

An angry murmur went through the villagers. I did not like the sound of it at all and was about to step in when *Baby Man* pushed his belly out again and said, “Of course the Shrine doesn’t eat, even a monkey would know that. But let me ask you this—do you think that the Shrine paints itself, or stacks the disaster grain itself, or tends the breeding herds itself, or enlarges itself as it soon must? Those of us who live here must do that, as must the nearby villages we ask to help us. All of us have to eat. Perhaps you would like to come here for three or four days and help us but have nothing to eat. If so, you can start tomorrow. And listen to me all of you—no one is forcing you to give small gifts for line positions, only those who want to get in before everyone else. Let me also remind you—if I may be so bold—that the sun will be up all day sending beams down on the Mother Goddesses, so why all this commotion. It is time to stop complaining and start celebrating, is that not so my friends?”

With that, the villagers laughed in agreement and went back to celebrating. *Baby Man* was beaming so hard I thought his face would crack. As I watched him moving through the crowd—joking and laughing, patting villagers on the back—I had to admit to myself I had no idea who this fat, little rascal really was, just as I was equally sure that only he—as he was so fond of saying—had any idea where he was going with this new talent of his.

By the middle of the night, the feasting and dancing had slowed down. Everyone seemed content to quietly sip beer and gossip when suddenly a bright star appeared in the heavens and began racing towards the earth with a tail of smoke and fire trailing behind it until it hit the earth with a huge noise far across the river, shaking the ground beneath us. We could see fire and smoke rising where it had hit. The

startled villagers immediately began to whisper among themselves, “The Goddesses, the Goddesses have sent a message.” *Bright Hands* was sitting next to me and whispered, “*River Mother*, the falling star hit the earth exactly where the sun will rise at dawn, I am sure of it. What does this mean?”

Just then I felt my right side stiffen and *Mafdet* spoke to me:

“This is a sign of my pleasure and the pleasure of Ra. We have sent a piece of ourselves to show you this. You must begin.”

I was confused. What exactly was it that I was supposed to begin? I summoned *Mafdet* to ask her, but she did not come. I turned to *Bright Hands* and said, “*Mafdet* just spoke to me about the falling star, but I am not at all sure what she meant. We must assemble in the Circle of Wisdom immediately and come to a decision about what to do.”

I spoke to the alarmed villagers. “The falling star is indeed is a sign from the heavens. But we must decide what it means, and we must do so right now, before dawn. I want all the leaders and shamans to assemble in the Circle of Wisdom right now, along with *Runs Like Cheetah* and *Bitter Knife* and *White Eyes*.” Then I turned to *Bright Hands* and said, “I did not see *Runs Like Cheetah* and *Bitter Knife*. They must be down by the cheetah cage. Bring them to the Circle and sit with them.”

When we had all assembled in the Circle of Wisdom, I asked the shaman *Six Fingers* to sit on my right in the seat of power, and the shaman *Night Stalker* to sit on my left in the seat of wisdom. I said to the Circle, “*Ra* and *Mafdet* sent us a sign tonight—a falling star. I am not completely sure what it means. This is what *Mafdet* said to me about the falling star:

‘This is a sign of my pleasure and the pleasure of Ra. We have sent a piece of ourselves to show you this. You must begin.’

“I am not at all sure exactly what it is that I must begin and *Mafdet* will say no more. I am asking each of the shamans here to summon your Patron Goddesses and Gods and ask them if they can make it clear what it is I must begin doing.”

I waited. None of the shamans rose to speak. Finally, *Night Stalker*, who was sitting on my left in the seat of wisdom, and was the oldest of the shamans, rose and said, “I am afraid you will receive no help from the other shamans, *River Mother*. They are all as silent on this as was *Mafdet*. There must be a reason for their silence and I believe it is due to the nature of the falling star. I am older than all of you, and remember stories from my ancestors about a special kind of falling star, which I believe this is. It is very rare. When *Mafdet* said to you, ‘*We have sent a piece of ourselves to show you this,*’ she was telling you that this is one of those special stars. We have all seen falling stars in our lifetimes that vanished before they hit the earth. We call those the Tears of the Gods and Goddesses. And some of us may have seen—or remember hearing—stories of stars that actually did hit the earth. These stars are usually small and made of stone. They make little noise, and are called the Sweat of the Gods and Goddesses.

“But until tonight,” *Night Stalker* continued, “I do not think any of us have ever seen a star hit the earth with the thunder this one did. In the stories of my ancestors, they are called the Bones, or Body of the Gods and the Goddesses. They aren’t made of stone but something much harder than stone. After a while, their surface turns to red dust, like dried blood. These falling stars were held to be sacred with much power. Sometimes these special falling stars have an unusual shape—they are pointed on top and large and round on the bottom. They look like a pointed seed or drop of water. That is why in the stories of my ancestors these falling stars are called the moon-blood of the Goddesses or the seed or

semen of the Gods. When *Mafdet* said, ‘*This is a sign of my pleasure and the pleasure of Ra. We have sent a piece of ourselves to show you this.*’ I believe she was telling you that the Fallen Star is made of her moon-blood and *Ra*’s semen. I believe it is a sign that *Mafdet* is ready to conceive you as the daughter of *Mafdet*. Your rebirth is about to begin, *River Mother*, and it has received their blessing. But you first must make sure the Fallen Star is what I believe it to be.

“You must begin examining the Fallen Star immediately to see if it has this special shape and that it is indeed harder than any stone and lastly, see if red blood dust appears on its surface after a while. If these things are so, the Fallen Star is what I say it is, and you must build a shrine exactly where it fell to honor its arrival here on earth—and this is very important—you must begin to construct that shrine as soon as you find the Fallen Star. To delay would greatly dishonor the Gods and Goddesses. If the Fallen Star is still smoking at dawn, and if what *Bright Hands* has told you is correct—that it fell exactly where the sun will rise at dawn today—we will soon see the sun rising through the smoke of the Fallen Star. If that happens, the Shrine you build must not only celebrate the arrival of *Mafdet*’s moon-blood and *Ra*’s semen but also honor the Union between *Ra* and the Mother Goddesses we are all celebrating at this very moment. I believe this is why the star fell where it did and when it did—just before the first rays of *Ra* are due to rise on the longest day and enter the shrine.

“If all this bears out as I have told you, it will be absolutely clear that you are about to become the Daughter of *Mafdet*—and a living Goddess. I believe *Mafdet*’s command, ‘*You must begin.*’ means two things. First, you must begin to build a shrine to the Fallen Star. Second, it means that *your rebirth* will not happen unless *you* make it happen. I do not exactly know what this means—but there is something you will have to do to make your face appear on the mound. One last thing, if *Mafdet* makes it clear to you that *Bright Hands* is to carve the face, she must begin carving

it as soon as possible. *Bright Hands* need not fear making a mistake—the divine moon-blood and semen will guide her in giving birth to your Goddess face. When it is completed, you will be reborn as the Daughter of *Mafdet*—a living Goddess. This is what I believe to be true. What say the rest of you?”

There was complete silence. I rose and said to *Night Stalker*, “The Circle thanks you for your wisdom, *Night Stalker*. The truth of your speaking has been good for all of us. We will take your truth and listen to it within ourselves.”

Bright Hands suddenly rose and said, “I take the silence of the other shamans to be a sign of agreement with everything *Night Stalker* has told us. Every bone in my body and everything I know about *River Mother* tells me that *Night Stalker* is correct. We must follow her wisdom, and wait to see if *Ra* rises through the smoke of the Fallen Star. That is the first thing we must do. If that happens, we must travel to where the star has fallen and see if it is harder than stone and has the special shape of blood or semen and if the red blood dust forms on it. If all that is so, we must construct some form of shrine immediately. Everything tells me it should be a high mound of earth honoring the Mound of Creation from which everything came. The mound would not only raise the Fallen Star up to honor the divine semen and moon-blood sent to us, but it would also allow the Fallen Star to be seen from the Settlement. We will then be able to see the sun rising behind it on the longest day—which means the mound shrine will also honor the Union between the Mother Goddesses and *Ra* that we are celebrating today.

“I believe it will take two or three days to find where the star fell. We must first cross the river and then begin walking east and slightly north. I have my sun rising tablets to roughly guide us. Come night, I can line them up with the North Star and follow the tablet line to the place where the sun rises on the longest day, so finding the star should not be that hard. Come day, there will be no North Star, but if we

build a large fire here on the cliff, I can line up the longest day tablet with it during the day to continue in the general direction of the Fallen Star and then correct our path once night falls and we can see the North Star. If the Fallen Star is still smoking, we will not have any problem during the day because all we will have to do is walk toward the smoke—but that may not happen.

“We must start right after the sun has risen and the smoke has confirmed that the star fell at the exact place where the sun rose. I believe that *Runs Like Cheetah* and *River Mother* should come with me along with four of the young hunters that *Runs Like Cheetah* will pick. I am asking *Sees Through Night* and *Night Stalker* to guide the rest of you through the Shrine to honor this great day. Is there agreement on this?”

The Circle nodded their assent and I rose and said, “The Circle thanks you for your wisdom, *Bright Hands*. The truth of your speaking has been good for all of us. We will take your truth and listen to it within ourselves while we wait for *Ra* to rise.”

Chapter 80: THE FALLEN STAR

As soon we saw *Ra* rising through the smoke from the Fallen Star, we left the Settlement and crossed the river on a small raft going east. We proceeded in the direction of a very a tall tree inland that *Bright Hands* had chosen as a landmark before leaving the cliff. When we reached the other side of the river, it was the middle of the day, with the sun overhead. *Bright Hands* said it would be hard getting exact directions during the day because her sun-rising tablet was designed for night using the North Star.

She said to us, "I cannot see any smoke from the Fallen Star, so we will have to walk in the direction of the very tall tree which will get us going in the direction of where the sun rose. When we get to the very tall tree, I will get a new rough direction by lining up the longest day *sun-rising* line with the fire on the cliff and pick a new tall tree landmark on the line. She told me we would have to keep repeating this until it was night time when she could correct our course using the North Star.

Bright Hands amazed me with the way she used the lines to guide her. The jungle here was completely unknown to any of us so we had nothing familiar to guide us. She told me if the star had fallen anywhere near a branch river we could have followed it, but it had not, so this was the only way during daytime. We took a short break and a nap at dusk and as soon as the stars became visible, *Bright Hands* lined up her tablet with the North Star and picked another star on the horizon that was on the same line as the longest day sun-rising line on the tablet. The stars were always moving and only the North Star stayed in the same place, so *Bright Hands* had to stop every so often and use her tablet to choose a new star to follow. We did this all night long but still did not find the Fallen Star.

When dawn rose, *Bright Hands* told us it would be best to rest and eat, as she believed we were very close. I told *Bright Hands* I was going to lift out of my body and travel to the Fallen Star because I knew the star would pull me to where it was. I reminded everyone not to disturb my body until I returned to it—even if a lion attacked—and with that I closed my eyes and I lifted out of my body. I found myself above the jungle and could see *Bright Hands* and the others directly below me. Then I saw the Fallen Star. It was all but buried in the ground so I couldn't see its shape or size, but it was very close to where *Bright Hands* and the others were standing. I stretched my arms out and locked my right arm on the fire on the cliff and my left on the Fallen Star and let myself be pulled back into my body, my arms locked in position.

When I opened my eyes, they were all standing above me smiling. *Bright Hands* said, "Ah I see you have locked your arms again. I hope they relax sooner than the last time. But before they do, stand up and tell me what they are locked on." I stood up and pointed my right arm to the fire on top of the distant cliff. She pulled out her tablet and lined it up with the fire on top of the cliff and then marked a line to where my other arm was pointing. She picked a tall tree as a landmark and asked me how far away I thought it was. I told her we should find it by the time the sun was about halfway to midday.

We were all very excited, but *Bright Hands* insisted we rest for a short while and eat because we had been going for a day and a night and if the Fallen Star was soon going to be found, we were going to have to dig it out to examine it, and there was no telling how hard that would be. So we ate and rested a short while and then off we went. Just as I had predicted, we detected the Fallen Star well before midday. We couldn't see it at first because the jungle was thick and there was no smoke, but we began to smell something like burnt wood and a sharp, heavy smell that was unlike

anything we knew. Those smells guided us through the jungle until the all but buried star suddenly appeared before us.

We were speechless. The star was buried in the earth with only a small part exposed, but we could feel a heat coming from it as if it were alive. We could also see the long scorched path that the star had burnt when it hit the earth and began burying itself. The trees and plants all along the path were crushed and burnt or scorched and I realized that the burnt wood smell we had detected was from the trees, and that the other sharp, heavy smell was from the star itself.

There was no smoke to speak of coming from the star, just heat. My arms were still stretched out and locked, so I turned my body to touch the part of the star that was above ground with my extended left hand. The surface was much hotter than it looked and I burned my fingers, so much so that I let out a scream and pulled my hand back. When I did, both of my arms immediately fell to my sides—like the arms of a doll. It was so funny we all laughed, but nervously, because of what *Night Stalker* had told us—that she believed the star to be the semen of *Ra* and the moon-blood of *Mafdet*.

I had never seen *Bright Hands* so excited. She told the four young hunters to start digging it out as fast as they could. She told them that the star was hot, but the ground surrounding it wasn't, and she reached down to touch the dirt to show them. The four young hunters began digging with their knives and the rest of us scooped out the loose dirt with our hands. By dusk, we had dug out most of the dirt surrounding the star. It was something to behold. It was huge, about as long as a man with about the same length on the bottom broader part. It was lying on its side, with the narrow part deepest and the broad bottom higher up. What we had first seen when we found the star was a part of the broad bottom sticking up through the earth. It was roughly the

shape of a huge drop of blood or semen, just as *Night Stalker* had predicted.

Bright Hands became extremely excited and grabbed a small rock and flung it hard at the Fallen Star. When it hit, the star sang out and the small rock shattered. *Bright Hands* turned to me and said, "I cannot be sure if it is harder than *any* rock, but it is *very* hard. And when the stone hit it, the star sang out, but not like a rock. The sound was different from anything I have ever heard. I think what we are looking at is the moon blood of *Mafdet* and the semen of *Ra*, just as *Night Stalker* had predicted. We will know for sure if the surface turns to red dust as time passes."

Just then, my right side stiffened and *Mafdet* spoke to me:

"*You must begin.*"

I replied, "O Great Mother, tell me what it is that I must begin?"

"*Everything.*"

I looked at *Bright Hands* and said "We do not have to wait for the red dust. The fallen star is indeed is the moon blood of *Mafdet* and the semen of *Ra*. *Mafdet* just spoke to me and told me so and that I must begin everything. I believe this means we must begin building a shrine to the Fallen Star here and then return to the Settlement and begin carving the face."

Bright Hands replied, "I have to tell you something I have been holding back because I wasn't sure of its truth, but after what you just told me I no longer have any doubts. When I hurled the rock at the Fallen Star and it rang out, I heard a voice saying, '*The Fallen Star you have struck is the Creation Star. That is the name you must use when speaking of it. It must never be struck again.*'"

I replied. “Yes, the voice you heard was true—I can feel it in my bones. We shall call it the Creation Star and no other name.” As soon as I said that, *Bright Hands* became even more excited. She was speaking very fast and was almost breathless, “We must build a shrine as quickly as we can. That is what *Night Stalker* said we must do—and I believe even more so now that the shrine should take the form of a high mound, imitating the Mound of Creation. To do this we must make a high mound of earth and then remove the Creation Star from the ground and place it on top of the mound. We will need many men to do this. *Runs Like Cheetah*, you must run back to the high cliff and get four more young hunters and have them bring eight axes. You will be guided back to the Settlement by the fire on the cliff. We will build a large fire here to guide you back. When you return, we will create a clearing by cutting down all the surrounding trees. We can then use those trunks to lift the Creation Star out of its hole and move it to the top of the mound we will build. While you are gone, we can begin removing the rest of the dirt from around the Creation Star so we can begin building the high mound of earth upon your return. Are we in agreement on this?”

We all nodded our assent and *Runs Like Cheetah* took off running for the Settlement. *Bright Hands* said to us, “If he runs all the way there and all the way back with the young hunters, he will be back in less than a day and a night. Let us start to build a large fire and keep it going while we dig out the rest of the dirt around the Creation Star. We should be ready just as he arrives.”

We heard *Runs Like Cheetah* returning with the other young hunters long before they burst out of the undergrowth. The other young hunters were stunned by the size of the Creation Star and started to chatter excitedly. We had prepared some food and water for them as they had run all day and night, but they soon recovered and asked *Bright*

Hands what they should do. She pointed to a tall tree and said, “Cut down only the trees that are as tall as that one. Keep going in this way until ten tall trunks have been cut and trimmed.”

By the next day, a small clearing existed around the Creation Star because of the ten trees that had been cut down. *Bright Hands* then told two of the hunters to clear the area of any smaller trees, and then she told three other hunters to dig a long ramp from the bottom of the Creation Star pit up to the ground. She then had the remaining hunters make ten long, very strong vine ropes.

I was always amazed at how clever *Bright Hands* was in making things. When the young hunters had finished their tasks, she called everyone to where she was standing. She dug a tiny hole with her hands and placed a small stone in it. Then she duplicated the ramp. Finally she took some thin strands from one of the large vine ropes and fashioned four very thin vine strings. She told the young hunters to pay attention. She took two long twigs and stuck them into the hole underneath the small stone. She then pushed down on the free end of the two twigs and showed us how they moved the small stone up the ramp a tiny bit. She then tied a long vine string around the small stone and wrapped the other end around a large stick she had stuck in the ground near where the ramp met the ground. She then removed the lifting twigs and showed the hunters how the long vine string she had wrapped around the large stick stopped the small stone from sliding back. She kept repeating this lifting and vine string tying until the small stone was completely out of the hole.

She asked the young hunters, “Do you understand how it is done?” They nodded their assent and she said to them, “Good, you four will lift the Creation Star up the ramp. It will take two lifting trunks with two of you pushing down on each of them to lift the Creation Star up. You will have to

build a dirt pile to stand on to start so you will be high enough to push down on the lifting trunks. You will have to pull down on the two lifting trunks at the same time. The others will take a vine rope and tie it around the Creation Star as soon as it is moved up the ramp by the lifting trunks. Then you will wrap the other end of the vine rope around the big tree trunk I am pointing to. The lifting trunks will only move the Creation Star a bit at a time, so you will have to repeat this many times to get it to the surface. The other lifting trunks and vine ropes are there if you break the ones you are using. Do you understand?"

They all nodded their assent and begin lifting. It was midday when they started and dusk when they finally nudged the Creation Star onto the surface of the ground. They were all exhausted. Outside of a few broken pole and one broken vine rope everything went exactly as *Bright Hands* had shown us with her tiny example. She couldn't contain her excitement and went around hugging the young hunters over and over, telling them how wonderful they had been.

As we sat around the fire resting that night, I asked her, "How are you going to get the Creation Star on top of a mound, and where is the mound anyway?"

She replied, "I am going to build it underneath the Creation Star. Look, here's how I am going to do it!" She then yelled to the young hunters to gather around us and watch. She took four long lifting twigs and shoved the end of each of them under the four sides of a small stone. She then placed four short twigs next to the four sides of the stone, but underneath the long lifting twigs. She then pushed down on the free end of one of the long lifting twigs. This lifted up the stone on that side. She then shoved a handful of dirt under the lifted side of the stone and placed a small twig on top of the dirt. She then pulled out the long lifting twig and the stone settled back onto the small twig and dirt.

She then did the same thing on all four sides of the small stone. She then said to the hunters, “Do you see what I am doing? I’ve just made a four sided cradle of twigs and dirt that holds up all four sides of the small stone. I am going to keep adding cradles and dirt until the small stone is sitting on a high mound of twigs and dirt. Watch me carefully.”

She repeated the steps until the small stone rested on top of a small mound of small twigs and dirt. She then took large handfuls of dirt and threw them all over the mound until all you could see was a mound of dirt holding the stone up. She patted the dirt down until it was solid, and then pushed many tiny pebbles into the dirt. She then added still another layer of dirt and pebbles. She told us the last thing we would have to do is weave some vine nets and lay them on the sides of the mound. She said the vine nets would prevent the rain from washing away the dirt until grass started to grow on it to hold everything together. She said to the young hunters, “I believe this is how the Giants built the Mound of Prophecy in our village long, long ago, do you understand how you will do it?”

They nodded their assent. “Good. Tomorrow morning you will lift the Creation Star bit by bit, just as we lifted the small stone. We will need one long lifting trunk for each side of the Creation Star. Chop the remaining long trunks into the lengths of *Baby Man*, which should give you plenty of short logs for the cradles as well as plenty of short logs to place crossways underneath the lifting logs to give you leverage as the Creation Star rises. When you have finished lifting, the final mound should be a bit higher than the height of a man, which will be enough.

“Right now,” she continued, “you must dig out more dirt and add it to the pile of dirt we have already dug out. We will throw this dirt on top and around each cradle layer you make until the Creation Star is sitting above us on the mound. Then we will add many small stones and then add

more dirt and small stones and then finally cover everything with the vine nets.

“We will start tomorrow. Working the lifting trunks will not be easy. It will take two of you to push down on each lifting trunk. As the layers get higher, those not lifting must use their long trunks to stop the Creation Star from sliding off the cradle beneath it as a side is being lifted. The rest of us will put the cradle logs and dirt in place under each side as it is lifted. There may be a few mistakes until we get it right. Cutting the short logs and digging out more dirt will take most of today. Then we will eat and sleep and dream of lifting the Creation Star.”

The next day, once the hunters got their rhythm right, everything went exactly as planned. Everyone was amazed. We all joined in packing in the dirt and small pebbles and then we all fell into a welcome, deep sleep. In the morning, I instructed one of the young hunters to climb a tree that was the height of the finished mound and tell me what he could see to the west. He climbed up quickly and yelled down that he could see the Mother Goddesses Shrine and the Veiled Face very clearly and that the Settlement could surely see the Creation Star on its high mound just as clearly. I then began calling the mound the Mound of the Creation Star to signify its importance, and everyone quickly followed my example.

Both I and *Bright Hands* were extremely happy. We had honored the Creation Star of the semen of *Ra* and the moon-blood of *Mafdet* by raising it up high on a mound that imitated the Mound of Creation from which everything first came. The high mound also allowed the Creation Star to be seen from the Shrine of the Mother Goddesses. But even more important, the Mound of the Creation Star also honored the Union of *Ra* and the Mother Goddesses because on the longest day *Ra* could be seen rising directly behind the Creation Star as he sent his beams into the Shrine of the Mother Goddesses and *Ra*.

While we were talking of these thing, *Bright Hands* said to me, “The Mound of the Creation Star will also honor you as the Daughter of *Mafdet*, because when *Ra* rises on the *next* longest day, his beams will not only light up the Creation Star along with the Shrine of the Mother Goddesses and *Ra*—but the face of the Daughter of *Mafdet* as well. It is time to begin the carving her face—do not you think so, *River Mother?*”

It surely was. We placed many beautiful flowers on the Mound of the Creation Star and piled enough wood on the fire to keep it burning and smoking for three days. We could see the cliff fire burning in the distance and were sure that the Settlement could see our fire as we headed back as fast as we could to tell them what we had done. When we arrived on the riverbank under the cliff, however, there was no need to say anything. All of the villagers were lined up on the riverbank and all the way up the cliff path waiting for us. They must have seen the Creation Star being raised up and knew that Night Stalker’s prophecies had all been fulfilled. Everyone was clapping and singing with a joy I had never heard before. It filled the river valley.

Chapter 81: WE PREPARE TO MAKE THE FACE

Bright Hands sent out some of the young hunters to bring back the makers who had volunteered to carve the face. Meanwhile, the rest of us worked at setting up comfortable huts and water jars for them, as we knew they would be here for many moons. There would be some thirty or so makers, many stomachs to fill. *Bright Hands* asked some women from the nearby villages to cook and make the large amounts of bread and barley beer that the makers would want with every meal. *Bright Hands* left nothing to chance. She told two of the young hunters that when the makers began to arrive, they would have to hunt antelope every day because the makers would need meat to keep up their strength. She kept telling all of us that it was very important to keep the makers as well-fed as possible, because the work would be very hard.

When all the makers had finally arrived, and were rested and fed, *Bright Hands* gathered them together in the center of the Settlement and told them, "I am going to make a large face out of clay in the clearing in front of us. It will be used to guide us in carving the face of *River Mother* on the mound cliff. Right now, I want all of you to get a good look at that small stone face on the east side of the Shrine before I start making the large clay face, because that is what the large clay face is going to look like."

She sent two of the makers to get the small stone face she had carved for the outside of the Shrine and had them hold it up for everyone to see. "As you can see," she said, "this face only goes to just back of the eyes, so there are no ears or neck. I made it this way because in my dream this is what *Mafdet* showed me. As you can also see, the top of the head is somewhat flat because again that is what *Mafdet* showed me in my dream. This will be helpful because the top of the mound is also somewhat flat, so it will cut down the amount of carving we have to do on the top of the forehead.

“As you can also see, this small stone face is somewhat different from *River Mother’s* actual face. It is broader, the eyes are larger, and it lacks the cheetah tears and the river scar running down the middle of her face. Again, that is because this is the face *Mafdet* wanted me to carve. It may help if you think of it as the face of both *Mafdet* and *River Mother*, which is a way of saying that the face is the face of the Daughter of *Mafdet*. I want you to understand that, because when you are carving you must carve what the large clay face looks like, and not be concerned that it may not look exactly like *River Mother’s* face.”

Bright Hands asked the makers to lay the small, stone face on the ground next to her. She told some the young hunters to go into the jungle and cut down strong, young bamboo trunks at least as tall as ten men’s arms, trim them, and to keep bringing them to her until she told them to stop.

She told some of the other young hunters to bring clay up from the river and place it to the side of the clearing, and not to stop until she told them. She said to the makers, “When there is enough clay, I will begin to make a large, clay copy of the small, stone face. As I do that, I will show you the most important thing that *Mafdet* showed me when she commanded me to carve the small face in stone, which is a way of doing it that will avoid the mistake of carving away too much stone. Remember, carving a stone face is different from making one of clay. If you make a mistake on a clay face, you can reshape it until you get it right. There is no way of reforming a stone face if you make a mistake, so there can be no mistakes. Do you understand?”

The makers nodded their assent and *Bright Hands* continued, “What I am going to show you, after I make the large, clay face, is how we will use it to guide us in carving the face of *River Mother* onto the cliff, so that it will be a perfect copy of the large clay face.”

I had never seen *Bright Hands* quite like this. She was highly excited, as if she were possessed. And yet she seemed absolutely sure of what she had to do, as if she had done it many times before. I took *Bright Hands* aside to tell her this. Her eyes looked like they were on fire. She whispered to me, “Yes, it is like that. It is almost as if I had done this many times before, but I had somehow forgotten it until it all suddenly rushed through me like a wild river.”

I embraced her and said, “We are both entering a new life, *Bright Hands*, I can feel it. But you are further into your new life than I am. I believe when the carving is finally completed, I will catch up to you and feel as excited and as sure of myself as you are now. Never doubt that I am with you in all of this.”

When the young hunters had brought her enough bamboo and clay, *Bright Hands* turned to the makers and said, “Watch me very carefully. I am going to build a bamboo cage in the clearing. The cage will be the length of ten men’s arms and as wide as seven men’s arms, which is the same size as the Veiled Face on the cliff mound. The cage is going to be as high as four men’s arms. I want you to take the bamboo poles and cut seven of them to the length of ten arms and seven of them to the length of seven arms and then four of the poles as long as five arms.”

She then took the four bamboo poles with the length of five arms and walked around the clearing, sticking each one into the ground one arm deep to keep it in place. We could see that they formed the outline of a square cage that was about seven arms wide and ten arms long. She then took some vine threads and attached bamboo poles to the tops of each of the four standing bamboo poles to form a cage.

Bright Hands then turned to the makers and said, “Now, look at the small, stone face from the Shrine. It is one arm in length and a bit less wide. I am going to take a piece of

charcoal and draw seven lines down the small stone face with the same space between them, and seven lines across it, with the same space between them. You will see that some of the lines cross where the nose is, and some where the eyes are, and some where the mouth is, and so on.

“Now,” she continued, “I am going to tie seven knots of vine thread on each of the long sides of the cage, with the same distance between them. Then I am going to tie seven knots on each of the short sides of the cage, with the same distance between them. Now, I want you to place the shorter bamboo poles on top of the cage and tie each of them to the knots on the two long sides and then place the longer bamboo poles on top of the cage and tie each of them to the knots on the two shorter sides. You will see that the poles match the charcoal lines I have drawn on the small stone face.

“When I copy the small stone face onto the clay, I will use the bamboo poles over the clay face, and the charcoal lines on the small stone face, to guide me in creating the clay face correctly. I am going to start working from the top of the face down. I will have to work on my knees to avoid hitting the poles on top of the cage. Do you all understand?” They all nodded their assent.

Bright Hands stepped inside the bamboo cage and told some of the makers to take some of the clay and place it in a long strip under the two top poles connecting the long sides of the cage. She then began copying the top part of the small, stone face. All the time, she kept glancing between the charcoal lines on the small stone face and the top of the clay forehead she was shaping. When she was satisfied it looked right, she crawled outside the cage, and looked back and forth between the poles crossing over the clay forehead and the charcoal lines on the small stone face.



She said to the watching makers, “If you look carefully, you will see the top of the clay face is slightly to the left of where it is on the small stone carving. I am now going to correct that.” She crawled back beneath the cage and reshaped the top of the forehead. She said to the watching makers, “As you can now see, everything is where it should be.” She then had a new strip of clay laid beneath the one she had shaped.

It was clear that the clay face on the ground was simply too large to form as a whole. She had to do it in strips, all the time checking the part of the clay face she was shaping against the charcoal lines of the small stone face. I could tell by her expression that it wasn’t an easy way for her to work.

Bright Hands continued to speak to the assembled makers, “When I am finished, I will have shaped the ten strips so as to completely make the large, clay face. Each clay strip will be shaped to match the same charcoal strip on the small, stone face. If at any point in shaping the clay strips they don’t match the small, stone face, I will reshape that strip until it does match. I will now start making the other clay strips, which will eventually include the rest of the nose and cheeks and lips and chin. I will check each strip as I complete

it to make sure it has been shaped the same as the small stone face. Do you understand?”

The makers nodded their assent. She then asked for more clay and began forming the next strip down, all the time comparing it to the small, stone face. By the end of the day, she had finished the large clay face. She then called for *Baby Man* to bring over his counting platform so she could view it from up high. I thought he was going to object that the platform was too important to be moved, but he did not. He told the young hunters to bring it over to *Bright Hands*. *Baby Man* was obviously as fascinated by what *Bright Hands* had done as the rest of us.

Bright Hands climbed up on the platform and asked that the small stone face be passed up to her. She held it in front of her and began looking back and forth between it and the large clay face. Sometimes she would smile, and sometimes frown, and sometimes she would look like she was completely lost. Finally she said to the assembled makers, “There are a few imperfections, but they are small. Tomorrow I will have the young hunters fashion a strong, thin platform that is eight arms long and two arms wide and about four and a half arms high that can be moved over the clay face so I can reach down and correct the imperfections from above without disturbing the rest of the clay face. Do you have any questions?”

There was a general silence, and then one of the makers, *Big Thumbs*, asked, “What you have shown us is thrilling, *Bright Hands*. We have all learned much. But what does this have to do with carving *River Mother’s* face over the Veiled Face on the cliff?”

“That is a good question, *Big Thumbs*. What I have shown you is the way *Mafdet* showed me how I should carve the small, stone face for the Shrine so it would be an exact copy of a small, clay face I had shaped earlier. We are going to use

those same ways to carve *River Mother's* face on the cliff. Here is how we will do it: We are going to build the exact same bamboo cage—but much stronger—and place it on top of the Veiled Face. This may take us a while because we are first going to have to widen the thin ledge that exists between the bottom of the mound and the top of the cliff so we can more easily stand on it.

“This way,” she continued, “the stronger cage over the Veiled Face will be standing almost straight up, and not lying down as the cage is here. The face on the mound cliff is almost straight up—but if you look carefully at it, you will see it is leaning back at a slight angle. I believe this a sign that the face we will carve should lean back at the same angle, as if it were gazing at the heavens just above the horizon. This means we will have to carve away less rock, which is good. The larger ledge we will carve will allow us to fit the bottom of the cage securely into holes we will make in the ledge. We will also have to secure the top of the cage using holes we will make in the top of the mound.”

She then stood back and said, “Does anyone see what the next step will be?” There was complete silence and then *Baby Man* squeaked, “Yes, O yes, I can see what you are doing. In my dreams I have seen these same little squares being used by painters to take a design from one wall and put it on another wall with the same little squares. They bring the design over one square at a time. But I do not see how you can transfer a sculpture that way, because the surface is not flat.”

Bright Hands replied, “But what if we dropped little sticks down from the top of the squares until they hit the surface of the clay face, and then fixed them there?”

“Yes, O yes,” *Baby Man* squealed, “I see what you are going to do. When you place the strong cage on top of the Veiled Face, you will make a new stick with the same length as the stick between the clay face and its square.”

“And then?”

“Then you take that new, copied stick and fix it to the same square on the strong cage above the Veiled Face. It will tell you how deep you have to carve.”

“Yes, *Baby Man*, it will. If we make marked sticks for every little square we place over the clay face, and then make a copy of that stick and fix it to the square above that same feature on the strong cage above the cliff, the carvers will always carve to the correct depth. Otherwise the carved face would be a mess.”

Baby Man howled back, “Yes, O yes, it would indeed be, but that is not going to happen now, right?” With that, the assembled makers burst into laughter and applause and cheering as it became apparent to each of them how the face on the cliff would be carved correctly using the way *Bright Hands* had shown them. When the laughing and cheering had stopped, *Bright Hands* said, “Right now I need all the makers and young hunters to chop down the same number of bamboo trunks we used to make the clay face cage. You will then place them in the same way on the strong cage that we are going to build for the Veiled Face.”

Bright Hands then continued, “First I must fix any imperfections in the clay face. Then we will begin attaching and marking the sticks between each square on the clay-face cage and the clay face. We can use the movable platform for that. I will let you sort out among yourselves who will do what. This should take us a few days and then I will go out and check the squares and the marked sticks on the clay face.

“We will then begin to build the strong cage that will be placed over the Veiled Face. We will use the long bamboo poles you have cut to make the same number of squares we have built on top of the clay-face cage. Then we must check that the squares on each cage match exactly. To do that, we will take the strong cage we have built for the Veiled Face and turn it upside down and lay it on top of the clay-face cage. We can then use the moveable platform to

make any needed corrections to the strong cage. Do you understand?”

There was a murmur of assent, so *Bright Hands* continued, “We will then place the strong cage over the Veiled Face and secure it. We will not place the copies of the marked sticks on the strong cage until we are ready to carve. We will start carving from the highest point—which will be the tip of the nose—and work our way down into the face. Here, let me show you.” She took a stick and drew the face in the sand as it would appear from the side. She then took a small twig and drew some fine lines to show us how high each feature was.



She said, “My drawing is very rough, but it will give you a good idea of what we must carve first and then second and then third and so on. We must always be guided by the measuring sticks, not what I have drawn here in the sand.”

It was immediately clear where the high points would be: the nose and eyebrows and cheeks and lips. Everything else would be lower. *Bright Hands* continued, “The most important thing is that when we place the strong cage over the cliff, and drop the copied marked sticks down from their squares, that they all hit the surface of the cliff with at least the length of a hand to go. This means we will have enough

rock to carve. If there is air between some of them and the end of their marked sticks, we're going to have to carve the highest points down until all the sticks are hitting the cliff with at least the length of a hand to go.

"Also, we will not be able to stand on the ledge when we start on the nose and eyebrows and cheeks, because they are all too high up. We will have to be hauled up by vine ropes around our waists. The strong cage will be sunk into the mound at the four corners and be about four arms high, which should leave us enough room to work inside it.

"Pounding on the cliff with small hard stones will be very hard work and no more than two or three of you will be able to work on any one feature at the same time. This means that the other makers must haul the carvers up every so often and replace them with new carvers. This work will also be very dangerous.

"You must always have a vine rope attached to you, even if you are standing on the bottom ledge. One slip and that may be the end of you. Do you understand? Good, let us have some barley beer now and have a good night's sleep. We start carving as soon as both cages and their squares are constructed and in harmony with each other and all of the depth sticks have been attached and marked on the clay cage. We will then make copies of each of the depth sticks for the strong cage that we will place over the Veiled Face. It will probably take us at least one moon to get everything right. When it is, we will carve out a wider ledge and attach the strong cage over the Veiled Face. Then we will begin to carve the face."

Chapter 82: THE MAKERS DREAM OF MAFDET

There was great excitement when the carving of the ledge was about to begin. It would be the first step before we attached the strong cage over the Veiled Face. All eyes were on *Bright Hands*. She put a vine rope around her waist, and had it passed up to the makers on top of the cliff mound, telling them to make sure their end was tied tight. She was about to step out onto the ledge when one of the young makers named *Long Hands* said he had an important question.

He told *Bright Hands* he had been having dreams in which the Veiled Face on the cliff mound began to cry as soon as he began pounding on it. He told *Bright Hands* he did not understand this, and wanted to know if the Veiled Face was going to be hurt by the carving. He was very troubled and said, "The Veiled Face is a divine Goddess face, the face of *Mafdet*. We know this because *River Mother* has told us. But we also know *River Mother* has told us that *Mafdet* commanded her to begin carving the face, because the Goddesses themselves were not going to carve it, as they had carved the Veiled Face when the world was born. But if this is so, why is the Veiled Face crying in my dreams? I have not told anyone of this, but I must speak of it now."

Suddenly several other makers spoke out, saying that they, too, had the same dream, and it also troubled them greatly. One of them said, "Here we are, about to take stones and pound a divine face. But no one has ever dared touch the face before this. No one. I am very afraid, and I know the others are, too."

I said to *Long Hands* and the other troubled makers, "It is true that the Veiled Face on the cliff mound is a divine face that has been here since the world was born. And it is also true no one has ever dared touch it because of that. This is not just the foolish talk of old people.

“When I first came to the cliff, I wanted to get very close to the Veiled Face. I wanted to see it up close, as in the vision I had as a young girl. My companions tied a vine rope around me and lifted me up near the right eye, because that is the eye I saw close up in my vision when *Mafdet* spoke to me and told me I was to journey here to become the Daughter of *Mafdet*. As I hung in the air, staring at the eye, *Mafdet* commanded me to touch it. I tried and tried, but the power of the eye kept me away. Finally, I lunged at the eye and my body went completely limp, as if the life spirit had suddenly left my body, and I began falling into an endless darkness. If the vine rope had not stopped my fall, I would have surely died. So I know of the power of the Veiled Face.

“But I also know this: when we went to find the Fallen Star, *Mafdet* spoke to me again, saying I must begin carving the face once we had found the Fallen Star. Let me tell you what happened: at first, we were stunned by the huge size of the Fallen Star, and the way it had scorched the jungle all around it. But after we collected our senses, we began looking for the three signs *Night Stalker* had told us would be present if the Fallen Star was made of divine sperm and moon-blood. We could see the Fallen Star was in the shape of a huge drop of sperm or moon-blood, which *Night Stalker* had predicted would be the first sign. But we couldn’t tell if the star was harder than any stone.

“That was important, because *Night Stalker* had told us that would be the second sign the Fallen Star was indeed made of the semen of *Ra* and the moon-blood of *Mafdet*. We had to be sure, so *Bright Hands* took a rock and flung it against the Fallen Star to see if it was truly harder than stone, and although the star rang out with a sound unlike anything we had ever heard, we were still unsure, even though *Bright Hands* said when the rock had hit, she heard a voice saying we must begin calling the Fallen Star the Creation Star. We wanted to wait for the red, blood dust to appear on its surface—which would be the final sign the Fallen Star was indeed made of the semen of *Ra* and the moon-blood of *Mafdet*.

“It was at that point *Mafdet* seized my right side and said to me again, ‘*You must begin.*’ Her command ran through my body like a cold river, and I knew right then that the Fallen Star was exactly what *Night Stalker* had predicted it would be. It *was* the Creation Star—the semen of *Ra* and the moon-blood of *Mafdet*—and it had come flaming down to earth to begin my rebirth as the Daughter of *Mafdet*. I knew right then that it was time to begin the carving.”

Long Hands replied, “We all understand, *River Mother*, that the time has come for your rebirth as the Daughter of *Mafdet*. We also understand that the Creation Star came here to begin that birth, just as we understand that when *Mafdet* said to you, ‘*You must begin.*’ it was a command for you to immediately begin to build the Mound of the Creation Star, as *Night Stalker* said you must. We all understand that.

“But that,” *Long Hands* continued, “is different than commanding you to begin carving the face. What *Night Stalker* had said to all of us was this, ‘*If Mafdet makes it clear to you that Bright Hands is to carve the face, she must begin carving it as soon as possible.*’ But I am not at all sure that *Mafdet’s* command ‘*You must begin.*’ meant that it is *Bright Hands* who is to carve the face. So I don’t understand why you are telling us this. What makes you so sure that the Gods and Goddesses are not going to do the carving, as they did when the world was born? If the Gods and Goddesses could send their divine sperm and moon-blood here to begin your divine birth, they could surely carve the cliff as well. Is this not so?”

“Yes, *Long Hands*, that is surely so.”

“Well then,” *Long Hands* replied, “where are the signs from *Mafdet* telling you *Bright Hands* is to carve the face? From what you have told us, there are none. We are afraid of the power of the Veiled Face—look what happened to you

when you touched it—and our dreams have made us even more afraid.”

I replied, “I would like to tell you that the Goddesses and Gods always speak clearly to their prophets, but they do not. You must know this from your own shamans when their prophecies do not bear out. The shaman is often blamed for this, but usually, sometime later, everyone sees it was not really the shaman’s fault—that the divine message could have meant several things. Sometimes it is worse. Sometimes the divine messages are very clear, but meant to deceive us. That is why we always have two shamans sit at the Circle of Wisdom. We are always at the mercy of the Goddesses and Gods. There is nothing we can do about that. It is our lot as humans.

“Yet what are we to do, sit around doing nothing, or take our chances by relying on what our prophets and shamans believe is the intent of those in the Other World? If *Mafdet’s* command ‘*You must begin.*’ had been uttered by her only once—as it was the night we all saw the Creation Star hit the earth—I, too, might be as cautious as you about what it meant. But it happened twice. It happened the second time when we were standing in front of the Fallen Star, unsure if it was really the semen of *Ra* and the moonblood of *Mafdet*. I told you of that, but I did not tell you the complete story about what happened after *Mafdet* said to me, ‘*You must begin.*’ I was still confused and replied, ‘O Great Mother, tell me, what is it that I must begin?’”

Mafdet then said to me, ‘*Everything.*’

“Right then, any doubts I had about how the face was to be carved disappeared. As her command ‘*Everything*’ raced through my body, I realized *Mafdet* was growing impatient with me, and was reminding me that the world today is not the same as it was when the world was born—when there were *no humans*—only the Gods and Goddesses who

made everything. But today, the world is not the same—humans make everything.

“Oh, it is true that the Gods and Goddesses could make anything they wished, but they are content now to direct humans to make things by sending us voices and visions, or pieces of themselves like the Creation Star. Let me also tell you something that you may not know—In the vision I had as a young girl, *Mafdet* never told me exactly *how* the Veiled Face was to become my face, only that *when it did* become my face, I would become her Daughter.

“That vision was so vivid I still remember rising up from the riverbank until I was looking directly into the huge right eye of the Veiled Face. My right side stiffened, and the eye of *Mafdet* spoke to me, ‘*River Mother, it is time.*’ The voice filled my body with dark light. The eye spoke again, ‘*The Veiled Face you see before you has been waiting to become your face since the world began. You must leave your village and come here for the Veiled Face to become your face.*’”

“Right then, the huge face began to become my face—but not entirely. Some of the cheetah face remained. I asked *Mafdet*, ‘What does this mean?’

‘*It means you are to become my daughter, the Daughter of Mafdet.*’

“Listen to me very carefully, *Long Hands*. *Ra* and *Mafdet* have sent us their divine sperm and moon-blood to guide us, but it is *we* who must actually carve the face, because today it is humans who make everything. That is what *Mafdet* meant when she commanded me to begin *Everything*. It may mean more than that, time will tell, but right now, today, I know it means that *Mafdet* wants *Bright Hands* to begin carving the face.”

There was complete silence. I looked at *Bright Hands*. She looked like she was on fire. I walked over to *Bright Hands*

and took her by the hand and walked over to the ledge, where I turned to the makers and said, “I am saying to all of you and I am saying to the great Goddess *Mafdet* that I am ready to carve the face—and so is *Bright Hands* who stands with me in all things.”

With that, we walked, hand in hand, out onto the narrow ledge. We had no vine ropes around our waists and would surely have fallen if the Veiled Face exerted its power. We knew that, and so did the makers. There was complete silence, and then gasps, as we placed our hands on the Veiled Face. Nothing happened. Then I took my flint knife and split off a small piece of the Veiled Face and *Bright Hands* did the same thing. I turned to the makers and said, “As you can see, the Veiled Face held back its power. This is a sign that *Mafdet* is waiting for us to begin carving. It is time.”

The makers nodded their assent and gathered around me. I said to them, “You have all seen births take place. You know that the mother is in great pain and often cries out. That is what your dreams have been about. It is *Mafdet* telling you she is ready to give birth, and to go through the pain of birth so that I can become her Daughter. Sleep well on that tonight, and do not fear the dream if it comes again. Welcome it.”

After the makers had gone off to their huts to sleep, *Bright Hands* and I stayed up talking. We were on fire. I said to *Bright Hands*, “I have to tell you that I was still a bit unsure when we walked out on the ledge. We can never be absolutely sure of anything with the Gods and Goddesses, can we?”

“No, we cannot.”

“Oh, you know what I wanted to ask you?”

“No, what?”

“Did you feel anything when you placed your hand on the Veiled Face?”

“Yes, I did.”

“What was it?”

“It was very strange—like a quick, little slap on the back of my hand—the kind my mother used to give me for touching things I should not touch.”

“Do you know what?”

“No, what?”

“I felt the same thing.”

Chapter 83: WE BEGIN TO CARVE

At dawn, we began widening the ledge at the bottom of the mound so we could get a better foothold. The rock ledge at the bottom of the mound slowly gave way enough so we could walk easily upon it without fear of slipping off. When that was finished we began sinking a hole at each end of the ledge and on top of the mound to secure the cage. The pounding of the holes both on the ledge and at the top of the mound went on for days. When it was finally done, *Bright Hands* put a vine rope around her waist and had it passed up to the top of the mound to be tied securely. She then stepped out on the ledge and called out to a maker named *Many Hands* whom she had taken as a special assistant. *Bright Hands* told me she prized *Many Hands* because she understood things very quickly and never made mistakes.

Many Hands put a vine rope around her own waist and had it passed up to the top of the mound to be tied securely. Then she stepped out on the ledge to get closer to *Bright Hands* who said to her, "I want the makers at the top of the mound to pull you up so you can direct them in putting the cage into the holes on top of the mound, while I do the same thing down here on the ledge. Keep your eyes on what I am doing and I will keep my eyes on what you are doing and we should have it secured very quickly."

Bright Hands turned to the makers assembled by the ledge at the side of the mound and told them to bring the strong cage out to the mound and tie vine ropes to the top of the cage and throw the vine ropes up to the makers sitting on top of the mound so they could pull the top of the cage up there. After they had done that, *Bright Hands* told two of the makers standing at the ledge to tie ropes to their waists and stand at opposite ends of the ledge so they could help her position the cage as it was let down. *Many Hands* began telling the makers on top of the mound to begin lowering

the cage very slowly. Within a very short time, the poles on the top and bottom of the cage had been lowered into their holes and tightly secured.

Many Hands came down from the top of the mound and stepped out on the ledge next to *Bright Hands* who said to her, "I want you to have one of the makers go to the clay face and bring you the copies of the marking sticks around the nose and eyebrows and lips of the clay face. They will be the highest points on the face we are about to carve and must be carved first, starting with the nose tip. When you give the marking sticks to me, you must tell me the exact square they came from so I can fix them in their proper place. After I have done that, get me the marking sticks from the very lowest places on the clay face and pass them to me, telling me the exact square they came from.

"Do not mix them up in your mind—and just to make sure, take *Baby Man* with you and tell him what you are going to tell me and have him make markings on his counting tablets that will remember what you have told him. When you tell me where each came from, he can check his tablets to see if they say the same thing. If they do, we can start to carve. If not, you will have to go back with him and check where things went wrong. Do you understand?"

Many Hands nodded her assent. *Bright Hands* yelled to *Baby Man* who was standing to the side of the mound, "Can you do this *Baby Man*? Can you make markings that will remember what *Many Hands* has told you?"

"I think so," *Baby Man* shouted back. "The position of the squares should be something like the markings I use to count grain, so if she tells me that a measuring stick is for the square that is ten down from the top, five in from the left, I can make those markings. Is that what she is going to tell me?"

"It is now. Do you understand *Many Hands*?"

"Yes I do," replied *Many Hands*.

Baby Man then said to *Bright Hands*, “How is *Many Hands* going to remember which measuring stick belongs to which square? We should have a way of marking that as well, is that not so?”

“Yes of course we should,” *Bright Hands* replied, “but we do not. I was hoping *Many Hands* would remember which went with which. She has a very good memory. Do you have any ideas *Baby Man*?”

“The only sure way would be to put more markings on the marking sticks, and that could lead to confusion. Why not try this? Have *Many Hands* tie a thin string of hide with holes in it around her waist and have her put the sticks in it in the same order as she is telling me the squares they belong to. That way if she does not remember the squares correctly, I will catch it because my markings for the squares will be in the same order as the sticks around her waist.”

“I think that will work. What do you think *Many Hands*?”

“It is a good idea,” *Many Hands* responded, “but I think it would also be a good idea for me to bring you no more than five marking sticks at a time. I should not make any mistakes that way. What do you think?”

“It is a good idea,” *Bright Hands* replied. *Baby Man* agreed, saying, “Better we get tired running back and forth between the faces than make a mistake that we could never set right.”

I was amazed by the calm way they solved these problems. I was in awe of the way *Bright Hands* had organized the carving, as well as the way *Baby Man* had been able to step in and help her with his counting abilities when they were needed. The makers were in awe as well. It was almost as if the two of them had come from a different world, a world where *watching* was much more advanced than the *watching* we knew. *Bright Hands* had been right when she told me that nothing would ever be the same after the carving of the face. But the face had not even been carved and things were already changing faster than I could ever have imagined.

When the measuring sticks for the highest places on the face were brought out to the cliff and checked and put in place, *Bright Hands* told us everything looked fine. But when *Many Hands* brought out the sticks for the lowest places on the clay face and *Bright Hands* put them in place on the cliff, I heard her moan, "I was afraid of this. I knew that the cliff face was not as level as the ground holding the clay face, but I was hoping the Goddesses would be with us and that the lowest places on the cliff wouldn't be lower than their matching places on the clay face. But several are. That means we will have to carve away all the high places until the measuring sticks for the lowest places also touch the cliff correctly. Do you understand, *Many Hands*?"

"Yes *Bright Hands*, I do."

"We can use the measuring sticks to tell us how far to carve down the area around the nose to make things right. It seems from my measurements that we will have to carve that area down about the length of a hand before we can begin to carve the face. I would like you to come out and make sure I am correct on this."

Many Hands was already tied to the top of the mound with a vine rope, so she stepped out onto the ledge and began examining all the high and low points against their marking sticks. It took her some time as she was very careful, but finally she turned to *Bright Hands* and said, "Maybe a bit more than a hand length. It would be better to have a little more of the lower cliff surfaces to carve on, right?"

"You're right, *Many Hands*. Tomorrow both of us can begin by pounding down the nose area. That may take us many days. When we are done, we will check the low areas again. If they are high enough to carve, we can start. But before we do, we are going to have to put *new marks* on some of the copies of the measuring sticks to reflect the new height of the tip of the nose."

“Yes, that’s right, *Bright Hands*. After the nose area is pounded down enough, let me measure the exact difference and apply it very carefully to the measuring stick copies that have to be changed. That will take a few days but better we get the markings right than try to rush it. Do you agree?”

“Yes I do, *Many Hands*. Select those makers you want as assistants. I am going to sit with *River Mother* and tell her what is happening.”

I am glad *Bright Hands* did sit down with me because I had not quite understood what the problem was, let alone the solution. But after *Bright Hands* drew me a few diagrams in the sand, I understood immediately. It was clear we both needed to relax, so I called *Baby Man* over to gossip. The three of us gossiped over some barley beer and bread that one of the young hunters had brought us. *Bright Hands* was so tired she fell asleep halfway through the meal, leaving me faced with a beaming *Baby Man* who seemed to have no bottom when it came to beer. Just before I fell asleep, I remember him burping, “So what do you think of your fat, little Keeper of Counts now, *River Mother*?”

Chapter 84: THE FACE IS CARVED

The next day, *Bright Hands* assembled the makers at the mound and told them that she alone was going to pound down around the nose area to reduce its height. She said, “I want to make the first cuts myself to see how soft the cliff is. That will tell me how long the pounding down will take. I want to take it upon myself to carve away an amount that is no more or no less than what has to be carved away. If a mistake is made, I want to be the one who makes it so I can figure out what went wrong and correct it.”

Bright Hands tied the vine rope around her waist and stepped out on the ledge. As it turned out, the cliff was very hard, much harder than she expected, so the cliff gave way very slowly, even with the hardest pounding stones. After ten long days of pounding and measuring, she had pounded down the rock around the nose area far enough to begin making new depth markings on the copies of the measuring sticks that would have to be changed.

Bright Hands and *Many Hands* took one final measurement, agreed it was correct, and stepped off the ledge so *Bright Hands* could speak to the assembled makers, “We cannot start carving until *Many Hands* has changed the depths of those marking sticks that have been affected by my carving away the area around the nose. She will select some of you to help her. Once that is done, we can start carving.

“I think by now you should understand that you always have to check how deeply you have carved, and that you must do that by constantly checking against the marking sticks. That is the only sure way. But the measuring sticks don’t cover *every* point on the face, only those points about a hand apart. You must use your judgment on the other points. To assist you I am going to draw with charcoal a frontal view of whatever feature is being worked on. I can do this from memory, but I think it would be better if one of you holds up the small stone face so I can see it as I draw the

feature on the cliff with charcoal. That way I can use it as a check against my memory.

“I am,” she continued, “going to draw the nose first and then carve it so you can see how I work. If some of you wish to, you can lower yourself down from the top of the mound to get a better view of what I am doing. If I could do all the carving by myself, I would, but it is very hard work, and *Many Hands* has worked so closely with me on everything—especially the measuring sticks—that I feel she best understands what has to be done and would be the best partner for me.”

Bright Hands then drew a charcoal outline of the nose tip, the nostrils, and the bridge of the nose on the cliff face. She looked back at the small stone face every so often and chatted with *Many Hands* about whether she should make some adjustments to the outline she was drawing. They both agreed that the nostrils could be larger so she redrew them and the carving was ready to start.

Bright Hands said to the makers, “We are now going to start carving the nose. You can see the care we took with measuring before we started. You must do the same thing because a careless mistake could ruin the face. *Many Hands* and I will do the carving of the nose, so if any mistakes are made, we will be the ones to make them. Now I want you to crowd around the ledge on both sides to watch us closely, or you can drop down from above. As there are many of you, take turns getting close.

“Once we begin carving the nose, you will see that when carving small features like the nose, no more than two will be able to carve together at any one time. Larger features, like the forehead, may allow four of you to work at any one time. It is important that you start thinking about choosing a partner to work with. To start, only one of us—either I or *Many Hands*—will be carving the nose at any one time. But as we progress, I expect *Many Hands* and I will both be pounding at the same time, because we will have

adjusted to each other's rhythm. Finishing the nose will take many, many days.

"After *Many Hands* and I have finished the nose, you will begin working in pairs, with one pounding and the other watching and measuring. You will switch back and forth when one of you gets tired of pounding. Later on, as you get better at carving and measuring, I may allow both partners to pound at the same time, as I and *Many Hands* are going to do. You will do the broad areas, like the forehead and cheeks and chin. The eyes and lips will be done by *Many Hands* and I and perhaps a few of you who have proved to be especially good carvers."

With that the carving began. It went on continuously day after day. After a while, *Bright Hands* told me that even with thirty makers it was going to take much longer than three moons—maybe as many as six or seven moons—because she had first thought that more makers could carve at any one time. But she had been wrong.

The makers never lost their good spirits but they always looked exhausted and were always covered with stone dust, so much so that they looked like ghosts walking back and forth each day between the cliff and their sleeping huts. Day followed day and soon almost two moons had passed since the makers first assembled here. By this time, most of the nose was finished and the makers were pacing back and forth, eager to start carving the forehead. The face began taking shape very slowly. I couldn't see the entire face from the side of the ledge because it was so huge, so I began taking the path down to the riverbank where I could see it from a distance. After a few moons, the nose had emerged from the cliff like a swimmer surfacing in a lake. Then, bit by bit, I could see other features beginning to appear beneath the squares on the cage. First the eyebrows and forehead and then the tips of the lips and chin and cheeks began to appear, as if the swimmer's face were close to breaking water completely.

Then, around the sixth moon, *Bright Hands* announced the face was finished and removed the strong cage. Without the little squares of the cage to contain it, the huge face looked even larger. I raced down to the riverbank. The face looked like it had completely surfaced from beneath the water. I could almost feel it gasping for breath and then I could feel myself lifting out of my body and rising up toward the face, and then, suddenly, I was next to the right eye—just as I had been in my childhood vision. I could feel the right eye pulling me in and I felt my spirit face being pulled and pushed and twisted and realized my spirit face was being changed into the face of the Daughter of *Mafdet*. Suddenly, something shifted inside me and I was no longer next to the face but far across the river, fluttering like a moth in front of the Creation Star—all the while being drawn closer and closer to it until I had an orgasm that was so intense I began crying and screaming and laughing in a voice I had never heard before—and then I was high above the river delta, watching the grain fields grow from seed to harvest in an instant while the river kept overflowing its banks and then receding just as quickly—and this kept happening over and over while the sun and moon kept rising and setting in the flick of an eyelid—as if time were somehow racing ahead of itself—and then I was above the villages watching bands of older hunters savagely murdering women over and over while the young cheetah hunters fought them back in bloody waves—neither of them winning and neither of them losing—and then I was high above the Settlement watching a tall young shaman I knew was *Ghost Hunter*, locked in mortal combat with *Runs Like Cheetah*—*Ghost Hunter* with his bloody, ravenous hawks and *Runs Like Cheetah* with his sleek cheetahs—first in the Settlement and then in the villages and then on the white beaches of the great blue water and then I was suddenly high above the river delta looking down at the dark chaos of what was once beautiful and a dark rage began building up inside me that I knew would never ever go away and then I was arm in arm with *Runs Like Cheetah*, slaughtering the women-killing hunters

over and over until the stench of death was everywhere—
and then everything went black and I was falling and falling
and then I was lying on the riverbank looking up at the
smiling, concerned faces of *Runs Like Cheetah* and *Bright
Hands* hovering over me like anxious mothers.

AUTHOR'S AFTERWORD

I created *River Mother's* story as I would a long, narrative poem, by letting the Muse's song rise up of its own accord. I had no preconceptions at all, except my growing intuition that the face of the Sphinx was that of a preliterate Nubian female. That was it. I had done some research, of course, into prehistoric Egypt, Nubia, and Africa to get a feel for that period, but it was of a general, cursory nature.

I never consciously preconceive or plan anything of a creative nature: my written poems, oral poems, video poems, novels. In the case of RIVER MOTHER I did research the prehistoric period I was going to be writing about, but whether that research would be honored by the Muse would be up to her. I never argue with her song.

The Muse began by having *River Mother* describe her own birth—which took the form of a poem resembling an umbilical cord—and then everything else: the characters, the setting, the action, the themes, the plot, began to assemble around her like planets assembling around a new-born sun.

The characters always surprised me. But even more surprising were the Muses' delicate, emotional portrayals of the relationships between the various characters, as well as the general emotional tenor of the tribe itself, which was that of a very large, extended family surrounded by an extremely dangerous world. Currents of love, anger, fear, and wisdom ran through it like a restless river.

These portrayals all had the feel of truth to them, despite the fact they had nothing to do with my research. It reconfirms my belief that art and intuition are capable of detecting a much larger, and often hidden, picture than is possible through science alone. I believe the Muses' portrayals are much closer to the truth than the usual archaeological portrayals of hunter-gatherer tribes as being composed of

superstitious, unorganized, primitive savages. That kind of portrayal comes from observing hunter-gatherer tribes from the outside, with modern, *logos* eyes. It is a portrayal that I believe to be inaccurate, as well as prejudiced.

None of the Muses' portrayals of the various characters were more surprising and striking than *Ghost Hunter* and *Baby Man*. *Baby Man*, with his ridiculous *braggadocio* and weirdly ironic sense of humor, could have easily been the product of the streets of Brooklyn. So what was he doing in Nubia c.6000 B.C.?

Despite his unusual behavior, *Baby Man* plays a critical role in allowing *River Mother* to fulfill her destiny. He somehow has a sense of trade, ships, numbers, counting, and agricultural organization that could only belong to someone living in a *logos* consciousness culture, such as Phoenicia, a culture still 4500 years in the future. To further complicate matters, he also has a very amused view of *Ghost Hunter's* demonic seizures, a view that no one in the tribe shares in the least.

Here we come to a point where we have to choose between two views of history. One view says we can explain where we are today by rationally examining the past as we would an anthill. In other words, there is no place for the metaphysical.

This is by far the dominant view today, but my own sense of the world says there is another view. That view says there is always something else at work. It seems to me that Jesus didn't become *Jesus*, or Buddha become *Buddha* solely because of the nature of their surroundings. I believe there was also a metaphysical force at work that swept them up and transformed them, just as their own transformations swept up and changed the cultures they lived in.

This, of course, is the minority view of history today, but the characters of *Baby Man* and *Ghost Hunter* seem to be suggestions by the Muse of just such a force.

Baby Man, as *River Mother* eventually discovers, seems to belong to two worlds: a Mediterranean, *logos* consciousness world in Time to Come, (which I sense to be Phoenicia around 1200 B.C.), and at the same time, the 6000 B.C. Nubian world of *River Mother*.

In his dreams, he experiences a *logos*-consciousness world with an advanced social structure and technology. It is a world that he senses he belongs to, but can't enter except in his dreams.

I can't think of a better way of portraying what it must be like to be a genius. By genius I mean someone who is not only very smart, but someone who is also vaguely aware that the world he finds himself in doesn't quite correspond to the world he is experiencing internally, especially in his dreams.

If you have difficulty in imagining such a person, I suggest you read about the childhood of Einstein, who was taken to be very odd and slow as a child, but grew up to transform our view of the universe. My own feeling is that Einstein, as a child, had an internal life that was closer *in principle* to that of *Baby Man* than that of the Quantum Mechanic rationalists who succeeded him.

I think there are *Baby Man* types in every culture, odd, brilliant misfits who somehow guide their cultures into the future with the assurance of sleepwalkers. Where their dreams and intuitions come from is simply a mystery, but they surely don't come solely from the time and place in which they live. *Baby Man*, of course, can simply be enjoyed as the odd court-jester he is, but it would be a mistake not to

see him as a psychic herald of a future, literate, *logos*-consciousness Dynastic Egypt.

Baby Man's friendship with *Ghost Hunter* also sheds some light on *Ghost Hunter's* character, which puzzled me at first. While other tribe members are terrified by his demonic behavior, *Baby Man* seems oblivious to it. In fact, he thinks it is funny. If I had any doubts that *Baby Man* was a psychic herald, it was soon dissolved by his amused appraisal of *Ghost Hunter's* demonic screams:

“I do not know why I find it so funny, *River Mother*, but I do. He *is* different, but I have never really thought of him as a demon—just a baby doing a very bad imitation of a demon.”

This kind of humor simply didn't exist in *muthos* consciousness, preliterate 6000 B.C. Nubia. It requires a *logos*-consciousness mind capable of stepping outside itself and seeing the humor in two sides of a situation. It is a *logos*-consciousness mind capable of the kind of *cold observation* necessary for irony.

While *Baby Man* was quite comfortable with the demonic *Ghost Hunter*, *Monkey Mother's* dark, birth prophecy about *Ghost Hunter* gave me the chills. His later, crocodile-stopping baby screams made me even more uncomfortable. He seemed almost alien.

I knew the Muse was up to something, but I had no idea what until *Monkey Mother* revealed that *Ghost Hunter* was possessed by a God/Goddess from Time to Come who was both a destroyer and healer. When she subsequently revealed that the God/Goddess came from somewhere nearer to the sun, and had “many arms and many weapons,” I immediately set about examining the history and pre-history of India, because that is where *Monkey Mother* seemed to be pointing.

What I found was an early, very advanced culture called the Indus valley culture, which evolved out of a very early farming, hunter-gatherer culture around 2800 B.C., which, in turn, evolved into what we know as the Vedic culture around 1700 B.C., which evolved into the Hindu culture around 800 B.C.

Despite this long evolving chain of cultures, many scholars believe the Vedic hymns represent an ancient, spiritual river that not only fed the roots of the Indus valley, Vedic and Hindu cultures, but also the preceding, very early farming and hunter-gatherer culture as far back as 6000 B.C., and maybe even 7500 B.C.

The ancient origin of the oral Vedic hymns became even more evident when it was recently discovered there are still small villages where Vedic mantras have been sung and passed down orally for thousands of years. When linguists attempted to decipher their linguistic roots, they came to the conclusion that the closest equivalent was that of the *song of birds*. This similarity suggested two things to me: that the Gods spoke to the earliest *avatars* (poets) in bird-song, and that the earliest Vedic mantras may indeed go back even beyond the very early farming cultures of 7500 B.C.

Although many have rejected this bird-song linguistic conjecture as nonsense, I contend that the earliest stories/poems were, of necessity, composed mainly of the animal sounds early humans still possessed, as well as the sounds of other animals that held special meaning for them, such as the songs of birds. If you'd like more background on this contention, see Chapter 49 of my ALICE HICKEY.

<https://app.box.com/shared/fn5qe4330d>

What the Muse seemed to be suggesting was that the spiritual energy represented by the Vedic hymns was trying to enter Proto-Egypt through *Ghost Hunter*. This kind of conjecture is seen by science as beyond crazy, but it would be wise to

remember that mystics of all cultures tell us that our sense of past, present, and future is an illusion—that everything is happening all at once. If that is so, who is to say this kind of thing couldn't happen?

Here, again, we have to choose between a rational view of history and a slightly different one that says there are also metaphysical forces at work. My intuition tells me that the latter view is closer to the truth.

Although we only see a glimpse of the truly war-like, God-like *Ghost Hunter* in *River Mother's* final, horrendous vision, *Monkey Mother's* earlier revelations suggest he is one of those extraordinary humans—such as Cyrus the Great, or Alexander, or Genghis Khan—who come to believe they were born to conquer, transform, and rule the world.

Examining their lives from the outside can never begin to tell us what their internal, imaginative life was like. Nor can it ever tell us what it was that separated them from the equally gifted warriors surrounding them. Nor can it tell us what gave them the spiritual/psychic energy that made tens of thousands rise up and follow them like a single body.

In the companion site I created, *When Was the Sphinx Really Built and Why*, I make no mention of this Vedic connection, because the rational methodology I used in creating the site never suggested it. That it surfaced in *RIVER MOTHER* is one more indication of the power of art to reveal the hidden. While the Vedic hymns are a complex subject, I think it worthwhile to give you some background, as it will further your understanding of *Ghost Hunter*.

The Vedic hymns display a highly developed spirituality centered about the sky (the abode of the Gods) and birds (mainly eagles) In addition, they portray the material world being created by *sound*. (*Shabda-brahma*—the pure vibration of the Supreme Lord)

These characteristics are mirrored in *Ghost Hunter's* character and behavior. This mirroring is admittedly sketchy, because we see only glimpses of *Ghost Hunter* as a baby. The one exception to this is *River Mother's* terrifying vision of him as a grown shaman/warrior. Yet the similarities are unavoidable. First of all, Vedic spirituality was connected to birds—most notably the eagle. *Ghost Hunter* hunts with a closely related bird, the hawk. In addition, *Ghost Hunter* transmits the power of Vedic spirituality by screaming (sound). When I was writing RIVER MOTHER, I never understood why the Muse chose screaming as a weapon for *Ghost Hunter*, but it now makes absolute sense to me.

Little is known of the Gods of the very early preliterate hunter-gatherer and farming cultures that preceded the Indus valley and Vedic cultures. We can safely assume, however, that they were Mother Goddess cultures. We know more about the Indus valley culture, namely that while the Mother Goddesses were still honored, there also existed a male God, *Pashupatinath*, who has been described by some scholars as *Shiva-like*.

When the Vedic culture emerged, a war-like Vedic God, *Rudra*, came into existence. *Rudra* is seen by most scholars as eventually evolving into the Hindu *Shiva* (the Destroyer). *Shiva* is often portrayed with “many arms and many weapons” and is sometimes seen as *androgynous* (both sexes) when he is spiritually combined with his wife, *Parvati*, who is a healer.

Which God/Goddess, then, out of this apparent mélange of Gods, is possessing *Ghost Hunter*? *Shiva* is undoubtedly the closest, but I believe the collective unconscious used the Hindu God/Goddess *Shiva* as a metaphor for the long river of Vedic spirituality that fed all of these cultures.

If we believe what *Monkey Mother* predicts and *River Mother* fears, we have to come to the conclusion that *Ghost*

Hunter will eventually learn how to consciously open himself to the immense destructive/healing power of Vedic spirituality and become a fierce, almost God-like shaman, as reflected in *River Mother's* horrendous, final vision:

“..and then I was high above the Settlement watching a tall young shaman I knew was *Ghost Hunter* locked in mortal combat with *Runs Like Cheetah*—*Ghost Hunter* with his bloody, ravenous hawks and *Runs Like Cheetah* with his sleek cheetahs—first in the Settlement and then in the villages and then on the white beaches of the great blue water.”

What we have here is *River Mother's* vision of a savage, unending contest between father and son. *River Mother's* vision stops there, but it is not hard to also see it as a contest between Vedic spirituality and Proto-Egyptian spirituality—the outcome of which will be the introduction of Vedic spirituality into the Proto-Egyptian culture.

For those who doubt any Vedic influence south of India or Iran, there is a good deal of scholarship on the influence of the Vedic culture on the Hebrew culture. Here is a good, concise article:

<http://www.veda.harekrsna.cz/connections/Hebrews-and-Vedic-Brahmins.php>

There is also a legend about King Solomon that suggests a Vedic influence. In the legend, Solomon asks God for wisdom and is granted the ability to understand the song of birds, one of them being the great White Eagle. Here is a good site on this:

<http://jhom.com/topics/birds/solomon.htm>

Some may see this introduction of Vedic spirituality into *River Mother's* story as outlandish, but all I can tell you is that I

create my novels in exactly the same way as I create my poems, whether written or oral—which is to say I surrender completely to the Muse and let her have her way. If you need an example of the depth from which the Muse can rise up from the collective unconscious, I refer you to my ALICE HICKEY, Chapter 3 and 4:

<https://app.box.com/shared/fn5qe4330d>

In the case of RIVER MOTHER, this resulted in something like an epic poem. I see the chapters as the equivalent of the books in Homer's epics. They are part of a narrative continuum, but they also have a completeness and energy similar to that of my poems, and like my poems, they were always a surprise to me.

Ghost Hunter was just such a surprise to me. It was only when I followed the trail of Vedic crumbs left by the Muse (sound, birds, Shiva-like God) that he began to come into focus. As to how Vedic spirituality actually influenced Proto-Egyptian and therefore Dynastic Egyptian culture, that is something I'll leave you to pursue on your own. There is plenty of scholarship on the matter. Here is a good site to start with:

http://www.hinduwisdom.info/India_and_Egypt.htm

There is a Vedic/Dynastic Egypt connection I think is worth considering. I believe that that the elaborate internal construction of the passageways and rooms in Khufu's pyramid at Giza served several functions. First of all, the stunning passageway called the Grand Gallery allowed the Pharaoh's "tomb" to be constructed high up near the tip of the pyramid. All other pyramids have the Pharaoh's tomb at ground level or underground. Another function of the various passageways was to physically mirror the ceremonial steps the Pharaoh's soul had to take in achieving eternal life with *Osiris*. I cover this in detail on my site on the Sphinx.

I believe still another function of the elaborate internal passageways and rooms in Khufu's pyramid was to facilitate the introduction and amplification of vocal and instrumental sound frequencies aimed at altering the consciousness of those participating in the dead Pharaoh's transition to eternal life with Osiris. (As a simple example of such a use of sound, think of the *Ohm* sound used to facilitate meditation.) We have to remember that this transition (whose ceremonial steps are specified in the Book of the Dead) evolved out of the highly psychic burial practices of the Proto-Egyptians. As much as our scientific mindset dislikes even considering that these elaborate burial/transitional ceremonies could have been conducted in an altered state of consciousness, we have to consider the fact that the Dynastic Egyptians, with their highly psychic spirituality, would have held such a state as highly desirable.

While this used of "sound" could be of Egyptian origin, it is not at all out of the question to propose that it could also be of Vedic origin. Twenty years ago, at the Monroe Institute, I personally experienced altered states of consciousness brought about by the use of sound frequencies, and can attest to its power. Here is Wikipedia on The Monroe Institute:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Monroe_Institute

I believe this excursion into the characters of *Baby Man* and *Ghost Hunter* will give you a fuller picture of the mysterious metaphysical forces that I believe also guide the evolution of cultures. Characters like *Baby Man* and *Ghost Hunter* may have appeared many times as Proto-Egypt evolved into Dynastic Egypt, just as many shamans like *River Mother* may have travelled to the Nile delta before her. What I have given you is their fictional representations.

I can't say why I have always had such a strong interest in preliterate cultures. It was something that emerged very early in my childhood. I will say, however, that later in my life, as

my knowledge of that period deepened, I became increasingly dissatisfied with the dominant scientific thought about the intellectual, spiritual, and artistic nature of preliterate cultures. It seemed way off base—if not dead wrong—but I couldn't really say why.

Over the years, as I plunged deeper into the nature of preliterate cultures, I found myself being guided primarily by three books: Robert Graves' *White Goddess*, Julian Jaynes' *Origin of Consciousness* and Marija Gimbutas' *The Language of the Goddess*. These books are almost encyclopedic in their breadth, yet each of them eventually gave me a single, decisive insight into the nature of preliterate cultures:

Graves: *The Muse was another name for the Mother Goddess that dominated all preliterate cultures.*

Jaynes: *Preliterate peoples had different minds than ours, i.e., they heard directive and poetic voices from the right side of their brains—voices that they took to be the voices of the Gods*

Gimbutas: *Preliterate tribes were governed cooperatively by males and females.*

To the casual observer, these might seem at first glance to be unconnected, scholarly observations, but to me they seemed the keys to unlocking the true nature of preliterate, tribal cultures. They simply had to be extended to form an *intersecting matrix*, and when that happened, everything began falling into place.

Yet, as far as I know, no one had ever extended these three observations. I believe part of the reason is that Jaynes and Gimbutas were scientists, and clothed their findings in cautious robes of science: *this is what I observed and that's it*. Another reason is that none of these authors seemed to

be aware of the work of the others, or if they did, felt it wasn't relevant.

Graves, however, being a poet used to acting alone, intuitively jumped far beyond what he had observed in the many scraps of transcribed, preliterate oral poetry that had made their way onto the shores of literacy. It was clear to him—as a poet and as a classical scholar of immense erudition—that the various female Gods in these poems were merely different aspects of the Mother Goddess. It was at this point that he made a critical, intuitive jump and came to the conclusion that whenever a poet—consciously or unconsciously—imitated the ancient thirteen poetic themes praising the Mother Goddess, they would create a true poem.

In other words, the Mother Goddess was the Muse, the source of the internal voices poets heard.

Although Graves seemed to be ignorant of Jung's work, what he was implying—in his unbelievably unscientific way—was that these thirteen themes and the Mother Goddess/Muse were early archetypes in our collective unconscious.

Although Graves was primarily interested in the Muse as the source of poetry, he was undoubtedly aware that the ancient Greeks always referred to the Muse in the plural (Muses), which implies that there was a Muse for all of the preliterate arts: painting, sculpture, dance, and so on.

Thus, when I extended Graves' observation and Jaynes' observation, and let them intersect, it became clear to me that the Muse/Mother Goddess was the source of *all* preliterate art, i.e., their art was essentially a spiritual act, a vision art that came from the Mother Goddess' voices and visions, and that preliterate peoples imitated them as a

muthos way of aligning themselves with the intent of the Mother Goddess, as a way of saying *we understand*.

"We hear your song, O most dark and beautiful, and we are returning it in the only way we know: the way you have shown us."

It also became quite clear to me (after I had extended Jaynes' cautious findings about preliterate peoples hearing directive/poetic voices) that in today's world we would clearly see preliterate humans as being highly psychic, and not like us at all.

Then, when I further extended Jaynes' findings to intersect with Gimbutas' findings, it became obvious to me that the highly psychic nature of preliterate humans was also the reason why hunter-gatherer tribes in the Mother Goddess period were governed cooperatively by both the men and women.

Cooperative governing doesn't mean that the men of that time were enlightened. They were just as savage and domineering as they have always been. The archeological findings of continuous, fierce, inter-tribal fights in this period attest to that. After all, it is the nature of men since Cain to kill, to control, to dominate, and that all other things being equal, it should have been enough for the men to simply honor the Mother Goddess as the greatest of the Gods and continue to completely control the tribe.

Nevertheless I believe the men chose to share control because they came to the inevitable conclusion that the women were simply better at interpreting the critical voices and visions of the Gods, and in particular, the all-important Mother Goddess, and that any error in receiving and interpreting those directive voices might be the difference between living and dying. When you look at things in that

light, it is clear why the men chose to relinquish control and govern cooperatively—they wanted to live, not die.

Let me return now to River Mother's final, horrendous vision. Although it is a limited vision, a close examination will reveal the forces behind preliterate, Proto-Egypt evolving into literate, Dynastic Egypt. Here is the first part:

“...then I was high above the river delta watching the grain fields grow from seed to harvest in an instant while the river kept overflowing its banks and then receding just as quickly—and this kept happening over and over while the sun and moon kept rising and setting in the flick of an eyelid—as if time were somehow racing ahead of itself—and then I was above the villages watching a band of older hunters savagely murdering women over and over while the young cheetah hunters attacked them in bloody waves—neither of them winning and neither of them losing...”

What her vision revealed was the immense growth of herding and farming, but also of something she had always feared—that the suppressed anger of the older hunters against women would one day break its bounds, and turn into a blind, savage murdering of women. While the vision also showed that *River Mother, Runs Like Cheetah*, and the young cheetah hunters would attempt to stop the older hunters, it also implied that the murdering would go on and on.

On the surface, the conflict would seem to be between the older hunters—who held that the Way of the Mother Goddess was destroying the Way of the Hunter—and *River Mother* and her allies—those who believed in Balance and the combined Ways of *Ra* and the Mother Goddesses. Today we might call it a struggle between ideologies.

Yet, as in many of our modern wars, it was really a cover story for what was really going on. After all, the wise, old hunter *Bitter Knife* had made it painfully clear to the older hunters that the Way of the Hunter could easily co-exist with the Way of the Mother Goddesses by pointing out that the greatest hunter of all, *Runs Like Cheetah*, lived by the Way of the Mother Goddesses.

What really brought about this furious outbreak was the result of the immense agricultural and herding activities that had developed in the later stages of the preliterate, Nile delta culture. The agricultural and herding activities—which had seemed such a blessing at first—were, in fact, slowly eroding one of the things that had maintained the male/female Balance of these hunter/gatherer tribes: the fierce *pride* of the men in being hunters.

This erosion was partly due to the fact that the need for hunting had simply decreased. The herds now supplied the meat. It was also due to the fact that the men were needed as workers and managers, not hunters. Together, the need for hunting slowly disappeared, and with it the fierce pride that went with being a hunter.

I believe the men's pride in being hunters, an activity in which they were clearly superior to the women, was important in helping the men keep their anger in check: their hunter's pride counterbalanced, if you will, the women's superior shamanic skills.

How long these murderous conflicts lasted is difficult to say, but I have no problem in saying that once it started, it never really stopped. Wiser heads must have eventually smothered its ferocity, however, because the continued, savage murdering of women would have resulted in the complete destruction of the early farming and herding that had so dramatically changed the lives of the delta tribes.

These savage conflicts, however, were but ground fires leading to a much larger conflagration that would eventually cause the waning of the Mother Goddess cultures, the rise of the male Gods, and the emergence of male-dominated, war-like cultures. We can see this in the rise of Dynastic Egypt c.3200 B.C., but it happened everywhere.

We know this took place around the world from the work of Marija Gimbutas and Riane Eisler. Their findings showed that around 4000 B.C.—as organized, large-scale agriculture began to emerge—the Mother Goddess cultures began to wane and were replaced by male-dominated, war-like cultures in which the male Gods were dominant. While we know this occurred with the rise of large-scale agriculture, a causal relationship is not easy to see, at least through the eyes of science.

I have come to believe that this change in culture was directly due to hunting being marginalized and with it the men's pride in being hunters. Pride and honor are concepts science doesn't handle very well and are often ignored, but they were everything to preliterate cultures.

At a certain stage of organized agriculture, the men could never return to being hunters—those days were long gone—but they could become warriors. That's what you get when you combine diminished hunting skills with an internal murderous rage: the beginnings of a warrior mentality. With that change, came the eventual evolution of a warrior culture—a world in which women had no place, a world where the Goddesses were replaced by the Gods, a world where domination and war reigned supreme.

Most of our Egyptologists have chosen to ignore the preliterate, Proto-Egyptian world of *River Mother*—seeing it as not worth study—despite the fact that we know that the beliefs of all literate cultures have long preliterate roots. Egypt is no exception. *River Mother's* tale should help

reverse that situation. What you should begin to sense is what I have come to believe: that it was a coherent world, driven by a highly psychic consciousness—a world whose *muthos* concerns were primarily spiritual and artistic and thus very different from the power-driven, *logos* consciousness that began to emerge in literate Dynastic Egypt c. 3200 B.C.

The highly psychic spiritual beliefs of this preliterate Proto-Egyptian, Mother Goddess culture didn't fade into the background as they did in most western cultures, but became an integral part of the *spirituality* of Dynastic Egypt, which operated with what was essentially a *dual* consciousness: both a preliterate *muthos* consciousness and a literate *logos* consciousness. It is a heady combination and not necessarily a very stable one.

The Dynastic Egyptians would have called this an example of Balance—which was a critical aspect of their spirituality. We can see that Balance again in the unique equality and pairings of the male/female deities. While I expect many will dismiss my dual consciousness contention, I am supported by the fact that it was also shared by Julian Jaynes. It is the only way to adequately explain many of the actions and beliefs and practices of Dynastic Egypt, for the simple reason that a close examination will show they are obviously the products not just of a literate, *logos* consciousness, but of a *muthos*, preliterate consciousness as well.

It is hard to say how widespread this split consciousness was. I am quite confident it was present to a significant degree in the priestly class, and was most likely a condition necessary for those who wished to enter the priestly class. I also believe it was honored—if not possessed—by the entire ruling classes.

I would say the same thing was true for important support groups such as artists: they possessed a *logos* consciousness,

but they also honored, or possessed, a *muthos* consciousness. As far as the general population, there is no way of knowing.

If this is difficult to understand, think of those Egyptians as something like the psychics in our own western cultures, except there were many more of them, not the few we encounter in our own culture—and they weren't "outsiders" as they are in our world—but highly valued "insiders."

By understanding this, and the many other connections between preliterate and literate Egypt, we can begin to correct the many errors in our current understanding of the Sphinx and Dynastic Egypt. Most of those errors are due to the fact that many Egyptologists hold that literate Dynastic Egypt operated solely under a *logos* consciousness—just as the literate Hebrews and Greeks did.

This *logos* consciousness, by the way, is the same modern consciousness we possess, but I believe it never wholly possessed the Egyptians. Let me put it this way—while you can adequately explain the literate Hebrews and Greeks by positing they operated solely under a *logos* consciousness—you can't explain the spiritual beliefs and practices of literate Dynastic Egypt in the same way, and get answers that make sense.

While *River Mother's* story can be read simply as an adventure tale, I assure you that I haven't created a fantasy version of 6000 B.C. Proto-Egypt. Those who are familiar with both preliterate Proto-Egypt (6000-3200 B.C.) and Dynastic Egypt (3200 B.C. and onwards) will quickly recognize that my Proto-Egypt is historically accurate and incorporates all we know today about the physical, social, spiritual, and artistic characteristics of Nubia and the Nile delta c. 6000 B.C.

The knowledgeable reader will also recognize that *River Mother's* Proto-Egyptian world also contains the first tendrils of what will eventually blossom into the majestic physical, social, spiritual, and artistic characteristics of literate Dynastic Egypt c. 3200 B.C., which was still three thousand years away.

The same knowledgeable reader should also be able to detect the connections I have suggested between *River Mother* and *Isis*, *Ghost Hunter* and *Horus*, and *Runs Like Cheetah* and *Osiris*. I am not suggesting that my fictional characters gave birth to these deities. What I am suggesting is that someone *like them* eventually became the psychic archetypes those deities represent.

I believe that the Gods and Goddesses of ancient, literate cultures had real physical counterparts who actually existed in the dim, shadowy reaches of prehistory. Over thousands of years, the collective memories of those real preliterate heroes (and villains) eventually became distinct psychic archetypes, just as the memory of the First Mother eventually became the Mother Goddess archetype. As Jung has shown us, these psychic archetypes representing Gods and Goddesses can suddenly possess consciousness, and thereby become the vehicle for the voices and visions experienced by preliterate peoples.

My suggestion that the Gods and Goddesses emerged from real memories of real people who actually existed in the dim reaches of prehistory is not an invention of mine. It is, in fact, buttressed by modern studies indicating that "fantasy" was a stranger to the preliterate, storytelling imagination, and that consciously-created, "fantasy" stories first came into being with literacy and *logos* consciousness.

The preliterate mind always created stories about real people and real events. However, it should go without saying that those real people possessed very *special* physical,

spiritual/psychic, and mental abilities that reflected, or represented, some characteristic important to the culture. This is why the stories of these heroes and villains were told over and over until, after thousands of years, they finally became the psychic archetypes that preliterate humans experienced as Gods and Goddesses.

The linkage between the beliefs of preliterate Proto-Egypt and literate Dynastic Egypt is something sorely missing from most archeological thought. As a result, what we have today is a body of thought that tends to ignore those preliterate roots, choosing to see literate Dynastic Egypt as creating itself out of nothing, like *Topsy*. Hopefully, *River Mother's* tale will help reverse that conception, but the grunt work of providing solid, detailed evidence that those linkages exist required a more methodical approach than what was possible in a novel like this, so I have supplied that in a separate website: *The Sphinx—When It Was Constructed & Why?*

<http://scyllasoulspk1.blogspot.mx/2012/09/test-part-one-sphinx-when-was-it.html>

In that website, I have gathered together extensive artistic, geological, weathering, historical, archeological, and cultural evidence of many of those linkages, all of which point very strongly toward the fact that the face of the Sphinx is not that of Pharaoh *Khafre* c. 2500 B.C.—but of a Nubian female leader c. 6000 B.C., whose visionary guidance of the inhabitants of the Nile delta led them to carve a simple *bas relief* of her face upon a rocky outcropping on the Giza plateau—an outcropping that was gradually transformed over the next 3500 years into what we now know as the Great Sphinx of Giza.

While RIVER MOTHER can be read separately from my website on the SPHINX, and vice versa, those who are interested in pursuing my contention that Preliterate Proto-Egypt was the source of the spiritual practices and beliefs of

Dynastic Egypt should visit the website and evaluate its arguments.

I wrote RIVER MOTHER not so much to present *facts*, but to allow the reader to *feel* the reality of the coherent spiritual/artistic culture that drove preliterate Proto-Egypt. The reader can then begin to understand my contention that the beliefs of Proto-Egypt were just as consistent in their own way as our own modern scientific beliefs.

In order to truly understand Proto-Egypt, however, you can't assume it was driven by the same type of consciousness as ours. The people of Proto-Egypt had a much different *muthos* consciousness. For those not familiar with the Greek term "*muthos*," it is used to describe the way preliterate people knew the world: through stories and art, because stories and art were seen as an *imitation* of life, or more correctly, an imitation of the visions and voices of the Gods. Those imitations were a way of saying back to the Gods and Goddesses: "*We hear your song, O most dark and beautiful, and we are returning it in the only way we know: the way you have shown us.*"

To *imitate* was to *know* for *muthos*-consciousness peoples. To *feel the truth* of something was sufficient for preliterate peoples—they didn't feel the need to logically prove it, as we do. This way of knowing is directly opposed to that of *logos* consciousness. The Greek term "*logos*" originally meant "word" or "plea" or "opinion" but has since come to mean many related things. For our purposes, we should think of it as meaning understanding the world by explaining it through the application of reason, or logic.

Thus, *logos* consciousness is used to describe the way literate peoples know the world, and it is inextricably tied to the written word. Our modern consciousness is a *logos* consciousness. It seeks to understand the world *by logically explaining it*.

My portrayal of the *muthos* consciousness that drove *River Mother's* world should give you a good feel for how radically different it was from our own *logos* consciousness—and more importantly, how an understanding of that earlier consciousness allows us to see both preliterate Proto-Egypt and literate Dynastic Egypt in their true colors.

One of the implied themes in RIVER MOTHER is that Dynastic Egypt's spirituality, and its obsession with the immortality of the Pharaoh's soul, grew out of African—and specifically Nubian—preliterate spiritual concepts. Our failure to acknowledge this has left us with an incomplete, and often erroneous, understanding of the origin of the unique spiritual forces that eventually came to drive Dynastic Egypt.

Archaeologists have tended to avoid explicating this connection, yet it is clear from a study of African religions and spirituality that African beliefs in the soul and immortality have remained essentially unchanged since those Neolithic times, despite some inroads made by Christianity and Islam over the past few centuries. I should add that those inroads almost always incorporated the much older African spiritual beliefs, so they were never really lost—they just changed colors.

Thus, I believe it is possible to deduce that the preliterate Nubian culture must have had a similar spirituality, whereas from all we know, the preliterate Semitic cultures migrating southwards into the Nile delta had much different spiritual concerns. Immortality was of little interest to those Semitic cultures.

This insight into the origin of Dynastic Egyptian spirituality is implied by what takes place when *River Mother* enters the Nile delta around 6000 B.C. Those familiar with the spirituality of Dynastic Egypt will also recognize the first tendrils of that unique spirituality—with its emphasis on Balance in every aspect of life—as seen in *River Mother's*

emphasis on the ways of *feeling* (*muthos* consciousness) being a necessary complement to the more rational ways of *watching* (an early form of *logos* consciousness) that had been brought into the Nile delta by the Semitic tribes coming down from the Levant.

I believe this emphasis on Balance eventually gave birth to a Dynastic Egyptian spirituality that accommodated both *muthos* consciousness and *logos* consciousness, while the surrounding cultures evolved into cultures dominated by *logos* consciousness.

Still another emerging tendril of Dynastic Egyptian spirituality can be seen in *River Mother's* insistence on the necessity of Balance existing between the male and female—both in their everyday lives and in the Gods and Goddesses who guided their lives. One of the distinct characteristics of Dynastic Egypt's spirituality is its unique male/female Balance, which is present in none of the other surrounding cultures.

The Mother Goddess culture in this story is the same Mother Goddess culture that dominated the spiritual beliefs and practices of all preliterate hunter-gatherer cultures throughout the world during Neolithic times, but most especially in Africa. *River Mother* lived in a world permeated by the Mother Goddesses—as you might expect since we now know that Africa was the home of the First Mother who gave birth to us all.

Muthos consciousness and Mother Goddess spirituality are inexplicably intertwined. They are also the key to understanding all preliterate spirituality and art—and especially preliterate Egyptian art—because preliterate art was always created *as a spiritual expression, an imitation*, of the visions and voices experienced by preliterate peoples. In short, preliterate art was a *vision* art. The Sphinx is no exception to this.

Many archaeologists have been slow to acknowledge the existence of such Mother Goddess cultures, despite the revolutionary breakthrough provided by Marija Gimbutas' *The Language of the Goddess* and Riane Eisler's *The Chalice and the Blade*.

This has not always been the case, however. Here is what two significant thinkers have said about their breakthroughs:

The Princeton anthropologist, Ashley Montagu, called Eisler's *The Chalice and the Blade*, "...the most important book since the *Origin of the Species*."

Joseph Campbell and Ashley Montagu each compared the importance of Marija Gimbutas' work to the historical importance of the *Rosetta Stone* in deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphs. Campbell provided a foreword to a new edition of Gimbutas' *The Language of the Goddess* (1989) before he died, and often said how profoundly he regretted that her research on the Neolithic cultures of Europe had not been available when he was writing *The Masks of God*.

For those not familiar with the work of Gimbutas and Eisler, let me give a very simple synopsis, but from *my point of view*. Both books showed that, prior to writing and sophisticated farming cultures c. 4000 B.C., women and men ruled hunter-gatherer tribes cooperatively. From my point of view, this happened because the men came to recognize women as being those who *knew*, so that *important* decisions always incorporated their input.

Does this mean that Mother Goddess cultures were Amazon cultures? Quite the contrary. The men played important roles, primarily as hunters. Many were shamans, but for the most part probably lacked the powerful psychic capabilities of the women. There were male Gods, of course, many of them. They simply played a less important role than the Mother Goddesses.

Common sense tells us there must have always been tension between males and females in these Mother Goddess cultures. There shouldn't be any doubt that the tension sometimes resulted in bloody attacks on the women. This ongoing tension is one of the reasons why I believe the all-important Goddess *Ma'at* had very deep preliterate roots.

Initially, *Ma'at* represented only the principles of Balance and Truth. The principle of Balance, when applied to the sexes, was absolutely critical in maintaining the well-being of the tribe in light of the constant tension between the men and women. I believe the men's anger was kept in check by their awareness that their lives might very well depend on the superior psychic abilities of the women. Under this light, it is not difficult to see why Balance became such an important principle.

While the story *River Mother* tells of her life and journey is a personal one, we can also see her as representing a long line of Nubian tribes who, along with their spiritual leaders (shamans), began migrating north into a *completely uninhabited* Nile delta around 6500 B.C.—while at the same time the Semitic hunter-gatherer tribes began migrating south into it. It was out of the meeting of these two cultures that Proto-Egypt came into being and with it, the first traces of Egyptian spirituality.

I believe that many of the erroneous conclusions about Egyptian spirituality, the Sphinx, as well as the nature of Dynastic Egypt itself result from a misunderstanding of the nature of preliterate Proto-Egypt.

Our failure to correctly comprehend preliterate cultures, and Proto-Egypt in particular, is primarily due to the fact that we have been examining them as if they had the same type of *logos* consciousness as we do. But they didn't—they had a *muthos* consciousness.

Thanks to the pioneering work of Julian Jaynes, however, we now know that preliterate peoples had a much different *muthos* consciousness and therefore didn't "think" as we do. Let me give you an example. If we were able to go back in time and tell the Proto-Egyptians that we created Mount Rushmore as a demonstration of ego and power, it would make no sense to them. Their art was a spiritual act, meant to imitate the voices and visions sent by the Gods, of saying back to the Gods, "We understand." That is how different their minds were.

As I was creating my website on the preliterate origin of the Sphinx, I felt the best way to make this clear would be to create a story rooted in that *earlier way of looking* at the world—so that the reader could see, perhaps even *feel* the world as preliterate humans saw and felt it. This became the genesis of RIVER MOTHER: *The Face of the Sphinx*.

Let me go a bit further into what I mean when I say that the *muthos* consciousness of Proto-Egyptians made them view the world in a completely different way. For one thing, preliterate peoples always relied on psychic directives in making *important* decisions—as opposed to the way modern, literate humans would do it: by mentally examining their options, and then deciding on a course of action.

Many of these directives arrived of their own accord, but others arrived as the result of shamanic practices which I believe were far more developed than those employed by even our most highly developed western psychics—Madame Blavatsky and Edgar Cayce being two good examples of such psychics.

The reason for the marked difference in capabilities is twofold: First, preliterate peoples were naturally psychic. They had a much different consciousness than we do. This is something many of our archaeologists have failed to come to terms with because they have continued to ignore the

findings of Julian Jaynes, preferring to believe that preliterate, shamanic practices were nothing more than hallucinatory nonsense.

If you have any doubt about this difference in consciousness and its implications, I suggest you read Julian Jaynes' groundbreaking book, *The Origin of Consciousness*, as to the rapid, world-wide evolutionary change in consciousness that occurred around the time of the invention of writing (3000-1200 B.C.).

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julian_Jaynes

A free PDF of Jaynes' *The Origin of Consciousness* is available at:

http://s-f-walker.org.uk/pubsebooks/pdfs/Julian_Jaynes_The_Origin_of_Consciousness.pdf

According to Jaynes, preliterate consciousness was incapable of seeing time as a solid continuum of mentally-accessible events in the past, present and future, as our modern, literate consciousness does. Although preliterate peoples were aware of past events, their sense of the future was extremely vague as compared to ours. Essentially, the *present* occupied their entire mind space because, according to Jaynes, their minds didn't have the *capability* of mentally creating scenarios of potential future options from which they could choose.

Passing on information on how to build a raft or an animal trap is not what I am talking about here. These they would do in somewhat the same way we would, but by a much more direct *show and tell* process. But matters involving life and death—such as deciding when to hunt a specific large animal or fight a neighboring tribe or which measures to take to survive an unexpected drought or disease—required directives from the Gods.

They knew no other way, because they lived in a world which was not only permeated by the Gods, but a world in which everything was caused by the Gods—not in a rational world operating on logical physical principles, which is how we view the world around us. Secondly, as I mentioned earlier, they had no interior mental space—as we do—in which they could imagine or project possible courses of action. That mind space, it seems, didn't evolve until around the time we discovered writing.

What they had was a consciousness that lived in the present, and was constantly being visited by voices and visions from the Gods. Jaynes, being a good scientist, claims that these directive voices originated in a now defunct language region of the right side of the brain, but that only begs the question as to why these directives were so valued that they formed the foundation of all preliterate spirituality around the world.

That is the elephant in the room, and Jaynes, being a good scientist, ignores it by *never attempting* to explain the uncanny intelligence of those voices. Giving a physical source (the right brain) for them hardly answers the question as to why these voices proved to be so accurate that they continued to be valued as a source of guidance not only within the 3000 year reign of literate Dynastic Egypt but also the highly logical, literate Greek and Roman cultures. I don't want to leave the impression that these directives were foolproof. It was never a sure thing, as many a beheaded shaman would surely testify—if he still could.

To fully understand preliterate cultures, you also have to understand that all of their spiritual practices were aimed at *aligning* their lives with the *intent* of the Gods. It was also what preliterate *art* was all about, because preliterate art was an act of spiritual alignment through imitation, not a display of ego. Once this is understood, everything falls into place—from the purpose of the *Stonehenge* structures to the cave

drawings at *Altamira*. Again, my website on the Sphinx goes into great detail on this aspect of preliterate art, and it is must reading for those who really want to understand it. The novel will simply give you a taste, but a very good one I believe.

Finally, if the only reference points you have to the psychic world are the images produced by Hollywood, you have to forget them and acquire more valid ones. A good starting point are the first six books of Carlos Castaneda's recounting of his time with Don Juan Mateus, a Yaqui shaman he reports having encountered during an anthropological study on the use of hallucinogenic plants in Sonora Mexico.

The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge
(1968) ISBN 0-520-21757-8.

A Separate Reality: Further Conversations with Don Juan
(1971) ISBN 0-671-73249-8.

Journey to Ixtlan (1972) ISBN 0-671-73246-3.

Tales of Power (1974): ISBN 0-671-73252-8.

The Second Ring of Power (1977) ISBN 0-671-73247-1.

The Eagle's Gift (1981): ISBN 0-671-73251-X.

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carlos_Castaneda)

It doesn't matter that many, including myself, believe Castaneda's books are fiction, particularly in regard to the actual physical existence of the Yaqui shaman *Don Juan Mateus*. Yet it is a very unusual fiction, because what is immediately evident to anyone knowledgeable about the psychic world is that his descriptions of these practices have the absolute ring of truth about them—and that they are therefore based either on what he personally experienced and/or on information he received from one or several highly developed psychic practitioners. Castaneda's great artistic gift to us—as modern, logical, scientific-minded humans—is that he was able to make that mysterious world extremely tangible. You can almost smell it.

A second source on psychic practices is Rudolph Steiner. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rudolf_Steiner) Steiner was a German philosopher with a wide range of interests. One of his many books, *An Outline of Esoteric Science*, which was published in English in 1922, gives an extremely detailed picture of the exact nature and breadth of psychic practices as we know them today. A free PDF of *An Outline of Esoteric Science* is available at:

<https://steiner.presswarehouse.com/research/archive.aspx>

The heaviness of Steiner's translated German, however, and its somewhat dated terminology make reading *Esoteric Science* a bit difficult—especially when compared to the magical ease of reading Castaneda. Yet *An Outline of Esoteric Science* is encyclopedic in its breadth and extremely rational in its approach, and is necessary reading if you want to truly understand the psychic world.

Both Steiner and Castaneda give us a glimpse into the kind of highly psychic spiritual world that preliterate peoples inhabited. It is my contention, however, that it is just a glimpse, and that the actual preliterate practices were much more powerful and extreme. I have tried to suggest this throughout the book in the most tangible way possible.

One of them is my suggestion that a psychic counterpart existed in preliterate cultures for our sense of smell. Although it is an unquestioned axiom of all psychic thought that the spirit body is identical in every part to the physical body, the sense of smell is always missing from modern psychic descriptions, for the simple reason that our ability to smell is almost non-existent compared to the capabilities of preliterate humans.

Today, it is simply dismissed as an unimportant sensory event, compared to sight and sound and touch and taste. We know, however, from early studies of the Australian aborigines that their sense of smell was almost as keen as that

of an animal, capable of smelling water from a distance. Smell was perhaps the most critical sense for preliterate people, perhaps surpassing even hearing. Don't forget that the most dangerous time for them was at night, when eyesight was almost useless and hearing predators was only possible if they moved. But predators—if close—could always be smelled,

The psychic events I describe in the book are all possible and are present in all modern mystical practices—they are not a figment of my imagination. More importantly, it was those spiritual, psychic practices that really drove preliterate cultures, not the physical factors our scientific culture keeps dimly falling back on. It is time for Egyptologists to open themselves to the fact that the preliterate, Proto-Egyptian psychic beliefs and practices eventually formed the foundation for all later Dynastic Egyptian spiritual beliefs (and allied psychic practices) regarding the soul and immortality.

Those Egyptian spiritual beliefs eventually became the seed that gave birth to all our literate western religions—Judaism, Christianity, Islam—which, in turn, gave birth to the rational, scientific thought that eventually challenged those religions. It is one long chain of our ongoing attempt to understand the unknowable and it all started in a period we continue to study in the wrong way. One last thing: despite what science tells us, none of these earlier manifestations are alien to us—they are, in a manner of speaking, sleeping in our DNA, waiting to be reawakened.

**Justin Spring
Mexico, 2014**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Justin Spring is a prize-winning poet, video artist, and writer of fiction and non-fiction. He is one of the few poets who works not only in the written mode of composition but also in a contemporary version of preliterate oral poetry called SOULSPEAK—of which he and fellow poet Scylla Liscombe are the originators. He is also the sole originator of an allied video form called SOULSPEAK DREAMSTORIES. His work in the oral and audio/visual area is pioneering.

Mr. Spring is the founder of *SOULSPEAK*, an organization dedicated to bringing poetry back into the everyday lives of everyday people. He was educated at Columbia College, has three children, and lives in Mexico and the United States.

Mr. Spring's written poems have been published in *American Poetry Review*, as well as numerous anthologies such as *Florida in Poetry*. He is the recipient of many prizes and honors and is the author of seven collections of poems, *Polaroid Poems*, *Other Dancers*, *Nursery Raps*, *Talkies*, *Poems for Family and Friends*, *Poems of Sarasota and Florida*, *Collected Poems 1985-2014*

Mr. Spring's seven SOULSPEAK oral poetry CDs, published by SOULSPEAK Studio, are: *Gathering*, *Smoke*, *Nursery Raps*, *Speakings*, *In Your Mind*, *Witnesses Log*, *I'm Talking to You Oprah*.

Mr. Spring is also the author of four prose works:

SOULSPEAK: *The Outward Journey of the Soul*: a ground breaking CD/book combination intended for anyone interested in attaining the deep spiritual expression possible through SOULSPEAK. It also contains a unique

look at poetry going back to the earliest preliterate cultures.

Alice Hickey: *Between Worlds*: is a fast-paced, lightly fictionalized, and sometimes troubling memoir of a seven year period in which the author and psychic Alice Hickey try to unwind a skein of bewildering psychic events that threatened to unseat the author. That effort sends them ricocheting back and forth between Sarasota, Tavernier Key, Panama, Santa Monica, Sedona, and the San Blas Islands and then, finally, back in time to the dawn of the human race. This is a totally new look at the roots of human consciousness, the psychic roots of poetry, the early Mother Goddess period, and our constantly evolving consciousness.

Mirrors: a short memoir of Mr. Spring's mysterious encounter with the *pidgin* poems of the Australian aborigine Eldred Van-Ooy, an encounter he describes as having left him in a shadowy garden, wondering, looking up at the leaves

River Mother: *The Face of the Sphinx*: is historical fiction set in the Mother Goddess period of Neolithic, Nubia in which *River Mother* tells of her life—from her birth to her early training as a Nubian shaman to the prophetic vision that drove her to travel to the Nile delta—where her spiritual leadership and prophecies not only established the unique male/female balance central to all Egyptian spirituality but also saved the Nile delta tribes from the tsunami caused by the eruption of Mt. Aetna in 6000 B.C. Her prophetic leadership eventually led the people of the delta to honor her as a living Goddess by carving *her face* onto a rocky outcropping that was gradually transformed over the next 3500 years into what we now know as the Great Sphinx of Giza.

Mr. Spring wrote this story to recreate the unique *artistic, spiritual, and highly psychic nature* of this much misunderstood Proto-Egyptian culture which he contends had a cohesive spiritual and intellectual center whose interests, although totally different from our modern interests, were powerful enough to give birth to the complex spiritual/psychic concepts and practices that eventually came to maturity thousands of years later in literate, Dynastic Egypt. There is a companion web site to the book, *When Was the Sphinx Really Built and Why* at:

<http://scyllasoulpeak1.blogspot.mx/2012/09/test-part-one-sphinx-when-was-it.html>

Mr. Spring's insightful and original site, *Investigation of Alternative World Views*, can be seen at: <http://scyllasoulpeak1.blogspot.mx/2012/09/t-aguide-to-investigation-of.html>

Among the recent poetry prizes and honors Mr. Spring has received are:

For his written poetry:

The 1997 State of Florida Individual Artist Fellowship
Finalist 1994 Academy of American Poets *Walt Whitman National Prize Contest*
Finalist 1997 Academy of American Poets *Walt Whitman National Prize Contest*

For his SOULSPEAK oral poetry:

The 1993 Homer Award for Spoken Poetry/Tampa Bay Poetry Council
The 1995 POETICA Hall of Fame Award

For his DREAMSTORY poetry videos:

The 2005 John Ringling Individual Artist Fellowship
The 2006 State of Florida Individual Artist Fellowship
The 2006 State of Florida Individual Artist Enhancement
award

For his SOULSPEAK HEALING PROGRAMS:

The 2003 Images and Voices of Hope Award
The 2003 Point of Life Award for Excellence

For his prose:

The 2009-10 Ringling Towers Literary Award for ALICE
HICKEY.

Other:

The Ringling 2009 “*Ageless Creativity*” award for his
lifelong contributions to poetry.

WEB LINKS

All of Justin Spring's sites can be accessed through this Google search argument: **Justin Spring SOULSPEAK poet**

Free downloadable books of all of Mr. Spring's poetry and prose are available at:

<http://sptpress.blogspot.com/2011/03/poetry-prose-of-justin-spring.html>

Free downloadable MP3 tracks from all of Mr. Spring's SOULSPEAK Oral Poetry CDs are available at:

<http://justin-soulspeak.blogspot.com/>
<http://soulspeakstudio.blogspot.com/>

You can hear and see the best Music Videos and *Dreamstories* on Mr. Spring's Radio/Video SOULSPEAK:

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL747A6E2C44E5BE11>

Free downloadable DREAMSTORIES are available on Mr. Spring's VIDEO SOULSPEAK:

<http://www.youtube.com/user/soulspeakspring>

Free downloadable DVDs of Mr. Spring's SOULSPEAK HEALING PROGRAMS are available at:

<http://therapeuticsoulspeak.blogspot.com/>

For Mr. Spring's latest artistic efforts:

<http://justin-soulspeak.blogspot.com/>

For a Directory to SOULSPEAK Programs and Videos:

<http://justininmexico.blogspot.com/>

SOULSPEAK Web Page

<http://www.soulspeak.org/>