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THE SKY PEOPLE



# THE SKY PEOPLE

**Terry Goodkind**

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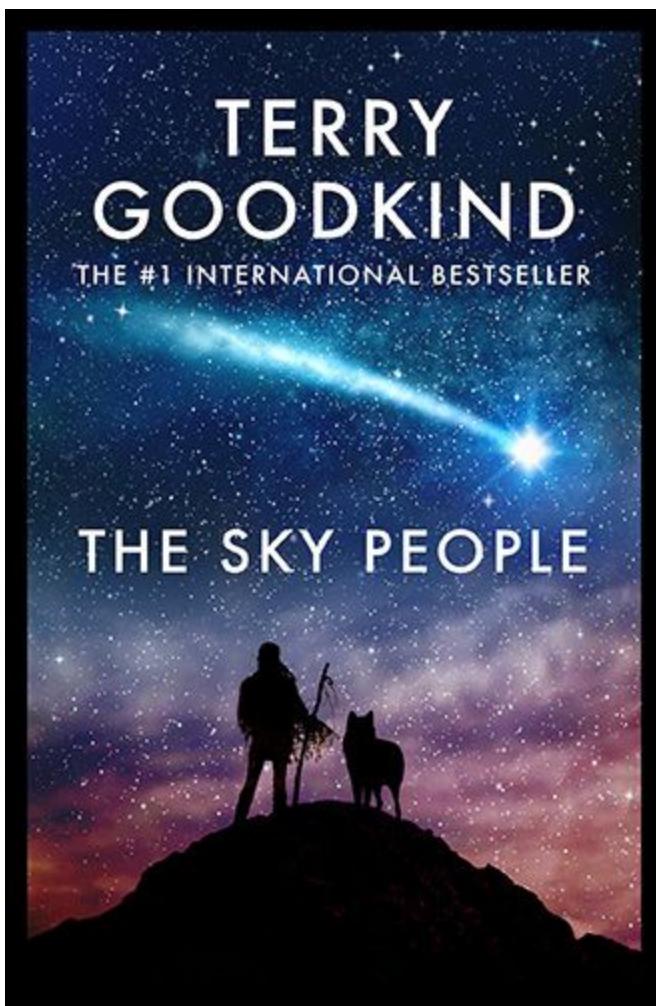
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## About THE SKY PEOPLE



Raging River, priestess of the Sun People, has just done the unthinkable.

The Sun People are bound by an ancient law, left by the long-vanished Sky People: they must never kill. To other tribes, who have no such law, the Sun People are easy prey who will not defend themselves. Their game is poached, their stores raided, their women abducted, their men killed for sport.

But when Raging River and her sister are attacked by a Wolf People raiding party, River fights back and kills one of the warriors. Worse, she has killed the son of their chief.

Now, with the Wolf People vowing revenge and her people facing annihilation, River must do the impossible. She must prove herself as priestess. She must find the mythical Sky people.

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## Chapter 1

A big hand thrust up out of the tall grass behind her and snatched Raging River's little sister by her arm. Morning Flower screamed. She was yanked from her feet so hard she lost a buckskin shoe. Before River could try to grab hold of her, Flower had been lifted, kicking and shrieking, and pulled back out of reach by a man with a frightening mask. At the same time, more than a dozen painted men from a war party rose up from the tall grass all around.

They were surrounded by Wolf People warriors.

As she was turning back, River shrugged the strap of the game bag off her shoulder, letting it drop to the ground. Hot anger took the place of icy fear. Fast as she could, River pulled her bow off her other shoulder and nocked an arrow, even though she knew that what she was about to do was wrong.

These men were all big and powerful. All were painted in the same way, with stripes around the bulging muscles of their arms. Their jaws were painted black. They all glared out from angled white lines. Blood-red war paint covered their cheeks. Grass tied to their arms and at the backs of their heads had helped conceal them in the tall grass for an ambush.

Only the man who had grabbed Flower wore a mask. That terrifying carved mask had a hooked, black beak. It marked him as Great Hawk, the son of their chief. Being the son of a chief, he had the privilege of being the one to take a captive.

As one of the men rushed forward and lunged for her, his arm extended, River fired the arrow.

Because of his experience in battle, he twisted at the last instant so that, while the arrow pierced his chest, it hit above his left lung, missing a vital spot. He recoiled in surprise at being shot with an arrow as she whipped another from the buckskin quiver over the back of her right shoulder. She nocked the second arrow.

“No!” Flower screamed as she was being carried away in the arms of Great Hawk. “River, no!”

As terrified as she was of being taken, Flower was more afraid of River violating one of the most sacred laws of their people, a law that had been drilled into them since birth. That law was central to everything in her people’s lives.

At that moment, those laws meant nothing to River. She wanted only to protect her little sister.

“Run!” Flower screamed.

River understood. Her sister, as young as she was, didn’t want River to let the men capture her too. She knew River had a chance to help her only if she got away and went for help.

River’s aim tracked the man who had her sister.

String to her cheek, heart filled with rage, River paused her breath. Her mind went still and silent. Nothing around her mattered anymore. Like the breath of a whisper, she released the taut bowstring. The arrow flew past Flower’s head as the powerful Great Hawk held her tight against his chest.

The razor-sharp arrowhead pierced the side of his throat, ripping flesh and the big artery as it flew clear through. He staggered back three steps as gouts of blood sprayed from the wound. River’s aim had been true.

As he collapsed, he lost his grip on Flower. The man beside him hooked her with an arm as she tried to escape. After a brief look at the son of their chief and seeing that nothing could be done for him, the man dragged Flower away.

Before River could get another arrow, a big warrior, the grass tied to his arms and head waving like a monster’s hair, rushed her. River ducked aside just in time as he leaped to catch her in his arms. He missed, landing face first with a grunt at her feet. Rather than go for another arrow, River pulled

a knife from the sheath at her waist, intending in her rage to stab him before he could get up, but Flower screamed again.

“Run, River! Tell Father! Run!”

If River didn’t escape, her family would never know what had happened to them. They would never know that it had been a war party of Wolf People.

Hating the thought of leaving her defenseless little sister, River knew in that instant that Flower was right.

Dodging first to one side, then to the other to avoid arms reaching for her, River bolted away. As her long legs carried her past the chief’s son lying dead in the grass, she reached down and stripped the mask from his face.

Most of the dozen men followed. She knew what they wanted. The Wolf People stole women from other tribes as slave wives. Morning Flower, named because she had been born at dawn, was too young and innocent to truly grasp the intent of these men.

River knew in her heart that if she wanted to have any hope of rescuing Flower, fighting these strong warriors was not the way. Alone, she had no chance against all of them. As difficult as it was to leave Flower, the way to help her was to escape and get back to her own people and try to get help. She had to tell her father. She had to tell their shaman, White Crow. She had to let them know that the Wolf People had taken Morning Flower. She had to convince them, this time, to act.

Raging River, the mask tucked in her belt and her bow back over her shoulder, ran with all her strength. Her powerful legs gradually took her out of reach of the men. Even though she was out of reach, they were close behind and they weren’t going to stop. Wolf People warriors were said to be able to run all day without slowing. River didn’t know if that was true, but the men, having lost precious little ground, were still coming.

She could hear them close behind her, whooping battle cries. She knew that if they caught her there would be no hope for her or Flower. No one would

ever know what had happened to them. No one would ever try to rescue them.

River had never heard of anyone escaping the Wolf People. She had heard that men who were captured were tortured for days and then staked to the ground still alive to let wild animals feed on them. The women were usually not killed, but River had heard tales that they all wished to trade places with the men staked to the ground. Whether man or woman, to be captured by the Wolf People was a terrifying fate.

River could hear the men's feet thumping the soft ground as they ran. It was a frightening sound, knowing they were that close. Her breaths came fast and ragged. They all still had enough breath for bloodcurdling howls. Even though her legs were beginning to ache, she knew that there could be no stopping if she had any hope to escape. Better to have her heart give out at a dead run than to fall into their hands.

Running with at least a dozen men in close pursuit, she finally left the flat grassland and entered the hill country. As she ran up slopes, her lungs burning, the hills became more tightly dotted with scrub trees, and then with bigger trees. As she ran, getting ever closer to her own people, to her home, she began to worry that this war party would follow her right into her village. If they did, her people might overpower them, but not before they slaughtered many.

She dismissed that much of her worry. She had heard stories of the Wolf People attacking other tribes, but when they did they always used many warriors, enough warriors to overpower any resistance. Though these warriors looked fierce, and they could certainly kill many people, they were smart enough to know they could not take the entire village. They would be overwhelmed by masses of people and whipped with willow switches until driven away, suffering the indignity and pain of countless slashes.

As the trees grew taller and in greater numbers, she suddenly came upon a deep ravine on a forested hillside that she and Flower had crossed on their way to hunt for game. She was relieved to spot the log across the deep cut

through the hillside. The dirt sides of the small gorge were steep. If she fell over the edge, she knew it would be a painful but not a fatal fall to the bottom. It would probably be a tumbling slide down to the fast-moving stream. The climb up the other side, up the crumbling dirt while snatching at roots, would not be quick.

If she took that safer but slower route of a controlled slide down the sharp bank and wading across the stream, the men would catch her as she struggled to climb up the opposite bank. It was a fool's choice to cross that way.

River instead danced out across the log, knowing it was her only hope. She knew, too, that if she fell, the men would have her. Not being very thick, the log flexed up and down with her weight, making balance difficult, but she raced onward and in a flash she was safely across.

She stopped and turned, then, catching her breath, as she saw the men rushing up to the bank on the far side. Even if they didn't use the log, they could still slide down the steep bank, cross the stream, and then climb up on her side. Crossing that way, they would lose some ground to her, but soon enough they would again be in hot pursuit.

They were predators running down their prey. They were not going to stop.

## Chapter 2

River knew she had only one chance.

Glaring at the men gathered on the opposite bank, she swiftly nocked an arrow.

“You killed Great Hawk, the son of our chief!” Unlike the others, the man who spoke for them had hawk feathers sticking up from the sides of his headband, marking him as second-in-command to Great Hawk and now their leader. “For this, you will die!”

“I killed a coward who steals children,” she called back across.

He shook a war hammer. “You will die for what you have done!”

“Come on, then,” she called to him. “Do you have courage enough to come across? You say I must die. So come across and get me.”

She drew the string back to her cheek, causing them to hesitate at the log crossing.

“The Sun People are sworn never to kill! It is your law! You will run instead like the cowards your people are.”

“So, you are brave Wolf People?” she taunted. “Come across, then. You have seen with Great Hawk that my aim is true, and I am not afraid to kill. Though I am one of the Sun People, I will not run. Go ahead, come across, and I will pick you off one at a time. Come across and your bodies will rot in the stream below without a proper warrior burial.”

The leader pointed his war hammer down into the ravine. “We can get across without having to walk the log as you did.”

“Fine with me,” she yelled back at them. “I can shoot you as you wade the stream or claw your way up the bank. It will be like shooting fish in a pool.

Come on, then, if you are brave enough.”

Angry at being held at bay by a mere woman, they withdrew a short distance to cluster in a tight group and argue about what to do.

“You will run out of arrows,” the leader called across once the bunch of them broke up from their strategizing. “Once you run out, the rest of us will be able to cross and then we will have you!”

Still holding the string to her cheek, aiming at the man who was talking, she shrugged. “Maybe. We will see. So then, while I still have arrows, which of you wants to be the one to come forward first and die?”

The leader shook a fist. “We can split up, some crossing to the north, some to the south.”

“Then go.” Again, she shrugged. “By the time you get back together I will be gone. If you are to catch me, this crossing is your only way. You must hope, though, that I don’t have an arrow for each of you.”

They weren’t sure she was right, but they were clearly worried that she might be. She knew that time was against her. If some stayed as a threat while some went another way, they could catch her. She needed to keep them from realizing that.

“Choose then. Who among you will be the first to try to cross? Who among you chooses to be the one to die? Is it you, Ass Feathers? You have a brave tongue. You speak for the others, so you should show them you are the bravest among them by being first to come across. But are you brave enough to be the first to die at the hands of a woman? Come across, then, brave Wolf warrior wearing ass feathers.” She showed them a taunting grin. “Come across.”

The leader with the tall feathers in his headband shook his war hammer in anger. “You wish to act like a man? We will have you, and when we do you will be treated as we would treat any man we capture. You will wish we had

caught you in the beginning along with the other girl. Now, since you pretend to be a brave warrior, that fate is too good for you.”

Raging River felt tears welling up in her eyes at the thought of those men having her little sister. Flower was not yet of an age to know what men would do to her. Before long she would come to know.

“Real Wolf People warriors do not waste time with empty words,” she yelled, her anger rising, “Act like real men and decide which of you will be first to die. Come across so I, a mere Sun People woman, may take your lives as easily as I took the life of your chief’s son.”

The leader threw his war hammer at her in a fit of fury. River ducked to the side as it whistled past her ear. As she swiftly came back up, she loosed her arrow. It caught his arm above his elbow. It was a bird arrow with a sharpened tip rather than an arrowhead like the one that had killed the chief’s son, so it pierced all the way through beside the bone. It stopped with half sticking out on the far side. He cursed her at the top of his lungs.

River knew that despite her bluster she was in a weak position. While she was holding them off for the moment, she couldn’t turn and run for home. If she did, they would be able to cross on the log and come after her. More determined than ever, they would run her down. She needed to keep them too busy to realize it.

River would eventually lose the standoff. She needed to think of something fast or she was going to die. She knew that she had only three more arrows left in her quiver.

One of the men broke off the fletched end of the arrow sticking out the front of his leader’s arm and then gave the part jutting out the back a quick yank to pull what was left the rest of the way through.

The man with the feathered headband acted as if it didn’t hurt. He gave her a mocking look, letting her know that he was a Wolf warrior and her arrow was nothing to a man like him. She wanted to wipe the smirk from his painted face.

“You should know,” she yelled across the ravine, “that my arrows have poison on the tips. You will soon lose your ability to walk, then to stand, and finally you will drop to the ground and die painfully. But know that, although agonizing, your end will at least come quickly.”

It was a lie, but River needed to break the deadlock. She had to give them cause to worry.

“You lie!” the wounded leader called out. “Your arrows are for hunting game. You are not a warrior. That was a bird arrow. Your arrows have no poison.”

“My people are hungry. I do not want to risk losing valuable meat. My turkey arrows are poisoned so that even if it is not a quick kill, when the wounded turkey takes flight I can follow until it falls dead.” She knew they would be sweating from running so hard. “Feel your flesh. By now the poison has reached your heart. You will already have a fever. You will fall dead before you can get back to your people.”

One of the men inspected the wound in his leader’s arm. Another sniffed the bloody arrowhead and carefully touched the tip with the end of his tongue. Another man leaned in and sucked blood from the arrow wound, as if sucking the poison from a snakebite. He spat out what he tasted, did it several more times, and then waved his arms as he gestured hastily to the wounded man.

They argued among themselves in voices too low for her to hear. But she could hear the anger in their words. She could also hear the worry.

Finally, they all took off at a trot, back the way they had come.

River stood her ground, bowstring drawn, until they vanished into the distance. Even though she had won a small battle, they still had her little sister.

River wiped tears from her cheeks as she turned and started running for home.

## Chapter 3

River trotted into her village, exhausted and out of breath. She could hardly put one foot in front of another. Her legs burned. Her lungs burned. Her heart burned for Flower.

As she passed through long shadows in the narrow passages among the mud brick buildings and entered the larger square in the center of her village, chickens scattered out of her way, flapping their wings and squawking in alarm. The village dogs ran up to greet her wagging their skinny tails as they surrounded her, hoping she had some bit of food for them. She patted a few on the shoulder as she pushed through them. Big Dog charged his way through to her side.

River had raised Big Dog since she had found him as a small pup abandoned in the grasslands. He considered River to be his one and only master. He ate with her and slept with her.

All of the other village dogs were midsize with short tan fur. Besides being a lot bigger, Big Dog looked entirely different from all the others. By his longer, dark fur and thick ruff as well as the long shape of his muzzle, it was clear he was part wolf. She drew Big Dog's ear through her hand, something he always enjoyed. He heaved a sigh of relief to have her home. Since he loved to chase birds from cover before she could get close enough to take them, he was not a helpful hunting companion. Now, she wished she had let him come on the hunt anyway.

Lookouts would have already announced her return. They would also have announced that Morning Flower was not with her.

Her father, his leathery face grim, waited on the far side of the gathering square, flanked by his advisors and other important people. Everyone stood in silence, backs straight, apprehensive about what she would report.

“Chief Standing Bear,” she said to her father with a bow of her head out of respect. “I have terrible news.”

“Where is your sister?” he asked in concern as he glanced behind her before she could tell him.

“Morning Flower and I were attacked by Wolf People warriors.”

The gathered crowd gasped.

His frown deepened the heavy creases of his leathery face. “Are you sure it was Wolf People?”

“They were painted in the traditional designs of a Wolf People war party. We know all too well those painted men.” She lifted the war hammer one of the men had thrown at her, showing the people. They all recognized the pattern of the woven leather on the handle as a Wolf People design. “They captured Morning Flower and took her away with them.”

River’s mother, Lone Willow, rushed forward. “They took my little Morning Flower?”

River, too choked with tears to speak, could only nod.

“How is it, then, that you were not taken?” Walking Stag, one of the more aggressive young men, asked.

He sounded suspicious rather than angry that the Wolf People had her little sister. Like many strong and brave young men, Walking Stag thought that one day he should be chief of the Sun People.

Rather than answer him, River turned back to her father. “I fought them off and ran back here to get help for Morning Flower. We must gather a rescue party at once. Maybe we can catch—”

“You know our laws,” Standing Bear said, cutting her off. He gave his head one shake of regret. “We cannot fight the Wolf People or any other. It is forbidden.”

River didn't back down. "I know why those men took little Flower. We all know why. We must fight to get her back."

"Those who gave us our laws forbid killing."

River could feel her face going red with rage. "They kill. They come to kill Sun People, and we run and hide or at most beat them off with willow switches. They take our young women and we do nothing. They kill our young men and we do nothing."

Standing Bear shook his head more firmly. "We all know the sorrow of losing those we love, but what you wish to do is against our most sacred law. You know that."

"I know that I wish I would have killed more of them!"

She realized it was out of her mouth before she had intended to reveal it.

Eyes widened among the gathered people. Some gasped. Silence gradually descended over the group.

"What do you mean, you wish you would have killed more of them?" Walking Stag asked in a measured voice as he stepped forward.

Standing Bear, the lines in face deepening with worry, leaned toward her. "What have you done, daughter?"

"I protected myself and tried to protect Flower. She is my little sister. I was supposed to protect her. I failed her because I let them surprise us. I should have been more alert. But that does not mean that they can take a child from us."

Her father lifted a hand out to the side to prevent Walking Stag from coming any closer. The arm was also a warning to keep quiet. It was not his place to question her. That was for the chief to do. Her father's dark eyes turned back to her.

“This is great trouble, Raging River. You have violated—”

“What about Flower!” River’s hands fisted at her sides. “Don’t you care about Flower? Don’t you care about your own daughter? Aren’t you willing to do something to get her back? Will you stand by and allow our people to be in danger?”

“The danger is past.” His voice took on the firm tone of finality. “The Wolf People will now be satisfied that they have a captive. They will leave us be for now.”

River gritted her teeth. “That is the talk of a coward.”

The crowd gasped. Her mother stepped forward and slapped her. “You will not speak with such irreverence to our chief and your father.”

Standing Bear lifted a hand, not unlike the way he had lifted a hand to Walking Stag, as if to calm his wife and say that he would handle it.

“River,” he said in a more fatherly tone, “you can have a child and replace Flower for our people. That is how you may right this loss. It is long past time that you should be a wife and a mother. Instead, you violate our laws.” He turned and indicated the tall young man to the side. “I think it is time you were the wife of Walking Stag.”

When he turned back, the look she gave him told him that he had just made a mistake.

“It is forbidden for anyone,” she said in a low, measured tone, “even our chief, to tell a priestess that she must take a husband, and more so that anyone, even a chief, should name that man.”

Raging River had been named priestess of the Sun People before she had even been born. That mantle had passed on to her only when the last priestess had died and would only pass on to the next when she died. For now, she was priestess of the Sun People.

The mood suddenly turned. Standing Bear, though he was chief and angry that she had violated their law, had just tried to violate one of their most deeply held customs.

Realizing he had overstepped his authority, he bowed his head to her.

“I apologize, Priestess.”

Raging River gave him a look that only a priestess could give and then stormed off, giving Walking Stag the same look on the way by. The gazes of both men went to the ground as she went past.

## Chapter 4

River flopped down on the floor in the small single room of her home, her emotions flying in every direction all at once. She was panic-stricken for Morning Flower. Tears sprang forth at the thought of her sister's lonely terror, at the thought of being helpless to do anything to save her.

River was furious that Flower had been taken. She was ashamed that she had not protected her little sister. She was embarrassed that her father would not act like a man and do something to rescue his daughter. She was shamed that the Sun People would not protect one so innocent. She was angry at their cowardly law.

Raging River sat, feeling helpless, feeling humiliated at having killed a man, but at the same time wishing she had killed them all. She was their priestess and yet she had violated their most important law. She, above all others, was expected to respect their laws. Yet she would do it again if given the chance to save Flower. For that matter, she would do it again to save any of her people, even though they wouldn't do the same for her.

Unlike many of the better dwellings in the village, hers was not made of baked mud brick, but like a few others was instead made of small logs. They were spaced apart and stood upright in holes, and then green branches were woven between them. The woven branches were chinked with a mixture of straw, sand, and mud. Once the walls were woven and thoroughly chinked, then plastered over, they were strong and weathertight. Her roof was made from the abundant grasses that grew to the east of their village. The small logs came from the abundant trees growing in the forested mountains to the other side.

The logs were no bigger around than her wrist. She had cut and gathered them herself, then dragged them home. She had collected the green branches, woven them, and chinked them by herself. She had gathered the grasses for the roof by herself, but some of the young men of the village had helped with making the roof over her small home.

One wall was shared with the house of her parents. Against that wall she had built her small fireplace with rocks she had carried back from creeks and streams. Morning Flower lived with her parents beyond that shared wall. At least, that was where Morning Flower used to live. Now she was a captive of the Wolf People.

Nose first, Big Dog pushed his way in past the hide hanging over her doorway. His tongue lolled out to one side, he loped over to where she sat cross-legged before the fireplace. He lay down beside her and rested his head on her leg as if to console her. Big Dog recognized her moods, and he knew she was heartsick, even if he didn't know why. He simply wanted to be by her. She ran her hand over his head in appreciation of his unqualified loyalty.

The fire had for the most part gone cold, but there were a few glowing coals she had banked off to the side before leaving that morning on a hunt with her little sister. She pushed the hot coals together, then broke twigs, piling them on the glowing coals to bring the fire back to life.

As she watched the flames grow and the smoke curl up, she fed in some sticks of wood. She stared into the dance of small flames, and considered something she had never considered before.

No one ever acted. They always accepted what happened, even this, as the way things were. Their laws forbade them from doing otherwise. For the Sun People, breaking those laws meant their spirit would be forever cast into the dark wilderness after death, never to settle.

River knew that she had to act. What happened after death was a mystery to her, but what was happening in life she knew all too well and it was not acceptable. No one would dare to violate their laws. She already had. She knew something had to be done, and she was the only one among the Sun People who had the ability to act. She was their priestess. As their priestess, she was the only one who could do anything.

She was also the only one among them who had ever killed anyone.

As their priestess, she was the only person allowed to do what she now knew she must.

River scooped up some of the darkest ashes from the side of the fireplace and put them in a grinding bowl. She lifted the lid off a bowl of lard beside her cooking pot and took a generous swipe of it with a finger. After wiping it off her finger onto the inside of the grinding bowl, she let Big Dog lick her finger clean. She drew her knife and used it to puncture the heel of her hand in order to add blood to the mixture.

As Big Dog watched, she used a stone to grind the mixture together to make black paint. After she had worked it into a smooth consistency, she set the stone aside. Looking down into the black paint, she wondered momentarily if she was doing the right thing. She knew, though, that she had no choice.

Gathering her courage, she started using the black mixture she had made to paint a mask across her face. She made the mask tall enough to go from above her eyebrows to down across the top half of her nose. She checked her reflection in a dark bowl of water to make sure it looked right. It looked frightening.

Once she had completed the mask across her eyes, she made up another paint out of white ash. She used the white to cover the rest of her face so that none would mistake its meaning or intent.

As the village priestess, she intended to make the journey to Spirit Mountain to call upon their ancestor spirits, and more.

She went to the door of her small home and pulled the hide hanging over her door aside. Across the way, a gaggle of young boys were playing a game with small stones. The boys looked up when she stepped into the doorway. They often followed her around, because it was well known among them that trouble tended to follow River and they liked to witness what trouble she would bring.

When they saw her painted face, they froze. None had ever seen such a thing before. Most of the village hadn't. If they had, it would only have

been before she was born.

“I want you boys to do something for me,” she called to them.

They all rushed to their feet, eager for the chance to be a rare part of whatever trouble she would bring about this time. By her painted face, they recognized that, this time, it would be big trouble.

“What is it?” one of the boys asked.

“Call Chief Standing Bear and his advisors to the square. Tell the shaman that the priestess wants him there, too.”

The boys stared in astonishment. “White Crow?” one of them asked. “Are you sure you want us to summon White Crow as well?”

“That’s right. Hurry now. Tell them the priestess has called for them to come immediately. I will be there in a twinkling.”

The boys ran off, excited to be part of the new trouble she was stirring up.

## Chapter 5

The thick cloud cover made a dark roof over the world. At the horizon the dark ground rose up to meet a burning band of sky. The dark ground and dark sky would soon meet and shroud the world in darkness until the sun returned at dawn. To her people, the sun was the sacred giver of life.

As River walked resolutely into the square, people moved back out of her way. Standing Bear was speaking to his advisors. When he heard the people falling silent, he turned to see what was happening.

White Crow sat on a low wall to the side. He had his ceremonial blanket around his shoulders and a wife to each side. His long, braided hair had been white as snow as far back as River could remember. He wore his necklaces of brightly colored amulets, each having meaning or purpose. Tied at the ends of his braids were crow feathers that he regularly dipped in white ash.

When White Crow saw her painted face, he stood and came forward, not looking at all happy. In fact, he looked decidedly unhappy, as did her father, Standing Bear, and his advisors. Both the chief and the shaman waited for her to explain herself.

“I must go to Spirit Mountain,” she announced without delay.

Her father looked to be taken by surprise. “Why?”

“Because as priestess I am the guardian of our ancestors. White Crow, would you please tell us all the story of the creation of our people?”

He frowned as he glanced to people to the sides, unsure of her intent.

“Everyone knows of our beginning. Why are you painted to meet with the dead? What is it you intend to do?”

“I did not ask if everyone knows our beginning. I asked you to tell us all the story of the creation of our people. It is important that everyone knows the story so that they may understand what it is I intend to do and why I must do it.”

He sighed as he hiked the blanket up higher around his shoulders. “In the beginning,” he said, looking out over the silent gathering of the Sun People, “there was only the sky and the ground. The sun, up in the sky, was lonely in the empty world, so he sent a raven down to the ground. The raven carried seeds from Father Sun and planted them in the barren ground.

“Once the seeds were in the ground, Father Sun kissed the ground to warm those seeds. Life-giving rain was sent. From those seeds, watered by the rain and warmed by the sun, our people grew. We came into the world and made the sun father happy because he was no longer alone. We worshiped our father’s return each day at dawn. This pleased the sun, and he named us the Sun People.

“Then, one day when the sun saw his children fighting and killing one another, he sent the Sky People down to give us our laws.”

As silence rang out over the gathering, River nodded.

“And what else have the Sky People brought us?” she asked.

White Crow’s brow drew tight. “What do you mean? The Sky People brought laws down to us from the sun up in the sky.”

River regarded the old shaman with a bitter expression. “The sun may have given us life, but the Sky People brought us death and suffering. One brought life, the other brought death.”

“But that is not true,” White Crow whispered in alarm. “The laws given to us by the Sky People are sacred. We live by those laws.”

“No,” she said, looking out at the people watching her. “We do not live by those laws. We die by those laws.”

Worry swept through the crowd.

“What are you talking about?” Standing Bear demanded.

“How many of our men have been captured and staked to the ground to die? How many of our young women have been taken from us? On the last new moon, a raiding party of Wolf People warriors came into our village and stole the grinding stone we use to grind our grains so that our people may be fed.”

“We can make another grinding stone,” he said. “In the meantime, we make do and grind our grain as best we can.”

“As best we can,” she said as she nodded, “as our people go hungry. As children cry in hunger as they go to bed. As parents go without to try to feed their young ones.”

“It will take time,” Standing Bear said with strained patience, “but we will eventually make another grinding stone.”

“And when we do, the Wolf People, or another people, will come and take it from us while we stand by, helpless.” River showed no emotion as she went on. “How many of our people were killed by the Wolf People warriors as we tried to keep them from stealing the most precious and important thing the Sun People possess?”

No one said a word, so River answered her own question. “Twenty-three young men who tried to drive them off with willow switches were killed. Six young women were taken along with our grinding stone. You can eventually replace our people’s grinding stone. How will you replace the lives sacrificed to our law?”

“But our law—”

“Our law killed those twenty-three young men,” she said, cutting the chief off.

The crowd was silent at her irreverence.

“The Wolf People warriors can only kill our people because of our law. While they are the worst, it is not only the Wolf People. The Yellow Fish came and stole from our stores of food. The Snow Tribe raids our village as they wish, and last spring stole most of our goats. The Boar Tribe has killed our hunting parties and stolen their game. The Lake Tribe has raided our village, stealing from us, the last time crippling a man and hurting others who tried to stop them.”

White Crow smirked. “You have forgotten to rage against sickness and fever that has also befallen our people.”

“For those things we have a medicine man and we have you. I presume you do not also wish to shrink from fighting those as well.”

The smirk turned to a scowl.

“Through it all,” she said, “as others steal from us, kill Sun People, and take our women, the most we can do is run and hide and hope they don’t find us. We never fight back to protect ourselves.”

“You can’t go against our sacred laws. Our Father Sun sent the Sky People to give us those laws,” Standing Bear insisted, his anger finally unleashed. “You cannot go against the laws the Sky People have laid down for us! It is forbidden!”

She didn’t react to his anger. “While you all do nothing, let me tell you what I am going to do,” she said. “I am going to Spirit Mountain, the land where our ancestors are laid to rest and where their spirits dwell... where one of the Sky People is said to have been laid to rest among us after giving us our laws.”

“What good will that do?” the shaman demanded.

“I intend to call the Sky People.”

Everyone stared in speechless shock.

Dumbfounded, Standing Bear spoke softly. “No one can call the Sky People,” he said, his voice filled with a lifetime of passionate faith. “The Sky People were sent by our Father Sun. They cannot be called forth by us.”

“We will see,” River said.

The old shaman, seeing the stunned looks of the people, finally waved a hand. “For what purpose?”

“I must ask for their help,” she told him.

Standing Bear cocked his head. “Why do you need their help?”

“Because the Wolf People will be coming here to kill us all.”

## Chapter 6

Standing Bear frowned. “Why would you say that? Yes, the Wolf People kill some of our people, and take some of our women, and they sometimes raid our village and steal from us, and while that is terrible, it is the price we pay to keep the peace with them.

“Because of that peace the Sun People continue to exist. By enduring some loss, we remain at peace with them and we survive. Because of that peace they do not kill us all. Our laws have made that peace possible.”

Lightning flickered in the distance where the dark sky had finally met the horizon. Torches held by some of the chief’s council lit the assembled people with flickering light.

River’s gaze briefly swept the tightly packed crowd, riveted in silence.

“There will be no more of what you call peace with the Wolf People,” River said.

Chief Standing Bear and Shaman White Crow shared a worried look. It was Chief Standing Bear who finally spoke.

“Why do you say such a thing?”

Raging River reached into the small woven satchel hanging at her belt. She pulled out the mask with the hooked black beak and tossed it to their feet.

“The man I killed was Great Hawk, the son of their chief. After I killed him, I took his sacred mask. I am proud to say that he did not die an easy death. For that, the Wolf People will come here to kill us all.”

“Their chief’s son!” the shaman cried. “Great Hawk! You killed Great Hawk? What have you done to us! By killing Great Hawk, you have broken the peace and murdered us all!”

“I did not go to their village and kill Great Hawk. They hid in ambush and stole Morning Flower. They would have taken me as well had I not fought them off. I’m sure the Sun People’s priestess would have been a great prize for them. I did not choose to be their prize. I have done nothing but fight for the life of my sister and myself. The same as all of you should do for all of our people.”

“This cannot stand.” White Crow shook his head. “No. This cannot stand.”

“It is already done,” she said.

“It is not done,” the shaman said as he lifted his chin in defiance. “You will go to them and offer yourself in sacrifice to atone for killing the son of their chief. This is your fault. You must make it right by giving yourself to them for having killed Great Hawk.”

“Are you really foolish enough to think that would stop them?” she asked.

White Crow was red-faced and sputtering in anger. “This cannot—”

Ignoring the old shaman, she pointed at Walking Stag. “Gather other strong men. You must all prepare to fight to save our people.”

“What!” He glanced briefly at Standing Bear before looking back at her. “You are not the chief of our people!”

“No, I am the priestess of our people. The ultimate duty of the priestess is the protection of her people. Until I can go to Spirit Mountain and call the Sky People for help, you and the strongest of the Sun People will stand and fight.”

“And if we refuse?” he asked.

River shrugged. “Then you will die. They will be coming. It is only a matter of when. Make your choice. If I could fight for the life of one I love, so too can you. If you love our people, you will fight to protect them. I go to Spirit Mountain to do what only what a priestess can do. I will call the Sky

People. While I am gone, you must do what you can do and prepare to protect our people.”

“How?” White Crow interrupted. “How can you call the Sky People?”

River hadn’t the slightest idea how. She only knew that she must.

Since she had no answer, she ignored White Crow’s question, which only angered him all the more. Standing Bear looked angry as well, but he had the good sense to remain silent. While the priestess was not chief, in certain matters her word was absolute. She only hoped that this was one of those matters.

When White Crow opened his mouth to speak, Raging River shot him a hot glare and held up a finger in warning. His mouth slowly closed and stayed closed.

“You all need to prepare,” River said as her gaze glided out over the gathered people, the people she loved and wanted to protect. Her voice lowered with quiet power. “The Wolf People will be coming. I have always known that one day they would.

“You can either fight them off, or you can let them kill you. If you do not intend to fight them off...” She pulled her finger across her throat. “...Then you might as well slit your throats now, for it will be an easier death than the Wolf People will grant you. First, though, you should slit the throats of your children to spare them what is to come.”

Some people in the crowd gasped; others began to weep. Yet others looked too horrified to weep.

“This is all your fault,” White Crow said as he shook a finger at her. “You are banished from among the Sun People! Banished! Banished now and forever!”

“You do not have the authority to banish a priestess,” she said in a calm, dismissive tone. As he shouted and waved his arms in anger, she turned

away from him as if he were no more than a cranky child throwing a tantrum.

“Walking Stag,” River announced, “you must now prepare to protect our people. As priestess, I give this responsibility to you. Gather young men who along with you will be Sun People warriors. Look to Standing Bear for counsel.”

He looked between her and his chief. “But—”

“If you want someday to become chief, then this is how you prove yourself. You protect your people to prove that you are worthy of ruling them.”

River didn’t wait for an answer. She turned and left.

## Chapter 7

“May I enter?” River called from outside the woven cloth covering the doorway. Symbols worked into the coarse material were meant to ward off evil spirits. Or frighten people away. River wasn’t entirely sure which.

“Yes, child, enter,” came the gentle, familiar voice.

It was darker than dark outside and smelled like rain was not far off. By the flickers of lightning drawing ever closer, the storm looked sure to make for a frightening night. She needed to be on her way to Spirit Mountain, storm or no storm. Every moment she delayed only made the situation more desperate, but first she needed to visit She Who Knows the Moon.

When River stepped quietly into the home, the old woman had lit a splinter in the low fire and was using it to light several candles on benches built into the bottom of the mud brick walls. She smiled warmly as she turned and held out a hand, indicating the woven rug on the dirt floor in front of the small hearth.

“Sit, child. I have been expecting you.”

River had only just decided to visit the woman before leaving. But having known She Who Knows the Moon as far back as she could remember, and having often sought out her advice, River wasn’t all that surprised at being expected.

“It is good to see you again, Wise One.”

She Who Knows the Moon smiled. She had an easy smile. The lines and creases of her weatherworn features seemed to have been shaped by that enduring smile. Only River called her Wise One. She was bent with great age, but she moved easily enough. As River sat on the carpet, the old woman came over and sat close, across from River. She wrapped her shoulders with a light blanket as she waited to hear what River would say.

“Wise One, I have come to ask your help.”

Still smiling, she poured something from a jug into a cup. She handed it to River.

“Yes, I know. As I told you, I have been expecting you.”

River leaned in, only a bit surprised. This kind of thing wasn’t unheard of with her old friend.

“You have powers to see into events?”

She Who Knows the Moon let out a soft laugh. “No, I heard you speaking to the people in the square.” She pointed with a crooked finger. “My door faces a passageway that leads directly to the square. With the way the walls funnel sound, I can often hear what is said there. It saves me the walk.”

“Oh.” River was a little disappointed that it wasn’t something more mysterious.

Because she knew so much, and more so because she was so reclusive, people were sometimes a little afraid of her. River, knowing the old woman as well as she did, assumed those fears were merely the ill-informed product of rumor and gossip. Even if some were cautious around her, She Who Knows the Moon was revered in their village, because she knew a great deal about a great many things. She was the one who remembered all the stories of their people, even the stories few had heard, and fewer still remembered. She was a store of knowledge for their people who passed down those stories that she kept alive.

“You have come to see me because you intend to travel to Spirit Mountain.”

“That’s right,” River said. “I’ve never been there before.” She didn’t want to admit that she was afraid.

“That is not quite true,” She Who Knows the Moon said.

“What do you mean it’s not quite true?”

“You were there once before.”

River leaned in. “What are you talking about? I would know if I had been there.”

The old woman nodded toward the cup in River’s hands. “Drink.”

River quickly downed the slightly sweet drink so as to get on with the reason she was there.

“I hate to disagree with one so wise, but I’m afraid you are mistaken. I have never been to Spirit Mountain.”

“No?” The woman smiled to herself. “How did you come to be the priestess? Tell me.”

River cleared her throat. “Well...” She frowned. “I guess I’m not sure, but I always believed I was named priestess when the last one died, when I was little, when I was too young to remember it.”

The old woman’s smile widened. “Your mother never told you the story of how you were named, then?”

“There’s a story? No, she never mentioned it.” She thought for a moment. “To tell you the truth, whenever I asked she always avoided the subject of how I came to be named priestess. I didn’t want to disrespect her by continuing to ask, so I stopped asking.”

The old woman nodded with a knowing smile.

“Your mother was very close to Bright Star,” She Who Knows the Moon said.

“Who is Bright Star?”

“Bright Star was the priestess before you.”

“Really? I never knew that. I’m sorry, but I just don’t remember her.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to. You were not yet born.”

River frowned, trying to understand the whole thing. “How could I be named before I was even born?”

She Who Knows the Moon let out a long sigh. “Well, before you were born, Bright Star was the priestess. She was quiet and spent much of her time alone.”

“Why?”

“Because people were uneasy around her, fearing her because of her position, and also because she was a person who knew what was right and spoke her mind. Much like you. While that fear was only the unfounded fears of people, it made Bright Star sad to have people avoid her. But she did have one friend who was like a sister to her, a woman she loved dearly.”

“Who was that?” River asked.

“Your mother.”

## Chapter 8

River blinked. “My mother? She never spoke of Bright Star. I’ve never even heard the name mentioned before you just spoke it now. I don’t understand. If they were such dear friends, why would my mother never mention it or speak of her?”

“Your mother had her reasons.”

“What reasons?”

The old woman smiled at River’s unquenchable curiosity. “Sometimes you are like a small child, River, always asking ‘why’.”

River leaned back away a little, trying to look less insistent. “Well, don’t you think that, considering that Bright Star was my mother’s dear friend, that she was also the last priestess, and that I am now the priestess, it is only right that I would want to know the answers?”

She Who Knows the Moon laughed softly, then, and put a gnarled hand over River’s knee. “Of course, child. Of course. The story is, after all, why you came, even if you don’t realize it.”

River felt a little more at ease. She put her hand over the old woman’s. Despite being so wrinkled, the hand was soft and warm.

“Please, will you tell me the story of what happened, then?”

The other sighed as she looked into River’s eyes. “That is why I have been waiting for you.”

“Really? Well, I’m listening.”

“The priestess Bright Star was like a sister to your mother. They found much joy in each other’s company. But then Bright Star was taken with a terrible illness. Despite everything that was done, it could not be cured. Day

by day she grew worse as the sickness ate away at her insides. She suffered many different and mysterious afflictions as the sickness progressed and stole away her health.

“Knowing that her end was near, she confided in your mother that she wished to be laid to rest on Spirit Mountain. The request to be laid to rest with ancestors is the right of those like her, or a chief, or a shaman.

“Because Bright Star feared that she would not be able to make it there by herself and wanted to go there while she was still alive, she appealed to your mother to make the journey with her and stay with her until the end so as to see to it that she was laid to rest properly.”

River swallowed back a lump in her throat. Her mother had never told her the tragic story. She was beginning to understand why Lone Willow would avoid speaking of her friend and such a painful memory.

“But your mother,” She Who Knows the Moon said, “was heavily pregnant with child. With you. Still, Lone Willow would not be stopped from honoring the request of her dear friend, even though Standing Bear forbade it.”

River knew her mother’s strength. “She would have gone anyway.”

“Yes,” the old woman said with a nod. “Standing Bear was in fear for his wife because she was so heavily pregnant, but your mother, like many women, would not be stopped from anything that needed to be done right up until the baby came. So it was that, together, Lone Willow and Bright Star set out on the journey to Spirit Mountain. Your father and some of the other men accompanied them as far as they were allowed. It was forbidden for them to cross the Bitterroot River.

“The crossing of the Bitterroot to get to Spirit Mountain was difficult on your mother and took nearly all of Bright Star’s remaining strength. Once they crossed, Bright Star was in such pain from the sickness that was killing her that she wept with every step until they were on the slopes of Spirit Mountain. She had brought with her a potion that the shaman, White Crow,

had given her. She had but to take that potion and her suffering would be over. But she wanted to live long enough to see her friend give birth.

“She did not have to wait long. As a great storm swept across the land, together they found shelter in the cave Bright Star chose as her resting place for all time. In the protection of that quiet cave, while the thunder and lightning shook the land all around and the rain poured from the dark sky, your mother gave birth to a girl child. She gave birth to you, there on Spirit Mountain. It brought great joy to Bright Star to see the new daughter of her friend.”

River sat in astonishment. “I was born on Spirit Mountain?”

She Who Knows the Moon nodded that it was so. “Because the storm was so violent, the Bitterroot River rose up with tall waves and pounding water. The storm had made the Bitterroot a dangerous torrent that carried uprooted trees and logs. There was no way your mother would risk crossing such treacherous currents in a canoe with her newborn child.

“Bright Star, now that she had been able to hold her friend’s newborn in her arms and look into her bright eyes, wished to at last take the potion and end her terrible pain. Lone Willow was in great sorrow at the thought of Bright Star dying but wanted her friend’s agony to be over. She asked the spirits to help Bright Star make an easy journey into death.

“But before she drank the potion, Bright Star had two requests of your mother. The first request of her dear friend was the honor of naming her newborn girl child. She knew that because of the storm it would be some time before the raging river quieted enough for your mother to be able to leave Spirit Mountain and cross back to her people. As in all things, Bright Star, being a priestess, saw the storm as having come for a purpose and having meaning, and so she named you Raging River.”

River wiped back her tears. “What was the second request?”

“Bright Star drank down the potion that would release her from the fangs of terrible pain, and then, before that potion let her slip into death, she kissed

your cheek and named you priestess to take her place.”

It felt to River like the sky had fallen in on her. The enormity of it all was crushing. It felt as if she didn’t know herself, as if she had never known herself.

River also sensed the room slowly spinning around her, and it wasn’t from the story. It occurred to her that she should have asked what was in the drink she had been given before so thoughtlessly downing it all.

“Can you tell me what it is a priestess is supposed to do?” Raging River asked. “I know my place of authority with our people—and I very rarely use that authority—but I don’t know what it is, actually, that a priestess is supposed to do. What is it I’m meant to do?”

She Who Knows the Moon considered for a time. “It is said that the duty of a priestess is to speak with our ancestors.”

“They’re dead. You mean I’m supposed to speak with their spirits?”

“Spirit Mountain has none but the dead. It is the duty of the priestess to go to Spirit Mountain, so that can only mean it must be her duty to speak with their spirits.”

“When is the priestess supposed to go there?”

“When she is needed.”

“How do I know when I’m needed?”

“Only the priestess can decide that.”

“How am I supposed to know what to do once I get there?”

“Only the priestess can know that.”

River sighed in frustration. “Well, I’ve already decided I must go there. It’s the only way I can think of to call the Sky People. Is that my purpose? To

call the Sky People?”

She Who Knows the Moon stared deeply into River’s eyes. “Only you can decide that, child.”

“Well, I guess I’ve already decided I must call the Sky People if I am to have a chance to save our people. But how can I call the Sky People? You are named She Who Knows the Moon, so you, of all people, should be able to tell me how I can do that.”

The old woman offered a sad smile. “I’m afraid that time steals away knowledge. If there was once a way, the knowledge was lost long ago, long before I was ever born.”

“Can you at least tell me if the Sky People are real?”

“Child, I cannot tell you if the Sky People are real or if they are only a story invented to make people follow a law created by mere men.”

“If it was a law created by men, they were very foolish men.”

“Is it so foolish to say we must not kill?”

“It is if it means we have to forfeit our precious lives.”

Raging River could hear the full force of the storm sweeping into their village. Thunder crashed down and shook the ground. She needed to hurry on her way.

But as she started to get up, River felt that her limbs were so weak that she couldn’t make them move. The woven rug under her seemed to be spinning, and then it seemed to come up to meet her.

River realized she was lying on the floor.

“What was in that drink you gave me?” she asked with slurred words.

“Something to make you sleep and not go out into the fangs of a storm. Storms have meaning, and you must not test this one. You will wake at dawn and then, when it is safe to go, you will be wide awake and able to leave.”

As her eyes were closing, River wondered if evil spirits had called the storm to prevent her from calling the Sky People. And then the sweet darkness caressed her away.

## Chapter 9

Standing outside the woven cloth over the doorway to the home of She Who Knows the Moon, River looked out at the first hint of pale violet at the horizon. She adjusted the war hammer she had stuck through her leather belt as she watched the early light of a new dawn gradually brighten. It wouldn't be long before she could greet the new sun.

She adjusted the pack the old woman had made up for her and filled with provisions she would need for her journey. She felt sad to be leaving her friend as well as leaving her village, but she was also filled with a sense of urgency. The Wolf People would be coming. If she delayed, they would kill every one of her people before she could even try to get the help of the Sky People and hope to return in time.

The other thing that was always in the back of River's mind was Morning Flower. She had to get her little sister back from her captors. She didn't know how she was to do that, she only knew that she had to find a way.

With no time to waste, River slipped the bow over her shoulder, checked that her quiver was full of arrows, and then started making her way through the narrow passageways of her village. Despite her fears and the reason for going, it felt good to at least be on her way. She had talked enough about what needed to be done. She had argued enough with her father and everyone else who thought she was wrong.

She was priestess. It was time to prove to herself that she was worthy of the title.

Instead of sitting around like everyone else, waiting for killers to come kill them, at least she was doing something. She didn't have any idea how she could call the Sky People, but if her people were to survive, she knew that somehow, she must.

She hadn't gone far through their village when Big Dog trotted up, tongue lolled off to one side. His tail started wagging and his head dipped with his

ears laid back with joy at the sight of her. When he reached her, he rubbed playfully against the side of her leg. She gave his shoulder a pat to let him know she was glad to see him as well.

“Go home,” she told him, pointing. He sat down and looked up at her. When she started out again, he got up and trotted along beside her. She pointed back. “Big Dog, go home. You can’t come where I’m going.”

Big Dog clearly didn’t care what she said. He was going, whether she permitted it or not. He was stubborn, and she knew that if she tried to make him stay home, he would wait awhile and then follow her at a distance. River sighed as she walked with Big Dog at her side. She thought that maybe, after a time, he would let her go and turn back for home. If he didn’t, she supposed it couldn’t hurt to have the company.

No one met her to wish her well on her journey. It felt like the whole village was against her. When she saw people in the passageways between homes, they looked away and turned their backs before disappearing. Everyone was angry with her. It was a lonely feeling.

She understood how Bright Star, the woman who had given Raging River her name and then named her the priestess, felt apart from her own people. River understood why she lived such a lonely life. Being the priestess was a great honor, but it also carried a price of loneliness. At least River’s mother had been her friend.

And at least River had Big Dog for a friend. It felt good to have such loyal companion with her. It was hard to remember back to when he was a pup so small that she could hold him in her hands. Now fully grown, Big Dog was fiercely protective of her, so besides being good company, he was the only one willing to fight to protect her. She decided that his insistence on coming along was probably wiser than her thinking he should stay behind.

As the bright rim of the sun broke above the horizon out beyond the grasslands, the buildings of the Sun People glowed a reddish violet color. It was a familiar, beautiful sight, but she didn’t take the time to admire it. Instead, after greeting the new dawn as she worked her way out of the

village, she was finally able to turn her back to her home place and the new sun and head out toward the mountains.

Those mountains, looking so distant out ahead of her, reached up into the sky to be brightly lit from halfway up by the first rays of the new dawn. At night, when the sun went behind those mountains, they became a dark, jagged mass.

At first, after leaving the village behind, she walked beside the meandering stream in the valley between the sparsely wooded hillsides. The stream was full from the rain and rushing swiftly. She loved the sound of the rushing water, but she knew it could hide the sounds of danger, so she continually scanned the hillsides for any sign of the Wolf People warriors.

River had to be careful in selecting spots when she needed to cross in order to avoid difficult terrain that would slow her down. The ice-cold water coming down from the mountains was up to her knees when she had to wade across gravelly spots. The current was strong, making it difficult to keep her balance. Big Dog simply jumped in and bounded across or swam to the opposite bank. He loved the cold water. When he shook it off on the opposite side, River tried to stay clear lest he soak her.

Broad sandy areas beside the stream in many places made for easy traveling. Big Dog made frequent side excursions to smell the bushes and rocks and mark them as his. He thought this adventure out into the countryside was great fun. River wished she could enjoy it as much as he did, but with the worries on her mind, she couldn't.

Farther upstream, the water had cut steep walls through the hills. Ordinarily there was room to walk between the stream and the walls, but with the height of the water from the storm, the water ran from wall to wall on either side, so she was forced to start her climb up the hillsides.

Finally reaching the top of a high hill, she was rewarded with a good view back out over the grasslands. Down below, far away, just before the sea of grasslands stretched to the horizon, she could see her village. People moved

through passageways, going about their business. She wondered if those people would still be alive when she returned.

When River turned around, a man was standing not far away, watching her.

## Chapter 10

When she first saw the man out of the corner of her eye, it nearly scared River out of her skin. Her first thought was that it had to be one of the Wolf People come to kill her. He looked to be a warrior. She feared they might have surrounded her.

River had an arrow nocked and aimed at him before he took the first step in her direction. Big Dog was watching him but wasn't growling. She had always been taught to trust her dog. She held her aim as she gathered her wits.

As he came closer, she saw at last that it was the tall, strong figure of Walking Stag, but he looked different. He had red cloth tied around each upper arm. He wore a sleeveless buckskin vest. His long hair was pulled back and wound into a braid with the same red cloth. He carried a spear, also with a piece of red cloth, tied around the shaft behind the balance point. Black lines had been painted up across his cheeks.

She had never seen him with the red cloth and black paint before. She thought it suited him well. It made him look formidable.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded as she lowered her bow and replaced the arrow in the quiver.

Big Dog sat protectively beside her. Even though he knew the man well and wasn't growling, she supposed he had never seen him looking the way he did now and that made him suspicious.

“I have come to watch over you until you reach sacred ground.”

She frowned at him. “Protect me from what?”

“You say the Wolf People are coming. I thought I would help protect you from them until you can go to call the Sky People.”

Raging River was at once angry and grateful. She was angry that he would follow her, but she was grateful that he had. She was even happier that he believed she would call the Sky People.

“And what if the Wolf People come to capture me? You fear breaking our law, so they will take you and torture you and stake you to the ground for animals to eat.”

He firmly set the butt end of his spear on the ground. He stared off to the dark mountains where she was headed.

“I thought about the things you said. You charged me with protecting our people. You are one of our people.”

“I charged you with gathering together other strong men and preparing them to defend the village.”

He studied her eyes before answering. “Why would you choose me? Is it because you favor me? Or is it because Chief Standing Bear said that you are to be my wife?”

Even though she was in a hurry, River wanted to disabuse him of any such idea.

“My father said what he did because you were the only young man in his line of sight at the moment, not because he meant anything by it.”

“Maybe he did mean it. He is your father and our chief. He would want you to have a strong husband.”

“Even if he did mean it, it is not for him to choose the husband of the village priestess.”

He sheepishly looked away. River hadn’t meant to shame him, but she didn’t have time for this. She started walking west.

Walking Stag, looking to put his feelings aside, jumped to catch up and walk beside her.

“Then why did you choose me?” he pressed.

“I chose you because you frequently stand close to Chief Standing Bear.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you seek to be a leader. Since you long to be a leader, I gave you the task a leader should have. That task is to prepare other men and protect our people. It is a task of responsibility, a task for a leader.”

“I see. Well... thank you.”

“I gave you that task to protect the village. I did not tell you to follow after me.”

He lifted his chin as he looked ahead. “You are the priestess and have an important job to do to protect our people. If you are killed, you can’t do that job and you won’t be able to save our people. I know what you said I must do, but I decided I should come and make sure you didn’t have any trouble, at least until you get to sacred land. Once I make sure you are safely to Bitterroot River, then I will go back to do as you asked of me.”

River nodded as she kept walking. “Have you collected men?”

“Yes. Many trust in me and want to follow what I say. But I am not sure what to tell them. We are not killers.”

“You are sons and brothers and fathers, are you not? And you love the people of our village, do you not?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Picture in your mind their terror as they are being killed by the Wolf People for no reason. Imagine the blood, the pain, of those you love. Does that not make you angry?”

Instead of answering, he asked a question. “Is that how you were able to kill Great Hawk?”

River thought how to answer. Finally, she tapped the center of her chest as she looked over at him.

“In here, my heart burned with fear for my little sister. In here, I also burned with hatred for men who would harm her. That is what you must do.” She reached over and tapped the center of his chest. “You must have righteous hate here, in your heart.”

He nodded but didn’t say anything for a time.

“I just don’t know if we can do that,” he finally said.

River shrugged. “Then everyone you love will be slaughtered or taken captive to be tortured and then killed. You will see it happening before your eyes before one of them rushes up to you, screaming a battle cry, and cuts your belly open to make you die slowly so that you will see it all happen to your people.”

Walking Stag let out a long breath. “You are making me angry to hear such things.”

“Good. You keep thinking about that as you go back. Work the injustice of it in your mind like you would finger a worry stone. You keep getting angrier until you no longer care about the law as much as you care about those you love. You tell the others you gather what I told you will happen and that you will not allow it, and that they must not allow it, or you all will be a willing party to the killing of our people. You make sure they are so angry they will want to kill men who would do such things.”

He nodded. “Will you be back by then?”

She looked over. “I hope so.”

He nodded again. “I hope so, too. Somehow, you give me fire in my heart.”

River smiled. "This is not pleasant business, Walking Stag, but when I saw all the blood shooting out of Great Hawk's neck as he was taking Flower away from us, it felt good. I wanted to kill them all and save Morning Flower. But to think back on it, it was not pleasant business, killing a man.

"Remember, these Wolf People who come will come for one purpose only. They will be coming to kill us all. You and your men keep that in your mind, and keep rage burning in your hearts."

"Raging River in our hearts?"

She smiled a little. "If it helps you, then yes, keep Priestess Raging River in your hearts as you defend our people. You all have the skills necessary, just as I did. We all hunt and take large animals. We all use arrows, spears, and knives. Our skill with them is what feeds our people. Use the skills you already have to protect them."

By the time they reached Bitterroot River, it was late in the day. Beyond a broad river valley ahead, she could see the dark shape of Spirit Mountain rising up before her. The sun was already behind the mountain, leaving the light to grow dim.

"It will be dark soon," Walking Stag said. "We should make camp here for the night."

"No," River told him. "I must get to Spirit Mountain and call the Sky People. There is no time to spare. I will cross the river now and keep going until it is too dark to travel any farther. That way I will be closer when there is light in the morning."

He sighed, not liking the idea, but he nodded his understanding of her purpose. He pointed with his spear toward the tall marsh grass.

"I see the crossing canoe."

After they untied the canoe that was always left there for just this purpose and righted it, they dragged it to a bank where she could get in. He helped

get Big Dog in it with her.

“Thank you, Walking Stag, for seeing me safely to the sacred land. Go back, now, and help get our people ready.”

“I will. Return safely to us, Raging River.”

She had to make Big Dog lie down lest he tip the canoe over as the strong young man, the first strong warrior of the Sun People, shoved the canoe out into the moving water. River started paddling for the opposite bank, worried about what she might find ahead.

## Chapter 11

By the time River made it across the marshland on the opposite side of the Bitterroot and then across the broad river valley to where the forest thickened into a confusing tangle of trees, limbs, and brush, it was too dark to find a way to go any farther. From what she could see of Spirit Mountain while there had still been light, it was going to be a difficult climb in places.

As much as she hated stopping, the moon, which would have helped light her way for a while longer, was completely hidden by heavy clouds. With the cloud cover, there were not even stars to help. It would simply be too dangerous to continue on in the dark. She couldn't help anyone if she stepped in a hole and broke her leg or slipped and fell from a ledge because she couldn't see the edge.

Resigned to making camp for the night, River cut some pine boughs for bedding and spread them out under the sheltering limbs of a big spruce tree. She laid her blanket over the pine boughs to have a bed up off the cold ground. It was a chilly night, but she didn't want to spend the time collecting wood and making a fire.

Once she lay down and called him, Big Dog came close and curled up beside her, as he had done since he was a frightened pup in need of comfort. With Big Dog beside her, she was warm enough to try to get some needed sleep. With his fur coat, Big Dog was enjoying the cooler nights.

As she lay close to her warm dog in the darkness, animals in the strange woods made frightening whoops, clicks, and howls. Whenever there was a worrisome call from the woods, Big Dog lifted his head to growl. But they were both tired and before long they were asleep. She trusted that if anything happened, he would be up in an instant to protect her.

Noisy crows up in nearby pines woke her at first light. River yawned and stretched. Big Dog was eager to get up. He always woke excited that it was a new day. It always took River a little longer.

She ate a quick breakfast of dried fish, which she shared with Big Dog, and some roots She Who Knows the Moon had packed for her. Big Dog stood beside her as she ate, his eyebrows bunched in concentration as he stared at the fish in her hands, waiting for her to share some with him. She had trained him never to take food from her unless offered. It wasn't a big meal, but it was enough. After eating, she quickly gathered up everything and set out.

Even though it was still cloudy, by the time she was ready to start out it was light enough for them to easily make their way through the woods. Before they got too far into heavy woods, River spent a bit of time studying the lay of the land, looking for terrain that would make for natural trails. Once she found deer trails through the brush in the direction she wanted to go, they led her to the easiest way to start up the mountain.

Following the animal trails and the natural lay of the land, she began to make out signs that people had come this same way before. It was reassuring to know that she was on the right trail as it wound its way through dense spruce and deeply shaded woods. Big Dog explored the fern beds as she kept to the trail, occasionally pouncing to flush out a small animal. He was a born hunter. As the trail began to climb, there were natural switchbacks that helped her and Big Dog start the ascent.

For the most part, Big Dog stayed close by, but now and then he was sidetracked smelling things only he could smell. River was in too urgent a hurry to wait for him. Sometimes he would track those smells into the underbrush and vanish. She kept on going at a quick pace. He always eventually emerged and caught up with her again.

After a time, as she was breathing hard with the effort, she came across the first of the caves she had been told about. It was more like a recess in the rock of the mountain created by a jut of rock overhead. From what She Who Knows the Moon had told her, important people in the past were laid to rest in such places.

Inside the wide maw, River encountered a terrible smell. She tried to ignore it and found a natural shelf of sorts along the back of the shallow opening. The remains of three bodies lay on the shelf. They were tightly wrapped with strips of cloth and leather. One was decorated with beads sewn along a broad leather strip laid down the length of the body.

There were no names on any of the remains. Since no one visited the burial ground, names would be pointless. From what the old woman had told her, the height up on the mountain held no significance or importance. The only thing that mattered was that the remains were laid to rest on the sacred ground of Spirit Mountain. For all River knew, these remains on the bottom might have been the most important ancestors laid to rest first in the more easily accessed spots.

Inspecting the remains, she was able to tell that they were of great age. She didn't recognize the designs of the beads. Fearing to be disrespectful, and fearing that their spirits might be watching her, she lifted the feet of one just a little to test the weight. They were feather-light, which meant it had been laid to rest long, long ago and the bodies were now mostly dust.

Even as ancient as these remains were, they still had a strong, unpleasant odor about them. All three had that same smell that caused River's nose to wrinkle. Big Dog didn't like the smell at all and stayed back outside the opening of the cave.

It wasn't the smell of death, but rather something that had probably been poured on the bodies to keep animals from disturbing them. It had obviously worked, since the cave was large, with a wide opening, and not at all deep, yet none of the wrapping appeared to be disturbed in any way. Big Dog, as curious as he was about dead things, didn't want anything to do with them.

River was happy to leave the cave and the repugnant smell and start back up the mountain. It wasn't long before she realized that the trail wound up the mountain the way it did in order to go past natural openings and caves. She could see a few openings to caves that looked inaccessible without

some difficult rock climbing. Since there were so many caves to explore on the trail, she decided to leave those alone for the time being.

Many of the burial places were simply low recesses under rock shelves. Some were vertical splits in the rock face. She could see wrapped remains placed deep within the narrow cracks in the mountain. Other burial spots were natural caves that had been worked as necessary to open them up, or to get into larger caverns beyond.

What they all had in common was that they had bodies placed in them, and all the bodies had that same repulsive smell to keep animals away. Many of the caves still had a lot of room left for a great many more burials. A few had no room left.

At midday, after a strenuous climb, River stopped to have something to eat. She sat on a ledge of rock that jutted out enough to give her a grand view of the valley below and the mountains beyond. She and Big Dog shared some more dried fish, along with strips of venison jerky, and then they were quickly on their way again.

In late afternoon, nearing what looked to be the top of the mountain as far as she could tell by brief glimpses through openings in the trees, the trail abruptly came to an end. River sat on a rock off to the side to catch her breath. She was sweating and tired from the daylong climb.

She was disappointed that she had not found any evidence of the Sky People. She didn't have any idea what she had hoped to find, but whatever it was, she hadn't found it.

As she sat resting, trying to decide what to do next, she noticed that the way the trail ended seemed odd. It simply stopped at the face of a large boulder. Curious, she got up and inspected the abrupt ending of the trail.

There was a lot of rock piled up, as if there had been a rockslide, but there was one big boulder sitting in such a way that it was the primary block in the path. The boulder sat against a rock face to the left side of the trail that was too steep to climb. To the right was a drop-off down the mountain.

When she leaned out and looked down, she could see the tops of tall spruce trees far below. Climbing down and around looked just as impossible as climbing up and around. The smaller rocks piled in around the boulder could be removed with some work, but the big boulder was far too big to move.

That struck her as deliberate.

When she turned back to the face of the rock blocking the trail, River paused and frowned. Under roots and debris, she could just see a faint image on the rock. Her people often painted things on rock walls—animals, people, stories. This was much like those, and yet it looked to be very different.

“What do you think this is, Big Dog?” she murmured half to herself.

She used her hand to brush away the lichen, moss, webs of hairlike roots, and accumulated dirt to get a better look at what had been painted there. Once she had cleared it off, she blinked at what she was seeing painted on the rock.

The painted images were clearly people made with black lines. They looked like regular people, with legs with feet and arms with hands, but the crazy thing was that their heads were all big and round with no features. All of the figures had the same big, round heads. None had eyes, noses, or mouths. Those big empty heads were somehow frightening.

They looked otherworldly.

River had seen lots of rock paintings before, done both by her people and others. Yet in all her life she had never seen images like these. They gave her goose bumps up her arms.

She knew, she just knew in her heart and soul, that these had to be drawings of the Sky People. What she didn’t know was why they were painted there on that rock blocking the trail.

Once she cleared away more of the dirt and roots, she saw what was even more worrisome. Under the drawings of Sky People there was a drawing of two large crossed bones. Crossed bones were a sign of extreme danger.

The big rock had been placed there to block the trail and keep anyone from going any farther. The crossed bones painted on that rock were a warning that if you went any farther, you would die.

## Chapter 12

River used the war hammer she was carrying to pound the broad side of her knife blade into a young, slender maple tree, first angling into one spot, then angling the blade in the opposite direction a short distance away in order to pop out large chunks of wood. In that way, she was quickly able to cut down the tree. Once she had felled it across the trail, she cut off the top with all the branches so that she ended up with a good length of tree trunk a little fatter around than her arm.

She muscled the tree trunk up and jammed the end into a small opening between the boulder that was blocking the trail and the sheer wall to the left side of it. She forced a big rock between the wall and the tree trunk to give her something to lever against.

Ordinarily the warning of crossed bones drawn on the boulder would have stopped her. Such warnings always had frightening consequences for people who ignored them. She couldn't imagine anything more frightening than everyone she knew being slaughtered.

Making sure Big Dog was clear, Raging River grunted with the effort of pushing the long log lever. The tree trunk bent a little. When it sprang back she used the momentum of it springing back and forth to increase the power of each push.

When the boulder made a grating sound as it started to move, she repositioned the rock braced between the tree trunk and the cliff wall to get more leverage. River grunted with the effort of a big push. The rocks packed in around the boulder fell free as the boulder began to tip outward. When it did, she rammed half the length of the tree trunk into the gap and gave the tree trunk a mighty pull against the boulder.

The boulder rolled over just enough to take it to the lip of the trail. With her back against the rock wall, she put both feet on the boulder and then pushed with all her strength. The boulder tipped and began to crumble the ground

at the side of the trail. As more and more of the dirt and rock at the side of the trail fell away, all of a sudden the boulder toppled out over the edge.

Panting to catch her breath, River stood at the side of the trail and watched the massive rock crash down through the forest. Treetops whipped back and forth as the boulder struck the trunks. It was some time before it finally came to rest and silence once again settled over the mountain.

“Come on, Big Dog. Let’s go.”

He jumped up to follow her as she hurried on up the now open trail. She didn’t encounter any more caves as the trail switched back and forth, going higher on the remainder of the mountain. The higher up she climbed, the more cracks she saw in the massive rock formations. She knew that each winter the water setting in cracks could begin to break rock apart. In several places she had to step carefully over wide splits in the rock that could have trapped her leg had she stepped in them.

As late in the day as it was, and as gloomy as the light was getting under the low, dark clouds, she knew she wasn’t going to be able to keep going much longer. She knew she was going to have to spend the night on Spirit Mountain. More troubling, though, was that she hadn’t found anything yet that could be of any help.

As she went up the switchbacks, she began to ascend into the lower reaches of the clouds. Cold mist prickled against her face. The fog reduced visibility the farther she went. The higher she went, the denser the fog became. Everything took on a ghostly gray cast.

River decided that if those dark clouds began to release rain, she would have to go back down and stay in one of the caves, smell or no smell. While she knew it would be necessary, it was an unsettling thought. This was a place of ancestor spirits. She didn’t know if they would like to be disturbed.

After climbing up several more steep switchbacks, River came upon another cave. It was similar to the others, though a little deeper. Gnarly tree roots from scraggly, windblown trees above the opening seemed to be

holding the crumbling rock around the cave in place. Some of the roots hung down as if to veil the opening.

The rock near the mountaintop was more cracked and crumbling apart than it had been down lower. Much of the higher trail had already fallen away, so she feared that with her weight part of it might even give way if she didn't step carefully. At least the fog hid the dizzying sight of the drop should the trail collapse underfoot. She was relieved to find that the area around the cave opening was wide enough to be stable. The trail had dwindled down and ended at the cave, so there was nothing beyond. All around, sections of stone slabs that had cracked away from the face of the mountain stood upright, like sentinels in the mist.

River ducked inside. The remains of only one body lay in the cave. The smell was just as repugnant as in the other caves. Big Dog had no desire to be anywhere near the smell. He took off to find aromas more interesting to him.

Even though it was darker yet in the cave, there was no doubt in River's mind that she had found the body of one of the Sky People.

She stood in shock in the center of the chamber, staring at the figure lying on a flat stone table just big enough to support it. There were stone chips littering the floor of the cave, telling her that this boulder had been chipped away to prepare a flat place for the body to be laid to rest.

The body had a big round head just like the drawings on the boulder. She stared in astonishment.

Rather than being wrapped in cloth and strips of leather like all the others she had found, this body was clothed in the strangest substance she had ever seen. It looked something like cloth, but the fabric was smooth and shiny. Even though it was shiny like metal, it wrinkled the same as any cloth. There was a belt around the waist with strange objects attached to it. Metallic rings circled the ankles and wrists. Boots similar to the material on the body covered the feet. Gloves with finger pads covered the hands.

But it was the head that was most startling. It was relatively round, with symmetrical indentations and ridges up along each side. After cleaning away the layer of dust, she saw that there was some kind of writing on the sides, but it had long ago eroded away. Here and there on the head there were small raised areas that were different on each side. The most prominent aspect of the whole thing, though, was the glossy black front of the head.

She realized that what she was looking at couldn't actually be the head of the Sky person. She thought it must be a covering of some sort.

River remembered well the mask with the hooked beak she had taken from Great Hawk. She had seen many other people with masks, most notably other Wolf People.

No one, not even the Sky People, could have such a perfectly smooth, hard, shiny, black face with no features.

What she was looking at could only be a mask.

## Chapter 13

River worked at the edges, or what she assumed were edges, of the black portion of the mask. It fit so perfectly with the white portion of the rest of the mask, even though it was slightly recessed, that she couldn't even get a fingernail in between the black and the white. She wasn't even sure they were separate pieces. For all she knew, it could all be one piece that had been painted. Even that thought didn't seem right, because she had never seen any paint so smooth or so shiny or with edges so sharp.

She kept working around the mask, trying to find a way to get it off. There were the same metallic rings around the neck, below the mask, as there were around the wrists and ankles. She could find no opening in any of those rings that she could work to get apart. She stood at the head of the Sky person and tried to pull the whole round, masklike covering off the head, but with the way it was so solidly attached to the rest of the clothes, it would not budge. She feared she would pull the body from its resting place if she pulled any harder, so she stopped.

The body was heavier than the others she had found. When she pressed against the shiny fabric she could feel arms and legs underneath. Pressing with her finger left squishy indentations. It didn't seem to have turned to dust like the others. She thought that was strange, considering that it had to have been placed there back in the time of the earliest stories of the Sun People, back when they were given their laws.

As a last resort, even though she thought it might be disrespectful, River pulled the war hammer from where it hung at her waist. She tapped on the shiny black mask with the stone face of the war hammer, but it did nothing. She hit it harder with the same lack of result.

She finally lifted the war hammer back over her head and brought it down with all the force she could, trying to break the mask apart.

To her surprise, the hammer simply bounced off. It didn't even leave a mark on the shiny black mask covering the face of the mysterious Sky person.

She wondered if the face was so hideous and frightening that maybe she didn't really want to see it.

But she did. She really did. So, she repeatedly struck the mask with the war hammer, thinking that she could weaken it and eventually it would crack and break open. Even that didn't work. She put all of her muscle into each swing. Nothing.

Panting from the effort, she finally gave up. While she wanted to look at the face of one of the Sky People, what she really needed was living Sky People. Looking at the face of a dead one wasn't really going to accomplish anything other than to satisfy her curiosity.

River wondered, then, how in the world she was supposed to accomplish what she had set out to do. How could she call them? How was she ever going to be able to get their help?

Unable to have any success with the mask, she moved down the body to inspect the things attached to the belt. None were like anything she had ever seen before. They had been made with a kind of precision none of her people could attain. While she had always considered some of her arrowheads a marvel of precision, these things were on a whole different level.

Whatever the objects were and whatever they were made of, they were the product of a people far more advanced than anything she had ever seen before.

River explored every little detail of all the things attached to the belt. There were round, colored knobs that gave when she pressed them. Others that stuck up turned freely. Some turned with a clicking sound. All of them had mysterious symbols and lines beside them.

She moved over to the strange armband on the left arm of the Sky person. It had a flat area with different-colored round buttons to each side. River found that by pressing small little levers on the underside of the band holding it on the arm, she was able to detach it.

Once she had it off, River started testing different places on the face. Being an odd shape, it was difficult to hold and kept slipping from her grip, so she wrapped it around her own arm the way it had been wrapped around the arm of the dead Sky person and clicked the ends back together. That made it easier to press the colored buttons. Some clicked when she turned them. Others that didn't turn made a clicking sound when she pressed on them.

Getting tired of the smell inside the cave, she went outside and sat back against the rock wall. As she sat there, she played with the thing wrapped around her forearm. She pushed at the round, colored studs and turned knobs.

And then, when she pressed a round red button, the thing on her arm made a brief noise. River froze. When it went quiet, she pressed the red bump again, but held it down longer. This time the armband let out crackling sounds.

A flat shiny area on the face of the armband suddenly lit up. Astonished, River tried pushing her finger around on the shiny surface that had lit up. Light from underneath seemed to follow her finger. She slid her finger around in a circle. Light chased the movement of her finger. She pushed her finger in the center of the circle she had made. The whole flat shiny surface lit up red and the armband crackled with sound. The circle she had made pulsed with light. She pressed the center again and it lit up with a brighter red light.

Words crackled from the device, but they made no sense to her. They were unlike any spoken words she had ever heard before. She wasn't even really sure they were words. It was more like muffled, garbled sounds along with crackling noises.

As she continued to play with the armband, that was the most she was able to make it do. As it grew dark, she grew weary and frustrated. Nothing was working, nothing was helping.

For all of her brave talk of calling the Sky People, River realized she didn't have any idea what she was doing. She didn't have a clue as to how to call the Sky People. She had only been fooling herself into thinking that as priestess she knew more than everyone else and that she would be able to bring help.

River wiped tears back off her cheeks. She did know one thing. Her people were going to be murdered. She knew she was never going to see Morning Flower again. The life she knew and loved with her people would soon end. Suffering and death were all that lay ahead.

Alone, cold, and deeply depressed, River pulled the blanket from her pack. She didn't like the smell in the cave, but she was getting numb to it. With rain just starting to come down, she knew she couldn't stay out in it. She picked up her pack and withdrew into the cave.

When she called Big Dog, he came to be by her, even though he didn't like the smell in the cave.

Feeling more miserable than she had ever felt in her life, River curled up in her blanket. Big Dog rested his head on her hip.

She had no rage left.

She cried herself to sleep.

## Chapter 14

River woke with a start. She had heard a sound, a distant rumble of some sort, something like thunder, but different. She didn't know if she had heard it, or if she had dreamt it. Big Dog was gone, probably off exploring.

She sat up when she thought she sensed the ground beginning to tremble. As the sensation increased, she saw small stones dancing around on the floor of the cave. Small bits of rock fell from the ceiling, followed down by trails of dust and dirt.

Running out of the cave, she looked around but didn't see anything. The early-morning sky was much brighter than it had been the day before. There were still clouds, but not like the ones that had brought rain the night before. These were a thin and wispy white.

She called Big Dog, but he didn't respond. Having that wild streak in him, he sometimes went off on his own for a time, so she wasn't alarmed.

When she heard another sound, she looked up just in time to see a sharp point of light glimmer high up in the sky, like a bright star in the day.

Suddenly, a long streak shot down out of the sky. It looked like a shooting star or a streak of cloud as thin as sinew thread coming straight down out of the sky. High up, what looked like a perfectly cone-shaped cloud puffed out around the tip of the streak.

Then the ground shook with a resounding boom.

The streak of cloud flashed down out of the sky to hit the ground right in front of her. Dust blew up into the air. Trees all around bent back, their branches thrashing.

River fell back both with the suddenness of it all and in fright. The air shimmered the way it did above a fire. A piercing shriek hurt her ears as a bright light streaked down through the thread of cloud. River covered her

face with her forearm with the armband as she cowered back against the cliff wall.

When the world again went silent, she carefully took her arm away from her eyes. River was astonished to see a tall figure standing before her. It looked in a way similar to the remains of the Sky person in the cave, but the clothes on this figure were a dull black with varied designs on it. They fit better, too, revealing the shape of a muscular man. There was a similar big round mask over the head, but it was not quite as large and the shape was different, too. There were rows of indentations along the sides. Like the rest of the clothes, the head mask was also a dull black color, with glossy black over the front of the face, similar to the one in the cave.

There could be no doubt. Even though the clothes and mask were somewhat different, this was one of the Sky People standing before her.

River could have jumped with joy, except that she was too scared to stand.

The figure reached up and touched the side of the mask. The shiny black part of the mask in front made a sound as it instantly vanished up into the top part.

Inside the mask, a man, possibly the most beautiful man she had ever seen, smiled out at her.

River shot to her feet. She couldn't hold back her own grin with the relief and excitement of seeing that it was a man and not some terrifying beast.

The Sky man pointed at his mouth. He rolled his hand in a motion like he wanted something. River frowned. He nodded encouragement as he rolled his hand again.

"I don't know what you want," she said.

He nodded as if excited and then rolled his hand again.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what you mean. Are you saying that you want something? Can you tell me? Can you speak?”

He nodded then and held up a finger, as if he wanted her to wait a moment.

“Ah,” he said at last, fussing with the adjustments on his own armband. His armband was not separate, like the one she had, but instead it seemed molded in to be part of his outfit. “There we go. I have your language zeroed in, now.”

“You speak my language?”

He smiled again. “I can now. I just needed a sample to fix in on. I have it locked in now.”

River was trembling. “Thank the spirits. Thank you for coming. I didn’t know if you would.”

“I was on patrol in the area when I got the distress call. It’s very strange because it’s a form of signal that I don’t recognize. It’s possible it’s one no longer used. That would mean it would have to be quite ancient. I was lucky to pick it up at all. Where is the one who sent the distress call? Can you show me?”

“Yes,” she said, “we are in distress. My people are all in distress. We are in great need of the help of the Sky People. I came to try to call you. The laws you have given us are about to cost the lives of my people.”

“The laws we gave you?”

“Yes. Those laws from the Sky People have already killed a great many people. More are about to be killed, all killed because of the laws you gave us. I must save my sister. She was captured—”

“Slow down.” He frowned. “The Sky People?” Then his head lifted back as he understood. He pointed a finger up at the sky. “The Sky People. All right, I see. You mean those like me?”

“Yes,” she said as she nodded furiously. “Sky People.”

“First, what is your name?”

“I am Raging River—”

“Raging River,” he repeated, as if testing the sound of her name. “I’m Tom. Just Tom.”

“Thank you for coming, Tom-just-Tom. We must—”

“No, no,” he said, smiling as she waved a hand. “My name is Tom. People who know me call me Tom.”

“People call me River.”

“All right, River, nice to meet you.”

“There is little time—”

“Where did you get that?” he asked, pointing at the armband she was wearing. “That has to be what generated the distress call. Did you find it?”

River gestured back into the cave. He immediately went in to have a look for himself. He seemed astonished by what he saw. He walked all around the remains on the stone, looking with great care.

Once he had looked them over carefully, he pressed a thumb against the side of his hand. “Control, this is Commander Tom. I’ve located the source of the distress call.”

From inside his mask River could hear the crackle of a female voice say, “What is the source?”

He bent over the remains on the stone slab, looking, then wiped dust and dirt off of a raised area near the shoulder.

“This is old. Beyond old, actually. The name looks like... R. Collins.”

“Hold a moment, Commander, while I check,” came the female voice from inside his mask.

River pointed. “How is there a voice in your mask?”

“My—? Oh, you mean my helmet. It’s a way I communicate with my people.” He smiled. “With the other Sky People.”

She decided that in his language, “helmet” must be the word for “mask.” He had a friendly voice that put her at ease. Even though she liked his voice, River didn’t really understand much of what he was saying.

“When your people came here before”—she swept a hand toward the dead Sky person on the slab—“they gave us our laws. Because of those laws, my people have been murdered and our women taken as slave wives.” She could feel tears of rage springing up at the corners of her eyes. “Now, because of the laws you gave us, all my people are about to be murdered. All because of you Sky People! You must help me. There is no time—”

“Got it,” the voice in his mask crackled. He held his hand up to River, signaling her to wait while he listened. “You aren’t going to believe this, Commander. The remains you found are one Rebecca Collins.”

“Doesn’t sound familiar,” he said.

“It wouldn’t,” the female voice said. “She was a crew member on a primitive exploration vessel. It was designated Twelve Twenty-three David.”

He put the tips of his fingers to his forehead for a moment, thinking. “You’ve got to be kidding,” he said at last, his head coming back up. “A Twelve Twenty-three would have to have been, I don’t know, back before the Jardin colonies were established, right?”

“That’s right. A portion of the records sent back from Twelve Twenty-three David survives in the archives, but they were badly fragmented. The

communication systems back then were not designed for such distances, and on top of that the ship was breaking up.”

“What were they even doing out here?” Commander Tom asked the female voice in his mask. He sounded deeply concerned.

“The record indicates Twelve Twenty-three David had a nav or auto guidance failure of some kind that sent them out there. They were desperately trying to repair unspecified, serious hardware failures in a drive unit they couldn’t shut down. They lost directional control and the core flared, sending them beyond the range of ships at that time and into what was then uncharted territory.”

“Does it say what happened to them?”

“Let’s see... It looks like they had critical damage and were looking for a survivable planet that could sustain them in the hopes of eventually being rescued. The record shows that they sent emergency teams to several planets on their way past. None were survivable, so the crews returned.

“Rebecca Collins was in command of the last team sent out. She reported that they found a Langstrom-class planet. The record shows that the team returned to Twelve Twenty-three David to help with an emergency evacuation of the crew along with the supplies they would need to survive.”

“Then why is she the only one down here?”

“Data is incomplete, but it looks like their ship disintegrated and all crew members were lost immediately after the team returned and before they could evacuate. Protocol would have dictated that she would go up last. The record assumed Rebecca Collins had returned to her ship just before the entire crew was lost when the ship broke up.”

“She didn’t make it back to her ship,” Commander Tom said. He took a deep breath. “She is buried down here.”

“If she didn’t make it back to her doomed ship then she was the only survivor, even though the record indicates all souls were lost. The type of personal rescue beacon of that era didn’t have a far enough range to reach help. Since it was assumed she died with her crew no rescue was attempted. For that reason, nothing is known of what she did down on that planet.”

“It appears she lived out the rest of her life here with the indigenous people,” Commander Tom said.

He pressed some colored knobs on one of the boxes on the dead Sky woman’s belt. River was surprised when lights flashed on the armband she was wearing. Commander Tom took River’s wrist and turned her arm so he could see the symbols that lit up on the shiny surface.

“The biodata show she had to have survived here for quite a while,” he reported to the female voice in his mask. “She was quite an advanced age when she died. The scan shows a variety of health problems, but a blockage in the main artery of her heart was what eventually ended her life. Her suit helped with life support as long as it could. When she died, her helmet and suit closed automatically to preserve her remains. Didn’t do any good. There was no one within range to receive the End of Life notice.”

“Any idea what she did there for all that time?”

Commander Tom looked at River while he spoke to the voice in his mask. “Apparently, she played God.”

## Chapter 15

River followed Tom out of the cave. She didn't understand a lot of what he had talked about to the voice in his mask, but she had much to tell him, and they had no time to waste. She needed him to lift the laws given to them so long ago.

River was about to again try to explain things to him when a sound she knew all too well made her turn just in time to see a Wolf People warrior, painted in full war paint, coming out of nowhere to lunge in at her with a knife. She deliberately fell back away from him, barely in time. He missed with his slash and stumbled. She was puzzled to see that his arms were bloody. He caught himself and turned to dive for her with his knife held high to stab into her as he came down.

At the same time, she saw another man—the leader she'd seen before with the feathers in his headband, the one she had shot through the arm with an arrow—driving a spear toward Tom's face as he turned to the sound of the war cry.

It seemed like she could see it all happening at once.

Just as the first man was coming down and about to stab River, Commander Tom reached around the leader coming at him with the spear. A kind of blue light she had never seen before lit from something in Tom's hand.

The Wolf warrior coming down on her suddenly exploded in a cloud of black ash. All of him, even his knife, were turned to a whirlwind of ash. In that instant he was gone.

River scrambled to her feet as she saw the man with the spear lunging for Tom, but Tom fell back just in time and landed hard on his back. The thing that made the blue light fell from his hand.

In a heartbeat, Raging River pulled her knife from the sheath at her waist and slammed the sharp blade into the warrior's lower back, where she knew

it would hurt him the most. She saw that he, too, already had bloody wounds on his arms.

Before he was able to stab his spear into Tom's face, he arched back toward the pain of her knife in his kidney. As he tried to counterattack, she had already stabbed him half a dozen more times. Her knife slammed into his lower back, into his ribs, into his side, and as he turned toward her it cut open his belly.

His eyes opened wide, wild with the shock of the damage done by her blade. His right hand reached out for her throat. As he did, she plunged her knife into the left side of his neck twice, fast and hard. With blood flowing from the wounds on his neck, he staggered back a step. When he did, she slammed her knife into the center of his chest.

With that, he finally went down.

She had to put a foot on his chest to help pull her knife free. When she did, River saw only then that his arms had been ripped up. There were great open wounds where teeth had torn down through muscle. She knew it had to have been from Big Dog. What he had done to this man had slowed him enough that it had enabled River to take him down. Had he not been so severely injured, he might have been fast enough to kill Tom and her both.

She looked around quickly, worried that there were other Wolf People warriors, but she didn't see any. Tom was already back to his feet.

River, still filled with the rage of the fight, jammed a finger into his chest.

“This is the fault of your people! This is what the Sky People have brought us! They bring us those who would kill us! All because the Sky People poisoned the minds of my people with their laws! The laws the Sky People put on us have caused nothing but suffering and death! You must—”

He grabbed her wrist to stop her jabbing him with a finger. “Thank you for protecting me,” he said in a calming voice. “I think he might have killed me had you not acted so fast. Thank you.”

She cooled under his warm smile. She took her hand back as she regained control of herself. She suddenly felt foolish for blaming him. It had obviously happened long before his time, just as it had happened long before her time.

“You saved me first,” she said, much calmer. “I was returning the favor.”

“Only one problem.” He let out a frustrated sigh. “After I took out the one trying to kill you, I fell back and landed on my back. When I did, I lost my weapon.”

She realized, then, that he had protected her life before his own. He could have died while protecting her. He could have protected himself and let her be killed, but he hadn’t.

If the Wolf People warriors came into her village to capture her, or kill her, no one would ever lift a finger to protect her. Something about the Sky People law didn’t make sense. This man had just killed to protect her.

The same as she had done trying to protect Morning Flower.

River looked around. “I will help you find it.”

Tom pointed. “It went down that fissure in the rock behind me where I fell back.”

Together they got down on their hands and knees to look down into the dark crack. Tom pulled something from his belt and made light go far down into the crack. She was amazed at how he made light without fire, but she was more interested in finding the weapon he had lost—a weapon that could turn people to ash. With the way the split in the rock twisted down deep, they couldn’t see his hand weapon. It was somewhere far down in the ground, far, far out of sight.

“I don’t think there is any way to get it back,” she said.

Tom gritted his teeth silently for a moment.

“I’m afraid you’re right,” he finally said.

“Commander,” the voice in the mask crackled, “are you still there? I have more information.”

“Yes. Sorry. I had a situation. What did you find out?”

“I confirmed that sector was long ago designated as restricted because it was determined by remote sensors that it was populated. If Rebecca Collins lived among those people and played God, as you say, it was long before the restriction was put in place. That complicates things. You need to investigate and straighten out any issues she might have caused, either deliberately or inadvertently. You need to confirm that nothing even remotely serious resulted from her interactions with the indigenous people.”

“I’m afraid the issue appears to be serious.” Commander Tom looked at River. “Quite serious.”

“Understood, Commander. I’ve plugged it into the system. Pursuant to the reformation directive, until resolution you have level Q-seventeen authorization.”

His glanced over at River. “Q-seventeen. Roger that.”

Tom was starting to say something to River when the voice came back again.

“Commander, it looks like we have another problem. Word is just coming in now that Over Command is on this Rebecca Collins discovery and they are not at all happy. The planet was classified as restricted and you’ve confirmed that there was a breach, but since the breach predates the restriction, they ordered an immediate quarantine of the planet.”

“Do they really think that’s necessary?”

“Apparently so. Deconfliction alerts were just sent out. We’re showing that you’re the only one in that sector, or even close. I’m sorry, but there is no

time to send you any help to correct the damage. You're on your own in fixing the situation.”

“Understood.”

“Oh, here we go... looks like this has them upset; they've put the quarantine on a short fuse. Sorry to put you in this spot, Commander, but you know the regulations.”

Tom's mouth twisted as he nodded. “I do indeed.”

“I can only buy you a little time until quarantine is initiated. You know better than anyone what you need to do.”

Commander Tom's expression was grim as he nodded. “Understood. Analyze and correct any inadvertent damage to the indigenous population before the quarantine sterilizes the planet. Give me a mark on how much time I have.”

“Done. Keep an eye on that countdown, Commander.” The female voice paused for a moment before going on. “It's a hard deadline, Tom. I can't buy you another second beyond that mark. You know that. You need to fix things and be out of there by quarantine initiation.”

“Roger,” he said as he nodded. “Commander Tom out.”

He sighed as he looked at River.

Tom spoke her language, but she still didn't understand much of what he and the voice in his helmet said.

“What does that mean? ‘Before the quarantine sterilizes the planet’?”

“It means that in your world any non-indigenous life-form, like me, is classified as an infection. Those in charge have mandated that any life encountered must be left alone. That is to make sure that no one interferes

with your people”—he gestured into the cave—“the way she apparently did.

“To do that, they quarantine the entire sector. The means they block it off. Any foreign entity inside that blockade—that means me and Rebecca Collins in there—will be burned out of the sector.” He gestured to the bits of ash that were all that was left of the Wolf warrior. “Like that.”

River looked over at the black ashes. They were all that remained of the Wolf People warrior.

“You mean if you stay too long, that is what will happen to you?”

“Yes.”

“That seems cruel,” she said.

“It’s meant to protect people like you and prevent what seems to have happened to your people from happening again.”

“You mean you could die helping us?”

He gazed into her eyes for a long moment.

“I signed up for this job. It’s my life. I knew it was dangerous, but I wanted to do it because I think it’s important and because I get to see the most remarkable things in the universe, things no one else ever has the chance to see.” He smiled. “Like you.”

“Then we should hurry, both for my people, and for you.”

## Chapter 16

Not far down the mountain they found Big Dog lying beside a small stream. River cried out in anguish when she saw the blood on him. No wonder he hadn't come when she had called him.

"Your dog, I presume?" Tom asked as she ran to Big Dog and squatted down beside him, holding his head in her hands. He didn't respond to her touch.

"Big Dog, I'm so sorry," she wept. "I told you to stay home. I didn't want you to be hurt."

"Here," Tom said as he knelt down beside her. "Let me see if I can help."

"It's too late to help him," she said, seeing the seeping blood, his shallow breathing, and his glassy eyes.

"Maybe not," he said as he quickly took a complex-looking container from his belt.

He held his arm with his own armband over Big Dog. Although it was part of his dark outfit, it was something like the armband she still had on, but more complex. He pushed at rows of projections on the armband and turned small white knobs. Lights lit and danced around on the shiny surface. She saw lines light up and move in waves. He opened the box from his belt, then pressed something from inside against Big Dog's neck.

Big Dog's eyes closed, and River could see him slump even more.

"Did you put him out of his misery?" she asked, afraid of the answer.

"No. I just put him into a deeper sleep so that I can try to help him. He was hit in the head with something hard. It cracked his skull."

"A war hammer." She tapped the one in her belt. "Like this one."

He nodded as he glanced over at the weapon while holding something against the side of Big Dog; then he went back to what he was doing.

“Fortunately,” he said, “it looks like it was a glancing blow. Still, it did damage. It put him down, which is what those men were after. They came to kill us and only wanted the dog out of the way.”

“But he’s hurt bad?”

“It cracked his skull, causing an intracranial hemorrhage.” He looked at the glowing symbols on his armband again. “Looks like it’s a subarachnoid hemorrhage involving a subdural hematoma.”

Her head spun in confusion trying to understand him. “What does that mean? Is he dying?”

“It means he is bleeding inside his skull from the damage of the blow. That bleeding puts pressure inside the braincase. That pressure will kill him if something isn’t done right away.”

It sounded hopeless to River. “What can be done?”

“Hush,” he said in a distracted voice as he used a small rod that made an intense line of light. She could smell burning fur. He had shaved away some of the fur in a round spot. Somehow, as he used it, the light made a little cut. He worked with strange objects from inside the box he’d taken from his belt, first one and then another. Some he put in through the cut he had made while he pressed others to different places on Big Dog’s head behind his ear.

Pulling another device from the same box, he placed the long point into the wound. It made a hissing sound. White foam frothed up around the wound and then slowly began to melt away.

“Now we have to wait just a little bit,” he told her.

“What did you do?”

“Stopped the bleeding, relieved the intracranial pressure by vaporizing the blood trapped inside, regenerated the damaged tissue, then sealed the crack in the bone and closed the incision.”

River didn’t understand most of what he said, but she understood the general idea. “How long? How long do we need to wait?”

Just then, Big Dog’s eyes opened. They looked clear. He blinked and lifted his head, then looked around as if waking from sleep. After a few more moments he got up on his feet.

“About that long,” Tom said with a smile.

Tail wagging, Big Dog started licking Tom’s face through the opening in his mask. Tom laughed and patted him on the shoulder as he tried to hold him back away.

“I’ve never seen him react that way to a stranger,” River said.

Tom laughed while trying to stop Big Dog from licking him. “We’re not strangers anymore.”

“How did you know what to do?”

“I’ve done it many times in training. It helps to have the correct instruments and of course that no disease was involved.”

River had never thought anyone could do such a thing. Finally, Big Dog shook himself and then leaned up against her. She hugged him, which he generally didn’t like, but he tolerated it now. She thought he understood that he had been in trouble and Tom had saved him. He was a little wobbly on his feet at first, but he quickly seemed back to his old self.

She cupped his head in her hands. “Thank you, my friend, for what you did to stop those bad men. It saved my life.”

Once Tom had replaced all of his gear on his belt, Big Dog started out down the trail. River and Tom followed him and together they made their way down off Spirit Mountain. It was a lot faster going down than it had been going up. And, of course, she didn't stop to inspect the caves and the remains of ancestors.

Once they finally reached the bottom of the mountain, River led Tom through the thick brush and gloomy forest on the same game trails she had used on her way in. All the time she kept a wary eye for more of the Wolf People warriors. She didn't know if those two had been alone, or if they had brought many other warriors with them. It could be they left some behind. She knew that the warrior with the feathers in his headband had wanted revenge for her arrow through his arm. It had cost him his life.

Big Dog didn't wander off. He seemed to know that his job was to smell the way ahead as well as listen for any signs of trouble that only he could smell or hear. If there were other warriors, River felt sure that Big Dog would warn them.

"There," River said as she pointed. "That's the Bitterroot River. We have to cross back over."

They found the canoe and quickly shoved off out into the swiftly moving water.

She smiled then, as she looked back past Big Dog at Tom paddling with long, strong strokes. "I was named after this river. When I was born, this river was raging, and my mother couldn't get back across to return to her people."

"You mean to say you were born back there? On that mountain?"

"Yes. Because of the storm keeping my mother from crossing the river and taking me home right away, the priestess named me Raging River. While there, before she died, she also named me priestess of our people."

"What's a priestess? What does a priestess do?"

River's smile widened. "A priestess is supposed to call the Sky People if they are needed." River lifted her head with pride as she looked out at the opposite bank. "But I am the first to succeed."

His muscles paddling against the water carried them across easier than her own crossing. As soon as they reached the opposite bank, Big Dog jumped out into the shallow water and started barking. River finally saw, then, what he was barking at. Nearly hidden off in the marsh grass were two war ponies left by the Wolf People warriors before they swam across.

She could tell that they belonged to the Wolf People because there were three fingers painted on their flanks. That stood for Chief Three Fingers, the chief of the Wolf People.

"We can take those horses and make much better time," Tom said.

"They are Wolf People war ponies. They won't let us ride them."

"Is that so?" Tom said as he started through the marsh grass toward them.

River hurried to catch up with him. When he reached the war ponies, they were skittish and danced around. One reared up on its hind legs. They wanted nothing to do with him because he was a stranger. More than being a stranger, he was a stranger in strange dress. The thing that really seemed to scare them, though, was the big round mask.

Tom untied the rope of one and gently pulled it, then released the pressure. He pulled again while whispering to the horse, and again released the pressure. Finally, after he'd encouraged the animal a few times, when he released the pressure again the horse took a couple of steps toward him. He kept doing it, getting the horse to come to him, until he was walking backward, leading the horse along.

"River, take the rope on the other horse and do the same as I'm doing. Tug gently and release. Tug and release. Talk gently to him to calm him."

She followed his example, gently tugging and then releasing. After a short time, the first horse had taken steps all the way to Tom. Once it was up close he cooed softly to it as he rubbed its nose and forehead. When it finally nuzzled its head against him, he stroked behind the horse's ears. River followed his example and was shocked to see her horse do the same with her. It felt good stroking the strong neck of the animal. The horse seemed to like it just as much as she did.

"How do you know to make a war pony respond to you?" she asked in astonishment.

Tom smiled at her. "My job is to interact with people and creatures I meet. It's my calling in life. People tell me that I'm a species whisperer."

He grabbed hold of the mane and jumped up, throwing a leg over the horse. It walked about in surprise a little but then settled down under his reassuring touch. When River mounted the other horse, it, too, responded well.

"We had better get going," Tom said. "These will save precious time."

River nodded her agreement and with her heels urged the horse quickly ahead. Big Dog ran with them, barking his enjoyment of this new kind of fun.

Rather than head to her village, River headed straight for the place where the Wolf People lived.

## Chapter 17

River stroked the side of her horse's neck as they slowed to a halt. The horse had proven a willing mount once shown a gentle hand the way Tom had taught her. The Sun People had horses, too, and she liked to ride them, but the men rode them most of the time on hunts, so it was rare for her to be given the privilege. Tom's horse, even carrying a man in a frightening black outfit with a big round mask around his head, had been eager to please him.

It amazed her the way the horse saw the man, not the mask. She, too, was beginning to see beyond the mask.

Off in the distance she could see the pointed tents of the Wolf People village. Those tents filled the valley between green hills. Smoke rose from a great many cook fires. All the tents gathered together reminded her of nothing so much as a field of white mushrooms sprouted up out of the ground beside the meandering stream.

The Wolf People moved their tent village to other locations from time to time to take advantage of different seasons. If they stayed in one place too long, the game would all be gone, so they moved on. Sometimes they moved into the territory of other peoples, which caused conflict. Sometimes they moved closer to or farther away from the Sun People village. The houses in River's village were made of mud brick, so they couldn't move. They were at the mercy of the Wolf People.

“This is your village?” Commander Tom asked.

“No. This is the home of the Wolf People.”

“The Wolf People?” He frowned over at her. “We need to get to your village so I can straighten out the problem caused by Rebecca Collins. That's the reason you wanted my help, remember?” He looked down at his armband. “I'm running out of time.”

“I’m not going back to my village until I rescue my little sister. I told you how they took her. I failed her. I need to get her back.”

“We don’t have time for this,” he insisted.

“The sooner I rescue her, the sooner we can get to my village.”

Commander Tom sighed as he rested a hand over the one holding his horse’s mane as he gazed out at the field of off-white tents. He did not look pleased about what she was doing.

“If I don’t take care of the problem caused by Rebecca Collins before I have to leave, no one will ever come again to help straighten things out. You, yourself, said that a great many people died because of those laws and that many more will. I am your last hope, River, and I don’t have much time left.”

River moved her horse sideways a couple of steps to reach out and touch Tom’s arm. “This is my little sister. I have to save her. Hasn’t anyone ever meant the world to you?”

His expression finally relaxed a little as he looked out at her from inside his round mask. “What do you have in mind?”

“What is level Q-seventeen authorization?” she asked. “I heard the voice in your mask say that you have level Q-seventeen authorization. What does that mean?”

He stared at her for a long moment.

“There are very few people like me—commanders who patrol remote areas on their own. There is often no one close enough to help us should we encounter problems, such as this problem here. Because of that, we must be able to operate alone.

“We are highly trained in everything we might need to do in our mission. I operate with a whole book of regulations of what I can and can’t do. Level

Q is the section involving the use of force. It runs on an escalating scale. When my command authorizes Q-seventeen, that is the highest level. It means I have the authority to kill anyone or anything, entirely at my discretion alone.”

River nodded. “That’s what I thought.”

“Why do you ask?”

“Because my little sister is in there and I may need to Q-seventeen people to get her out. You lost your weapon back on Spirit Mountain.” She pulled the war hammer from her belt and handed it to him. “Here. You may need to Q-seventeen someone, too.”

He couldn’t help smiling. “Do you have some plan to get your sister out?”

“There is a sacred place, the walls of Rock Canyon, where all peoples go to draw the stories of their people. It is for all to see and the one place where there is no fighting or killing. I don’t know why, but since the time of our ancestors it has always been this way. It is a place respected by all. Because of the story pictures drawn there, all peoples know of the Sky People. The Sky People are feared by many.

“If you put the black part of your mask back down over your face so that they see only your round mask, I think that seeing one of the Sky People before them, they will be frightened enough that with the surprise of the moment, we can get in there, get my sister, and get away.

“I know that when I first saw you I was too frightened to move.” She smiled. “That was before I knew you, of course. I think we can use that fear to our advantage.”

He thought about it a moment. “That’s actually not a bad idea. Keep in mind, though, that surprise only works for so long and then it turns to anger.”

“Then we should get this done as quickly as possible,” she said as she urged her horse ahead.

Tom hurried to ride beside her. Big Dog galloped along right next to them. It was a brief ride that took them to the first encounter with guards at the outer fringes of the tents. Those men lifted their spears, holding them up above their heads to signal that the riders must stop.

When they saw Tom coming, the men’s eyes grew wide. They stepped back, afraid of what they were seeing.

“Where is the girl that was captured a few days ago?” River asked.

They stared at her as if she, too, were one of the Sky People. They looked too fearful to speak.

River pointed over at Tom sitting tall on his war pony. “This is one of the Sky People. He has come to see the girl that was captured. Tell me where she is, or he will burn your entire village to the ground. I won’t ask again.”

Several of the men fell to the ground, bowing forward dreading they would be struck down. One of the others, not knowing if he believed her, but fearing that she might be telling the truth, stepped back and pointed with his spear.

“There, over that way. The tent with the small red cloth tied to the top. That is the tent where she is being held.”

“Held for what purpose?”

He hesitated a moment. “She is being held until a man wishing for a wife can pay the proper price for her.”

He then fell to his knees with the others. “We bear no ill will to the Sky People and beg that they not harm us.”

Now that River knew where her sister was being held, she didn't waste another instant. She charged past the men, causing them all to scatter.

## Chapter 18

Tom rode to her right flank as she raced into the village in the direction the guard had pointed. As she wove her way in among the tents, she pulled her bow off her shoulder and drew an arrow from her quiver. She nocked the arrow and then held it in place with the fingers of the hand holding the bow. Holding on to her horse's mane with her other hand, River leaned forward over the withers as her horse raced ahead, leaping over cook fires.

A number of people stared as she rode past, not knowing what to make of a woman on a war pony. While they had no idea of who she might be, they recognized the three fingers painted on the horses' flanks, marking them as belonging to the Wolf People. These onlookers would never suspect someone, especially a woman, from the Sun People to ever dare to ride in among them on one of their own war ponies.

Mostly, though, people stared at the dark figure of Tom in his big round mask up on another one of their war ponies. It made no sense to them, but it frightened them. While a few people stood staring in shock and others ran screaming, most were so terrified of Tom that they fell to their knees to bow forward as if begging for their lives to be spared.

Big Dog, aroused by the prospect of getting to take down anyone who might try to hurt River, ran out in front of her, barking the whole time. He veered toward people to one side, snarling at them as they ran away, and then he charged to the other side. The wolf in him was readily apparent. He was a frightening sight with his fangs bared. Afraid of being bitten, many people fled before they even had a chance to see Tom. Big Dog provided an unexpected benefit of clearing many people out of their way before River and Tom even got there, making their progress that much quicker.

River at last spotted the pointed tent with the red cloth on top. She cut her horse to the right, in the direction of the tent. Her heart pounded with the fear of being in among so many Wolf People. If their panic and surprise gave way to anger, she would be in a great deal of trouble.

An angry-faced man jumped out to block her way. He waved his arms and then raced forward to try to grab her leg and drag her off her horse. River put an arrow through his chest and charged her horse right over him.

At the tent with the red cloth, River and Tom rode around the outside to drive people away. Once they had scattered, Tom grabbed a flap of the tent material and pulled it away as they continued on around. It ripped the places where it was joined and then tore the whole covering away from the tent poles. He dragged it out of the way and dropped it.

Flower was cowered in the center, not knowing what was happening. She screamed in recognition when she saw River up on the horse. She was tied hands and feet, with the rope connected to a stake so that she couldn't escape.

River leaped from the horse, pulling her knife at the same time. Fast as she could, she raced in to Flower and cut the ropes around the girl's hands and feet. Overwhelmed to be free, Flower tried to throw her arms around River.

"Hurry!" River yelled, not wanting to take the time to hug her little sister. As overjoyed as River was to have found Flower, they still had to escape. There was no time for a joyful reunion.

River leaped up on her horse, then stretched down and grabbed Flower's hand. A powerful-looking man without a shirt raced up behind Flower with an axe, clearly intending to split her head. Flower squealed in fright as she shuffled sideways, trying to avoid the man's axe even as River held a tight grip on her hand.

Tom swooped in. He swung the war hammer as if he had used one from atop a horse his whole life. The stone hammer made a terrible sound as it crushed in the man's head. The man toppled back. His misshapen head smacked the ground with a wet thud.

River gave a mighty pull on Flower's arm, yanking her off her feet and swinging her up and around to land behind her on the horse. Flower threw her arms around River's waist.

“Let’s go!” Tom yelled, as people were converging on them from every direction. His voice was louder than his normal voice and reverberated like a spirit calling out from the afterlife.

Without delay he led them charging through the crowd. Big Dog helped scare people out of the way.

As they raced away, River took the lead so that Tom could handle any trouble that might come up from behind. From the corner of her eye, she saw men in a distant corral mounting horses.

She raced through the confusion of tents, heading in the direction of her own village. Finally they broke out of the cluster of tents, but suddenly came upon a wall of men with spears. Their chief stood at the center of his line of warriors. When he held up a hand for them to halt, she saw why he was called Chief Three Fingers.

He had on a vest made of wolf fur with hawk feathers at each shoulder. His war chiefs to each side likewise wore wolf fur to denote their rank. His face was as weatherworn as her father’s and just as creased and brown.

It looked to River like he wanted to say something. Of course, what he might want to say was that they were to be put to death.

River and Tom pulled their horses to a stop before the wall of warriors. She didn’t want those men to use their spears on Big Dog, so she leaned down and told him to sit.

“You are brave to come into our village,” Chief Three Fingers said to her. He looked to Tom. “I see you have one of the Sky People with you. This is bad business. What do you think to accomplish?”

She kept her eyes on the chief, but she could sense people gathering to the sides and behind them.

River reached around and put a comforting hand on Flower’s back. “Your people stole my sister. I am the priestess of the Sun People. I vowed to get

her back.”

He wore as grim an expression as she had ever seen. Wolf People had always been the stuff of her nightmares. The look of these men only reinforced her fear of them. Chief Three Fingers looked as if he had never smiled in his life.

While these men might have been afraid of Tom, they also found bravery in their numbers. They looked like they had no intention of fleeing as others had. These were fearless warriors who were always eager for a fight.

River didn’t know what to do, so she decided to do the worst thing she could think of.

“I am the one who killed your son, Great Hawk.”

He looked genuinely surprised. “That was you?”

“Yes. Did not your warriors tell you that it was a woman who killed your son? I would do it again to protect my sister from cowards who hide in the grass to steal women.”

The warriors to each side of the chief murmured in anger. They looked eager to drag her off her horse and rip her apart.

“What do you think you can do now, Priestess, with all of us here to stop you?”

“You want your revenge on the Sun People for the death of your son, am I right?”

He gave her a single nod. “We are going to kill all of your people for what you have done.”

“I’ll tell you what. I will give you your chance to kill us all. I will go back to my village and tell them that you will come tomorrow to kill everyone. But know that the Sky People”—she gestured to Tom—“have released us

from our law. Now that the Sun People are released from their law, we will prepare to fight you when you come.

“Tomorrow, when you come, we will have a war. A real war.

“How would you like that? You can see then, if your brave warriors really can fight, or if they can only kill women and children. Do you think they are strong enough to fight, instead of murdering innocent, helpless people?”

He held up his hand with three fingers to silence the men to either side.

“My brave young warriors are strong enough to fight anyone. Law or no law, the Sun People will not fight. They will cower as they always do when they see us, and then they will die.”

“If you are so sure of that, and if you really believe that your young warriors are strong enough, then you will let me go so I can tell my people that you will come tomorrow. We will see, then, if the Sun People will fight you or not. Unless you fear that they will?”

Chief Three Fingers leaned to one side, then the other, discussing it first with his war chiefs wearing wolf furs to one side, and then the war chiefs to the other.

He finally turned his attention back to River. “Because you have shown bravery, more than I have ever seen from any of the Sun People, or even many others, we will let you pass. But because you have killed my son, tomorrow we will come, and we will kill you and then all the rest of the Sun People.”

River didn’t know if Chief Three Fingers was letting her go because he meant what he said about her being brave, or if it was because he was worried what the Sky man on the horse beside her might do. Whatever the reason, River was only too eager to leave.

With a signal from Chief Three Fingers, the men to each side all pulled back out of the way. Once there was a wide opening, River urged her horse ahead at a walk. Tom walked his horse beside her. Flower squeezed her

eyes closed and pressed her head against River's back. Her arms tightly hugged River's middle.

They rode for a time before she had the courage to look back. When she did, the Wolf People village was far behind and no one followed them.

Tom pressed the side of his round mask and the black portion vanished up into the top of the mask. River could feel Morning Flower trembling to be so close to one of the Sky People.

"It's all right," she whispered to Flower. "He is a friend."

Her stomach felt like it was twisted in knots from the encounter with all those warriors. When Tom smiled at her, it melted away what was left of her fear and made her feel like all of the Sky People were smiling down on her.

## Chapter 19

By the time they reached the Sun People's village, the sun had set, but there was still a blush of deep color in the sky behind Spirit Mountain.

Sentries would have alerted everyone that she was coming with a stranger on war ponies, so River was not at all surprised to see that all of the Sun People, it seemed, had come out in the darkness to line the broad, main passageway into the village. As they rode through torchlight, people were treated to a sight they would never have expected to see: River riding home on a Wolf war pony, bringing Morning Flower—a captured girl—back from captivity with the Wolf People, something that had never been done before.

But if that was startling, the unnerving sight of one of the Sky People as her companion was astonishing and terrifying.

People fell to their knees in waves, bowing down before the dark figure with the big round head. Many of those on their knees trembled in terror of what might befall them at the hands of a mysterious Sky person. While they all knew that River had vowed to call the Sky People, she doubted that there had been one among them who had believed she could actually do it.

In the main square, on the far side of a fire burning in the fire pit at the center, her father, Chief Standing Bear, had come to wait with other revered old men who were his advisors. She was pleased to see that Walking Stag was there to the side, now covered in war paint unlike any she had ever seen before.

Charged by River with the task of assembling strong men who could defend the Sun People, he had created a war paint design for him and all the young men assembled. She had to admit, he had done an admirable job. They all looked frightening. Walking Stag had never looked more handsome.

Despite the war paint and the weapons, River didn't know if they were yet committed to actually fighting for their lives. They had been raised since birth to never kill, no matter what, or they would be cast into darkness in

the afterlife, never to see the sun again. Painting their bodies was one thing, fighting and killing was quite another.

River slipped down off her horse and then helped Flower down. Once down, Morning Flower raced into her mother's welcoming arms. Her father smiled down at his youngest daughter, tearful to be reunited with her people, then dropped to a knee and bowed his head as Tom dismounted.

River walked with Tom to stand before Chief Standing Bear as he returned to his feet.

"Chief Standing Bear," River said, "I hope you will be pleased that as priestess I have called the Sky People to help us and I have freed your daughter from the Wolf People."

When her father looked from her to the open mask of the tall, dark figure beside her, River held a hand out to the stranger.

"Chief Standing Bear, this is Tom-just-Tom."

Her father again bowed his head. "Welcome, Tom-just-Tom."

He waved a hand. "No, no, it's just... Never mind." He took a breath. "As I told Raging River when she told me that her friends call her River, those who are my friends call me Tom. I am a friend to the Sun People, as are all Sky People. I would be honored if you call me Tom."

"Welcome, Tom," her father said, starting anew. "It has been since the time of our ancestors since the Sky People came to give us our laws. I hope my daughter has not angered you with her foolishness. I hope you will be pleased to find that our people have always followed the laws the Sky People have given us, even if River has failed in that duty."

Tom smiled. "No, I'm not at all angered that Priestess Raging River called me to return. The opportunity to once again visit the Sun People is a rare one."

River held out her arm to show them the armband she was wearing. She tapped it with a finger.

“I called the Sky People with this. It is from Spirit Mountain.”

Her father squinted down at it. All the advisors to each side leaned in to squint at it with him. They murmured their wonder to each other.

Her father turned his attention to River once more. “How is it that you came to rescue Morning Flower?”

“When I called the Sky People so that they may tell us about our laws, we were attacked by two Wolf People warriors. We had to kill them to defend ourselves.”

Worried whispering spread out through the crowd at hearing this. Everyone watching feared that Tom might bring the wrath of the Sky People down on them.

“You have killed yet again?” Her father moaned.

River nodded. “We had to. We took their war ponies in order to make better time. By my decision, I rode into the Wolf People village and together with Tom’s help, we rescued Morning Flower.”

Her father was shaking his head with incredulity. “And the Wolf People simply let you ride out with Flower? Their warriors did not try to stop you?”

“Well, yes, they stopped us. I spoke with Chief Three Fingers—”

Her father’s eyebrows went up at the very idea. “And he let you leave?”

“Well, yes.”

“They are Wolf People. Why would they let you leave with their captive?”

“Because I invited Chief Three Fingers and his warriors to come here to the Sun People village tomorrow to have a great war with our brave warriors. He said that if we do not fight, then they will slaughter every last one of the Sun People. He let me go so I could tell you.”

Her father was stricken speechless with alarm.

“We cannot fight them!” one of his advisors cried out. “The Sky People who gave us our laws say that we must not kill!”

“That’s right,” Chief Standing Bear said. “It is against our laws to kill. By inviting the Wolf People here to wage a war on us, you have condemned us all to death!”

Tom finally lifted a hand to get everyone’s attention. He waited for silence to settle over the square.

“It is not our way to give laws to others,” he said. “We believe that other people should live as they choose, even if the way they choose to live is not what we would wish. It is our law to leave others be.

“The Sky People who came here in the past violated our laws by trying to give a law to your people. We believe that what your people were told so very long ago was wrong. I came to set it right.”

“How could they be wrong? They were Sky People.”

Tom clasped his hands a moment as he considered how to make them understand. “Were you afraid when you saw me?” he finally asked the chief.

Standing Bear looked around self-consciously. “Yes. I admit that I was and still am fearful of what you will do to us.”

“When people are afraid, they often misunderstand things. It is likely that your ancestors were afraid, too, and because they were so afraid, they

misunderstood what they were told. Yes, it is wrong to kill people, to murder them, that is all those who came before meant.”

“So, then our laws are right. We must not kill.”

“You see, that’s where the misunderstanding comes in. Yes, killing is wrong,” Tom said, leaning in, “if it is murder. But it is not wrong to kill if absolutely necessary to defend yourself or your loved ones from being murdered. Killing in self-defense is not murder. Murder is wrong, not self-defense.”

Her father looked bewildered. “The Sky People gave us the law—that if we kill—Father Sun would never return, and our people would die in the forever darkness.”

Tom considered for a moment. “Do you say things to your daughter—tell her what to do—because you don’t believe in her and think she is too foolish to understand anything?”

“No. I say things hoping to keep her safe, to keep her from making mistakes, or to teach her so as to make her a better person.”

“And sometimes does she misunderstand your meaning, and take it for something else?”

“Oh yes,” he said, nodding that it was one of the great miseries of his life. “Sometimes she takes what I say all wrong. This is very frustrating for a father.”

Tom’s smile widened. “It is the same way in this. The intention was good—to say that people must not murder one another because their life is sacred.

“But by that same truth, your life is sacred as well and others may not take your lives.”

“But if we kill in self-defense, then we have taken a sacred life.”

“If they murder or attempt to murder, they have violated the highest law of life itself and then they have forfeited their right to their own life. You have the right to defend yourself and if necessary kill them to preserve your own life or the innocent life of those you love and protect.”

“That’s called Q-seventeen authority,” River said.

Her father frowned in confusion. “Q-seventeen?”

“Yes,” she said. “It is often difficult to understand the things Tom says. Believe me, I have had a difficult time of it. His language is sometimes strange to my ears. But I learned that to kill because it is justified to protect yourself or other innocent people, it is called Q-seventeen authority.”

The frowning chief looked from her up to Tom. “Is what my daughter says true?”

Tom made a face. “Well... yes. Our people—the Sky People—call this Q-seventeen authority, but that is only our way of speaking, our language. You simply call it self-defense.

“The point is,” Tom went on, “the Wolf People do not have the right to take your lives, just as you have no right to go out and kill them. That’s murder.

“When they come to make war and kill you, your duty is to protect your own lives even if it means you must kill them. Sometimes the threat of force—making others believe they will die if they try to harm you—is the best way to discourage them from killing. Then no one fights, and no one dies.”

Walking Stag took a step closer. “Does this mean that when the Wolf People come tomorrow, and they try to kill us, it is our right to fight back and kill them if we must to make them stop?”

“That’s right,” Tom said.

“It’s more than right,” River told Walking Stag. “They have no right to our lives. We must fight back, or we are betraying the true meaning of the law the Sky People gave us.”

The frowning chief looked to Tom. “Is this true, then, as my daughter says?”

“It is,” Tom said with a nod.

He looked like he still feared to accept the simple truth of it, so River urged Big Dog forward and had him sit before the chief.

“When I found Big Dog as a pup and raised him by my side, what is it you always told me?”

Her father smiled slightly at the memory. “I told you to always trust your dog.”

“And what did you mean by that?”

“I meant that your dog will know if someone is a bad person and means you harm.”

“When those Wolf People warriors up on Spirit Mountain followed me and tried to kill me, Big Dog attacked them to protect me. When we went into the Wolf People village to rescue Flower, Big Dog scared people who tried to harm me away from us and he would have killed anyone who tried to kill me.

“Big Dog just naturally follows the law as the Sky People intended it, as our sun father meant when he created us. Big Dog is a friend to good people and would never harm them, but he will fight anyone who intends me harm. He will kill to protect me. It is his nature, as nature intends. Good should always fight against evil when it tries to harm you.”

“Raging River has it right,” Tom said.

Her father was nodding. “I think we understand now. We have been as foolish as children, and in that foolishness, have let others kill our people.”

Tears welled up in his eyes as he gazed out over all the people watching. “No more,” he said in a strong, clear voice of the chief that rang out over all those gathered. “We do not murder, but from now on we will fight to protect ourselves and the lives of those who are innocent. To the death if we must.”

Tom grinned. “Chief Standing Bear, you are a good and wise chief. You understand what I have come all this way to tell you. You understand what your ancestors misunderstood. You are a wise chief to correct the mistakes of the past.”

The chief frowned. “I have always wondered something. Where do the Sky People come from? Where is it that you live?”

Tom pointed up at the sky. Everyone looked up with him.

“I come from out there, among the stars.”

“Then you look down on our people, the way our Sun Father intended.”

Tom nodded as he smiled. “That’s right. And just as Father Sun does not tell you how to live your lives, neither do we.

“But my time here grows short. Now that I have set things right again, I will soon have to leave.”

“But the Wolf People are coming tomorrow for a war,” River said. “You can’t leave us before then. I started this war when I killed trying to save my sister and then when we rode in to their village and we stole her back. You must be here tomorrow. I need your help. Please. It’s important.”

He rested a hand on her shoulder. “I can stay at least that long.”

“But they are coming for war,” her father said in a worried voice.

Raging River showed him a cunning smile.

“I have a plan.”

## Chapter 20

It was a clear, bright day for war. River had let Tom sleep in her small home while she spent the night with She Who Knows the Moon. The old woman was eager to hear all that had happened.

River had been up for hours, painting black bands across the eyes of all the warriors. She told them that it was the mask of the priestess and would give them power. Men often believed what a woman told them. She hoped they believed it when they went into the battle. She hoped it would help them.

They had all been in the square and had heard what Tom had told them. They had heard what their chief had told them, that they would protect themselves.

She called to Tom from outside her small home. He pulled back the covering of the doorway and smiled to her.

“Oh good,” he said. “I was just getting up.”

He was pulling together parts of his dull black outfit. It made a strange sound as the open pieces joined together and became one. It seemed like magic, but he had assured her that he had no magic.

River was taken by surprise to see him without his big round mask. She was used to him in it all the time. Without the big round mask, she could see that he had the head of a normal man. She supposed she shouldn’t be surprised by that, but she was, just a little. She was also surprised to see that his hair was a lighter color than that of her people. She had never seen hair like his before, and like everything else about him, she found it captivating.

“I’m sorry if I called you too soon,” she told him. She hadn’t wanted to disturb him, but she was worried without him nearby.

He was holding the round mask under an arm. “No, no. I was talking with Control. My time is running out.”

Big Dog went right up to him, tail wagging, looking for attention. Tom smiled broadly and scratched Big Dog under the chin. Big Dog barked once. It was his “Let’s play” bark.

“Not now, Big Dog. Maybe later.”

River didn’t know that the Sky People understood dog barks, but clearly Tom did, because that was exactly what Big Dog wanted. Tom took a deep breath, as if the air was the best he had ever breathed.

“Boy, something smells good. I’m starving.”

“You will have to wait until later,” she told him.

“It’s been a long time since I had such a good night’s sleep in such a wonderful place. I wish I could stay here forever.”

“I wish so as well, but it may not be wonderful for long. The Wolf People will likely start out at dawn, so they will be here soon.”

“Right. Time for a war.”

“Do you think my plan will work?”

He gripped her shoulders and faced her squarely. “You are the only one who can make it work. This is your time. I will be there beside you. I believe in you.”

River couldn’t help smiling. Then, she couldn’t resist hugging him. It was more of a brotherly hug, she told herself. He hugged her back and it was wonderful. Then they separated.

“Walking Stag is a lucky man.”

River frowned. “Why would you say that?”

Tom laughed. “Because he is, that’s all.”

He slipped his big round mask down over his head a little crooked, then turned it straight. The ring on the top of his dark outfit and the one on the mask slid together until she heard a click. He finally looked normal again.

Together River and Tom went to the edge of the village and watched as Walking Stag put all his young warriors in a line, preparing to fight. Tom walked up to him and put a hand on his shoulder.

“Good job, Walking Stag. Good job. They look very fine.”

Walking Stag beamed. “Thank you.”

“But do you mind if I make a few suggestions?”

“I’m sure you know more about fighting war than I do. It would be an honor to have any suggestion from a Sky man.”

“All right, then, here’s what we want to do. The object is to gain an advantage before any fighting starts. What you want to do is look formidable so that they have second thoughts about attacking.

“Right now, your men are all lined up right here in front of the broad passageway into your village. That’s fine, and I see why you did it—to protect the village and your people—but let’s move them to positions where they will be more effective at fighting if your priestess can’t stop the war, what do you say?”

Walking Stag was eager for the help. River suspected the young warrior was nervous because he was in charge and had no experience. She was glad to see that he had no jealousy and instead listened carefully, taking Tom’s suggestions seriously. Listening and learning was the mark of a wise man. She had chosen Walking Stag for the task because she had believed he was the right man, and now he was showing that he was.

As River watched, her father joined her.

“What is he doing?”

“He is making it to give the Wolf People fear of attacking, and if they do and there is a war, we will have a better chance. I think he is positioning the men in a way that they can trap and overpower the Wolf People warriors if they come in to attack.”

Her father nodded. Then he pointed off toward the horizon.

“They come.”

“How do you know? I can’t see them.”

“I can see the hint of dust they raise.”

“When they come,” River said, “I would like to be the one to speak to them. Chief Three Fingers knows me. He said I was brave. I think that it would go better if a woman talked to him.”

“You want to speak for us? Why is a woman better?”

“Because what a woman says is less of a challenge than the same words coming from a man, and more believable as truth.”

“Do you really think it makes that much difference? When they have their mind set on war, what difference could it make? I am the chief of the Sun People. Chief Three Fingers will expect to talk to our chief, man-to-man.”

River smiled as she patted the flat of her hand on her father’s chest.

“Yes, there is no question that you are brave, but please, Father, I am the priestess. Besides, all of this is my doing. I am the one who killed Chief Three Fingers’s son and angered them to war. If I am the one facing him, maybe instead of war he will kill me and be satisfied.”

“You do not think we can win a war with them?”

“It doesn’t matter if I believe it. Chief Three Fingers must believe it. If I can make him have reason to fear war, then maybe there will be no war. If killing me will be enough to satisfy his bloodlust, then so be it. I would

make the sacrifice of my life if it will prevent a war in which many people die.”

He looked down at her for a long time, the creases in his face looking more tight than usual.

“Chief Three Fingers is right. You are brave. Foolish at times, but brave. I will let you speak for us, but I will be right beside you. If it goes badly, then maybe our priestess and our chief will be all the blood he needs today.”

## Chapter 21

River stood tall as she waited for Chief Three Fingers and his war party to approach. On her left arm she wore the Sky People armband she had gotten up on Spirit Mountain. Tom had told her that she should keep it. He had even shown her how to make it light up with lines and symbols—he said just for the fun of it.

To River, it was as close to a spiritual object as she could imagine. In her most desperate hour, it had called the Sky People. It had brought Tom, the most amazing, kind, beautiful man she had ever met. It felt good on her arm.

To her left, but back half a step, her father stood tall and proud in his finest deerskin vest, which her mother had decorated in designs made with beads. Half a dozen steps behind him were his advisors, close enough to hear, but not close enough to interrupt. River hadn't wanted to present the impression that she needed to have a strong force standing with her.

She wanted to be the strong force.

To her right stood the tall figure of Tom, the Sky man, in his dull black outfit with the smooth designs on it. His mask was open so that the Wolf People could see his face and not think he was some kind of evil monster, but know that he was a man, like them. Well, not like them, but a man nonetheless.

All of Walking Stag's men were positioned as Tom had suggested. There were discrete units of men, each with spears and shields. Each line of men was positioned at an angle, with spaces separating each block of men. Each unit was stepped back as they were positioned farther out from the village. In the center, closest to the village, were the archers as the last wall of defense.

All of the men in each rank had spears leveled in the exact same position. It looked seriously menacing seeing all those men in precise formations,

shields overlapping, with their spears sticking out, ready to kill.

Tom said that the angled formations created a funnel that was designed to force the enemy together into what he called the kill zone. Once they charged in, the formations would close around them, driving them together for the archers. It was clear that Tom knew what he was talking about and it had given Walking Stag a great deal of confidence.

In addition to the painted lines and symbols Walking Stag had designed, all of the men had the black masks River had painted across their eyes, the sign of their priestess. For the first time, she thought that the warriors of the Sun People looked intimidating.

Chief Three Fingers, along with his war chiefs, all of them in wolf furs and different feathers denoting their rank, along with several dozen of the strongest warriors painted in frightening war paint, came to a halt as a large, aggressive group in front of River, her father, and Tom. In order to keep herself from trembling, she reminded herself that her name was Raging River. She held that rage in her heart.

Back a short distance was a great mass of Wolf People warriors standing at rest, all with spears and axes and other weapons. Behind all those warriors, there were old people, young people, and even a great many women, all come to watch the war. Come to watch the great victory of their warriors. To these people it would be a game, a slaughter, with no risk to themselves.

River bowed her head out of respect as the enemy came to a halt before her. “Chief Three Fingers, I am honored to face you again.”

That puzzled him. “You find it an honor to die at our hands?”

River considered her words carefully, words she had lain awake all night going over in her head.

“Yes, an honor because I respect your strength.”

Everyone waited in rapt silence until she went on.

“I do not deny that I killed your son. Great Hawk has been here before and taken the lives of my people. Great Hawk then hid in the tall grass like a coward in order to take my sister. It is easy to look like a big strong warrior when your quarry is a little girl.”

There were grumbles from the warriors behind the chief.

“Like the lives of our people that Great Hawk has taken in the past, her life belongs to her, not to him or anyone else. It was my duty to protect my defenseless little sister. So, I killed him. For that matter, it is my duty to protect all of my people. So, I killed him. Given the chance, I would do it again.

“I know that it hurts your heart and angers you that your son was killed, and even more that he was killed by a mere woman. But he was a warrior against a child, so being killed by a woman was no less than he deserved.

“It is only natural that you would be angered by the loss of your son as well as the other warrior with the tall feathers I killed yesterday. I am angered by the loss of so many of my people.

“You can take my life for revenge if that is your wish. I am not strong enough to stop you. Just as my little sister was not strong enough to fight off Great Hawk.

“I ask of you only to hear me out, first.”

Chief Three Fingers, even though he looked angry, gave her a nod to grant that last request.

River gestured to Tom standing beside her. “I called the Sky People and they have come to lift the law that has resulted in the death of so many of our people. We no longer live by that law.

“We will no longer be victims.

“Know that if you choose to take my life, then that will be the beginning of a war, and all of those Sun warriors behind me will fight.

“Do not mistake as weakness our past adherence to a misunderstood law that cost so many of our lives. It takes great strength to face death to uphold a belief, even if that belief was a false one.

“You have not yet faced our strength.

“If you choose revenge, it will be the beginning of a war, a war the likes of which you cannot begin to imagine. It will not end today. Instead, the battle that begins today will be but the beginning of war as you have never seen it.

“We will show no mercy.

“Your people will never sleep safely again, for in the night we will come with knives to slice your throats. You will never again drink water to quench your thirst without wondering if this time it is yet again poisoned. You will never again be able to hunt without our warriors lying in wait to cut down any hunting party. You will never again sleep in the warmth of your tents without wondering if this cold night will be the night we send burning arrows out of the darkness into your warm tents to light them all afire. You will never again be able to watch your children at play without an arrow coming out of nowhere to take their life. You will never again be able to eat in peace without wondering if we have slipped into your stores and poisoned them. You will never again be able to lie with your wives without the fear that while you are preoccupied we will drive a spear through the both of you at once as you lie together.

“Right now, you see us as weak. If this war starts, you will see us in your nightmares. The Sun People will haunt your every thought, your every waking moment, your every action, your sleep. You will never again have a moment at peace.

“It will not stop until there is not a single one of your people to ever again wake to see the sun. This is the way of war, and what the law given to our people was meant to prevent, but it did not work. So, if you decide to take

my life, it will be the beginning of a war to the death of the last one of you. And like all war, it will be a tragic loss of lives.

“Sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers will all die to no end. We will be ruthless and savage. Like the sun we were named for, we will come for you every day. My people will have their revenge and kill your people. Your people will in turn want yet more revenge.

“If you want to kill me and lust for that terrible war to begin, then it will. It is your choice.

“But be warned. Once started, this war will be to the death. We fully intend that if this war starts, we will not stop until we wipe every last one of the Wolf People from existence.”

River let that all sink in a moment before going on.

“But if you want instead to live in peace, without your people and my people having to live in constant fear of dying for nothing, then we must set aside revenge and blame because revenge and blame has no end until one side is killed to the last person.

“That is the way life has been. We understand that life was difficult and so it was the strongest who survived. That was the way to be the ones who lived. But that time must come to an end. We must grow beyond that way of the past. We must rise above our past. There must be a new way.

“For peace, we must all instead decide that we are brave enough to say enough, and we will have peace. We both have bloodlust and revenge in our hearts. We must be brave enough to set that lust aside so that it will one day die out, even if only in those new born in a world without war. We must be brave enough to let all our people live their lives in peace. We must be brave enough to let others live their lives in peace.

“We must value life above all else.

“If you want to live your lives in peace with love of life, then the only way is for the killing to stop. Here. Now. There is no other way.”

River looked out at all the grim faces watching her, waiting to see what she would say next. She went on and said the last thing that any of them would have expected.

“We have prepared a great feast today, with roasted boar, venison, turkey, smoked fish, baked bread, along with many other delicious foods. If you wish to live in peace from now on, then we invite you to come into our village as our friends and have a great celebration feast with us as the end of war and killing.

“It will be only the first of many celebrations of our people trading with each other, and having gatherings and feasts together, even finding wives and husbands in the village of the other. It will be the beginning of a common goal of the joy of life. Such a peace will make the Wolf People and the Sun People stronger together than we have ever been apart.

“Any hotheaded young warrior can say ‘There will be war.’ Only the strongest chief can say ‘There will be peace.’

“So, choose, great chief. War and endless killing, or a great feast to celebrate the first day of a lasting peace between our people. A joyous day when we can shed tears of joy instead of tears of sorrow and pain.

“Yesterday you said I was brave. I believe you are brave and a great enough chief of your people that you could be the first chief to make peace.”

After the silence seemed to stretch on forever, Chief Three Fingers finally looked from her to her father, Standing Bear.

“Your daughter is strongheaded.”

“You are not telling me anything I do not know.”

“Daughters are difficult,” Chief Three Fingers said. “I had three sons and one daughter. The sons together were not as much trouble as the one daughter.”

“I have no sons, but I have two daughters.”

Chief Three Fingers grunted. “Then you must be a strong man who can raise two daughters.”

“My youngest, Morning Flower, is still too small to cause me much burning in my stomach, but I can tell you, this daughter here has been a constant test of my good humor. Worse, she was named priestess without my knowledge or permission.”

Chief Three Fingers grunted again as he nodded. “That must have caused you many sleepless nights.”

Standing Bear nodded in agreement. “To this day.”

Chief Three Fingers thought in silence for a time, then nodded to himself.

“Though raising this one must have been a trial for you, I think you should be proud of her. She is a worthy priestess. I wish we had one so wise and so brave.”

Standing Bear only smiled as he waited. It seemed that everyone was holding their breath.

“The Wolf People choose to end the killing here, today,” Chief Three Fingers announced in a loud voice as he turned from side to side so all could hear him. “The Wolf People choose to be brave enough to let go of revenge and war. A wise chief knows that it must stop somewhere.

“It stops here, today.

“The Wolf People choose to feast with our new friends, the Sun People, to celebrate the peace of our lives together into the future.”

Silence rang across the countryside for a long moment, and then the warriors on both sides erupted in cheers and shouts of joy, throwing their spears, war hammers, and bows into the air.

Both chiefs embraced.

River thought she saw tears in their eyes.

Tom gripped River's hand and gave it a squeeze.

## Chapter 22

The celebration feast was more than River could have hoped it would be. She had expected everyone to be reserved and hesitant. They were not.

One of the Wolf war chiefs jumped on his horse and raced back to their village to tell everyone the news. By late afternoon, the whole Wolf People village, it seemed, had rushed to come to the celebration. There were so many people the village of the Sun People couldn't hold them all, so the feast spilled out to the surrounding countryside. Some of the Wolf People brought tents and game and many of their specialties and started cooking to help supply all the people with food.

Other Wolf war chiefs brought back the grinding stone and placed it in the large square to cheers from everyone.

It was a joyous feast beyond what anyone could have expected, even River. Warriors from each side embraced and compared their war paint designs and wrestled with their arms in contests of strength, laughing with each other over who won each match. Women from both peoples hugged and chatted. Children joined together in games, laughing and cavorting.

River found Chief Three Fingers and Chief Standing Bear sitting side by side on a wall in the center of the village, watching the roasting of a wild boar, waiting to be the first to have their choice of meat. They invited River to come sit with them. Chief Three Fingers moved over and patted the wall, inviting River to sit between them.

“It is only fitting,” the chief of the Wolf People said, “that you sit in the first council of the two great chiefs.”

“I would be honored,” River said.

As she sat down, she called Big Dog. He came eagerly, tail wagging, happy as could be with all the people. Everyone was giving him tasty morsels, so he was a happy dog.

Big Dog put his nose up to Chief Three Fingers, smelling this new person. The chief held out a hand. River held her breath, hoping the chief didn't lose another finger.

Instead, Big Dog licked his hand.

Chief Three Fingers chuckled and then scratched behind Big Dog's ears, something he loved.

"He is different than all the other dogs of your village," Chief Three Fingers said. "All the others are smaller, with short, brown hair and skinny tails. This one is a wolf dog, you know. He has a lot of wolf in him."

"So I have been told," River said.

"You know, I had a big strong dog that was mated by a wild wolf one time. She went off to give birth, as dogs like to do. When she came back, nearly a full moon later, she carried her pups back, first moving one, then the other, then another, bringing them back home."

"And Big Dog looks just like the pups you raised from your dog," River said.

Chief Three Fingers laughed a deep jolly laugh. "You jumped ahead. I was going to surprise you by telling you that!"

Chief Standing Bear leaned around her to speak with the other chief. "It is hard to surprise this one. I can never tell a joke without her telling me the end before I get there."

Walking Stag came up then and held out his hand to River. "We are having a dancing ring with some of the warriors from the Wolf People, and some of our women and some of theirs. Will you come and be part of it?"

"Oh, I don't know—"

Chief Three Fingers elbowed her. “Go. Dance. My daughter is there. Her name is Laughing Fox. As much sleep as I lose because she thinks she knows more than me, she makes my heart happy when I look upon her. She would love to meet the woman who brought peace and this great feast. She badgers me all the time, telling me that we should make peace. She talks to me as if she knows more than her chief and father.”

River’s father leaned in again. “You too? I thought I was the only chief who had to bear the burden of a daughter who thought she knew more than the chief.”

Chief Three Fingers let out a long-suffering sigh. “We are both troubled men. But we are lucky men, I would say.” He looked back up at River. “Now Laughing Fox is joyous that we are at peace... because of you. Go, dance, talk to her. You two can plot against your fathers together.”

River had to laugh. She touched the arm of each chief, then went and met his daughter. Walking Stag was all grins that River was joining him.

Talking as best they could while dancing, River and Laughing Fox found that they had a lot in common. They made plans for something River had wanted very much to do for a long time. Laughing Fox liked the idea.

Once the plans were made, they went back to dancing with the boys. They laughed with a joy none of them had ever before known in their lives.

And then River saw Tom signal to her.

## Chapter 23

As he put his big round mask on over his head, River's heart sank. She knew what it meant.

She ran to him. "Is it time?"

He gave her a brave smile. "I'm afraid so. The initiation of the quarantine is going to begin shortly. My command tried, wasn't able to delay it. I can't be here any longer or I will be... well, let's just say I would like to have a long life, as I still have a great deal more I would like to see."

"In a short time, as you celebrate, I will be up on my ship among the stars. Once that happens, your people will never again have to fear that you will be visited by anyone who might cause them trouble."

River's hand clutched his arm. "I would never fear you coming down from the stars."

He smiled as he touched her cheek. "You did good, River. No, you did better than good. I would never have expected all that I would see and experience when you called me down from the sky."

"You are a worthy priestess. Your people are lucky to have you. Everyone is lucky to have you. From now on, your laws and your ways are your own. Life is what you make of it. I have great confidence after seeing how you handled everything, and how everyone reacted to reason. That is the mark of an intelligent species. I can't tell you, River, how proud I am of you."

River swallowed back the lump in her throat. "Is it lonely, up among the stars?"

He looked into her eyes for a long moment. She saw a deep sadness there.

"It never was before. It will be now."

She put her hand over her mouth for a moment to stop her jaw from trembling.

“I can’t stand to see you go.”

“I’ll tell you what. You wear that armband. As long as it is on you during the quarantine operation, it won’t be destroyed. In a few days, when the quarantine procedure is complete, it will be safe to take off as you like.

“Whenever I pass this sector, I will send you a signal.” He pointed. “When you see it light up here, you will know it’s me.”

River wiped a tear back from her cheek. “I will send a kiss into the sky when I see it.”

“I will catch it.”

Tom kissed a finger and then touched it to her cheek as he smiled at her in a way that meant the world. She returned a smile that meant the world.

The two chiefs stood when Tom went to meet them. He locked arms with both men in turn.

“We will miss you,” River’s father said.

“We will miss you, and we will always remember what you have done for us,” Chief Three Fingers said.

Chief Standing Bear lifted his chin. “We will remember you longer.”

Everyone in earshot laughed. Both chiefs laughed.

“Commander,” the female voice River remembered all too well crackled from inside Tom’s mask. “You’re coming up on the quarantine window. Have you straightened out the situation down there?”

“Yes,” he said, confidently. “Everything has been set right. But a remarkable woman named Raging River did most of the work. When I get

back up to my ship, I'll upload the event recorder and let you see it all for yourself.”

“All right, Commander. Commit to the lift on my mark.”

“Roger, Control.”

“What is that word? ‘Commander’?” Chief Three Fingers asked River.

“I think it means the same as chief,” River told him.

He nodded solemnly. “We are honored to have been visited by the Sky People chief,” he told Tom.

Tom clapped him on a shoulder and then turned to sweep an arm out.

“Please, everyone, I need a little space.”

River helped urge people back out of the way, then turned and stood alone to watch.

Commander Tom stepped to the center of the cleared area as he took a last look around. Then he pressed the side of his mask and in an instant the black face covering came down.

As he stood, arms at his side, everyone waiting in rapt silence, the muffled female voice came from inside his mask.

“Lift locked in, Commander. Ready... mark.”

A bright star appeared high up in the daytime sky, bright enough to make everyone look up. People oohed and aahed.

Then the whole world seemed to shudder. Dust blew outward in an expanding ring.

A thin thread that looked like a cloud shot up into the sky. When River looked back, Tom was gone. She heard a boom shake the buildings.

And then the star winked out and was gone.

## Chapter 24

River took Morning Flower's little hand in hers. "Careful. This part is steep and there are a lot of loose rocks. I don't want you to fall."

Her little sister held tight to River's hand. "I won't," she protested. "I'm not as little as you think. I know what I'm doing."

River had to laugh to herself, wondering if that was the way she appeared to her parents.

Flower was excited to be on an outing with her big sister that took them days away from their village and adult supervision. Big Dog watched her every step, looking ready to grab her clothes in his teeth and help hold her up if need be.

It was the least tense River had ever felt away from home. Until the peace, she would have had to think hard about making such a journey. Hunts were always a nerve-racking affair. For once she didn't have to constantly look over her shoulder.

After the Wolf People and the Sun People made peace, other people soon found out and wanted to join in and reap the benefits. Everyone was only too happy to have peace treaties. They were always marked with a great feast.

Still, Walking Stag worried for them on their journey. He said that anything could happen. They could fall, they could be attacked by a boar or a bear. So, he had come with them to watch over everyone. He mostly watched over River. She couldn't say she didn't like him watching over her.

"Hurry," Laughing Fox called down to them as she motioned with her hand. "The view from up here is unbelievable!"

Chief Three Fingers's daughter and River were quickly becoming steadfast friends. Both being the daughters of chiefs, they had a lot of similarities.

Especially the common complaints about their fathers and how overly protective they were, but at the same time, how much they both respected the wisdom of their chiefs.

River and Flower finally reached the broad ledge where Laughing Fox waited. Together they gazed out across the world under a bright, baking sun. It seemed they could look forever. It was a beautiful sight, but what interested River the most, and the reason for their journey, was the smooth wall of reddish rock behind them under a protective overhang.

This was the place where people came to tell the story of their people with pictures drawn on the stone. River had quite the story to draw on the wall. Flower, too, was eager to tell a story.

It was considered a mark of importance to have drawn something on the wall. Everyone approached the honor with great respect and reverence. This day, they came to the task with the blessing of their chiefs. They had been charged with leaving a record of the most important event in their lives.

Laughing Fox was excited to tell of the peace between peoples. All the pictures already drawn on the wall were done with great restraint, saving the most important events in the lives of their people to be presented for all time. They would do the same.

As they began to carve their drawings into the soft stone, Big Dog curled up in a sunny spot for a nap. Walking Stag stood leaning with both hands on his spear as he looked out over the world while the three of them went about marking out their drawings in a nice clear spot.

River was particularly pleased to see Flower's drawing, down low to the side. There was a stick figure to one side, and a smaller stick figure to the other.

"This one is you, River," she said. "This one is me."

"I can see that," River said.

Flower put her finger on the figure in the middle with the big round head, holding both their hands.

“This is Tom,” Flower said.

River smiled. She couldn’t help but look up into the sky.

And then she began to carve out her own drawing of the Sky People, and her drawing of Tom in his big mask that looked like a big round head in the drawings.

Together, they spent the afternoon drawing their stories. Later in the afternoon, Walking Stag came back to tell them that he had caught some fish they could have for their evening meal. He had even made a fire and started the fish.

As he walked past the drawings, he studied them carefully.

“Your picture of Tom is very good, River.”

“Thank you. He was an amazing Sky man.”

“He taught me how to fight a war and kill people if I had to. You made it so that I didn’t have to. I am thankful that you are our priestess.”

“Me too,” Laughing Fox said. “She made peace between our people and now none of us has to worry about fighting and killing.”

“I will miss Tom,” Flower said.

River’s fingertips touched her own picture of him that she had carved into the wall. He looked so handsome in his dark clothes and big round head mask.

She had only known him for two days. He would be in her heart as long as she lived.

For all time, now, the drawing of Commander Tom would be protected there for all people to see, both her picture, and Flower's of Tom holding hands with each of them.

Laughing Fox drew a picture of the two chiefs at peace, hunting together, chasing a buck with bows and arrows.

It was good to have such a record for people who would come after them.

River checked the armband, as she had so often since Tom had left.

There was no signal.

Tom belonged to the sky, now.

We hope you enjoyed this book.

Terry Goodkind's next book is coming in spring 2019

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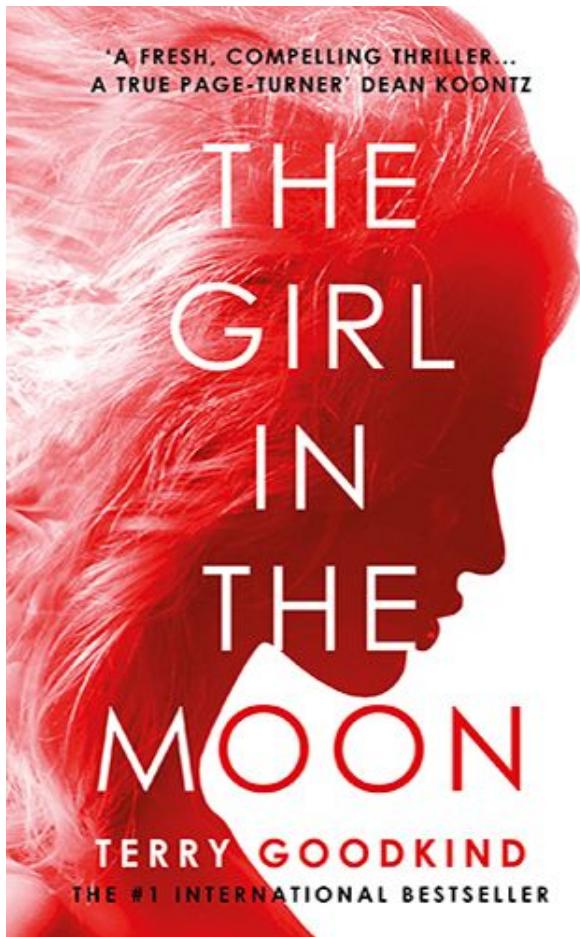
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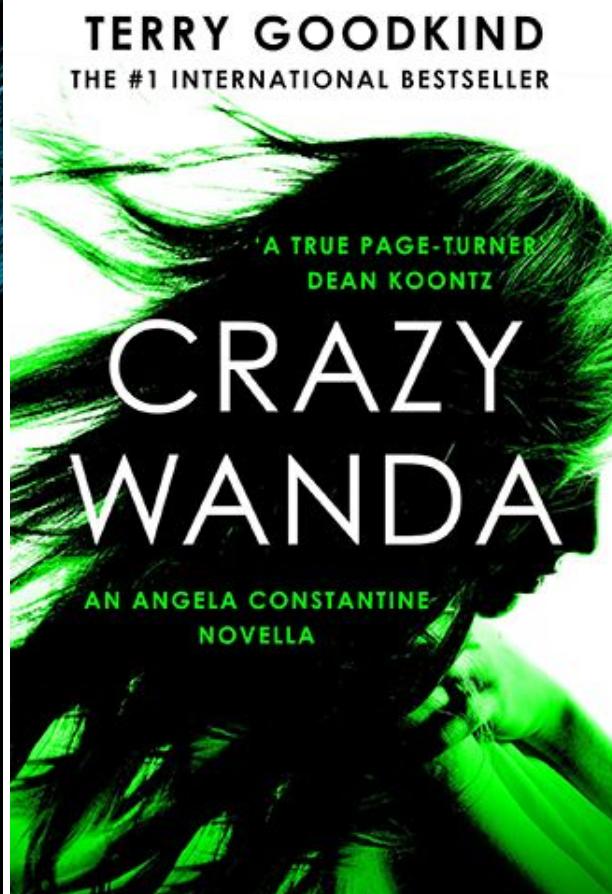
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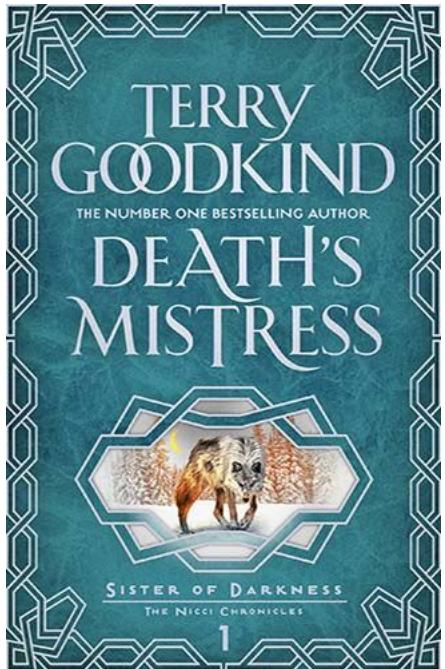


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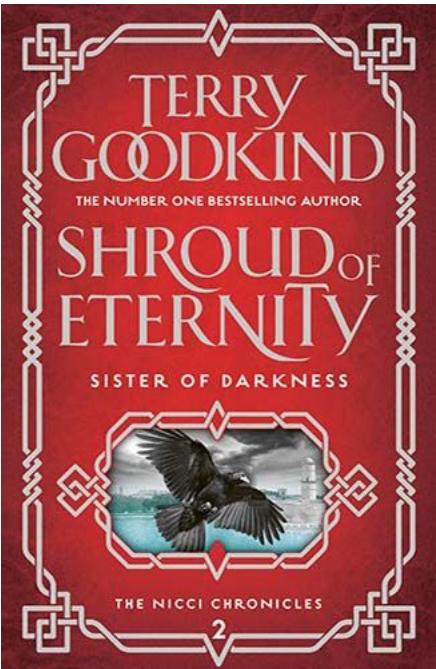
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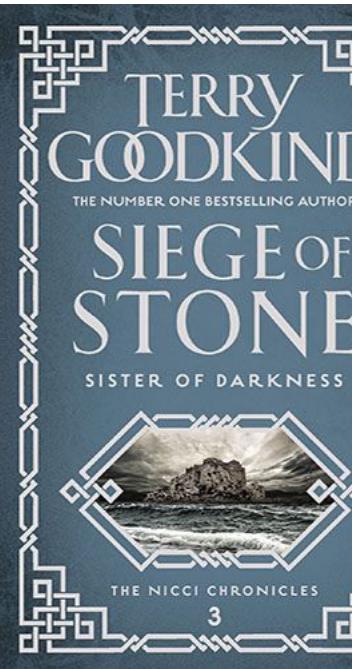


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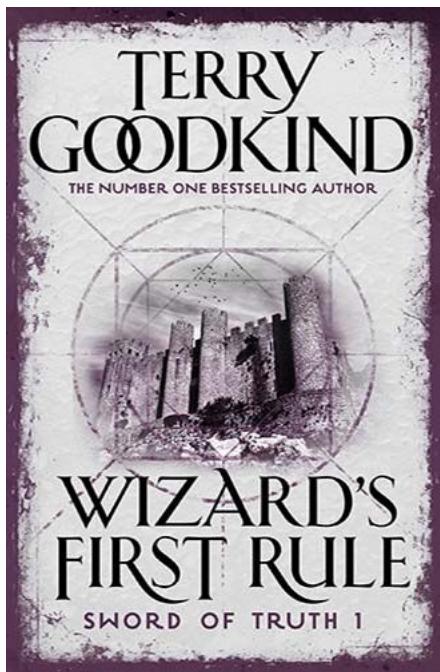
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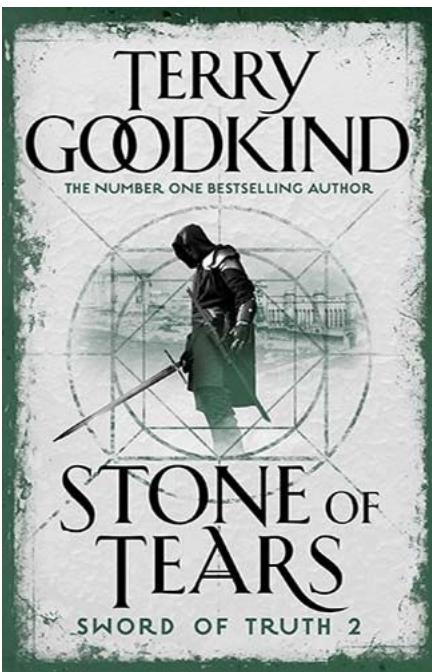
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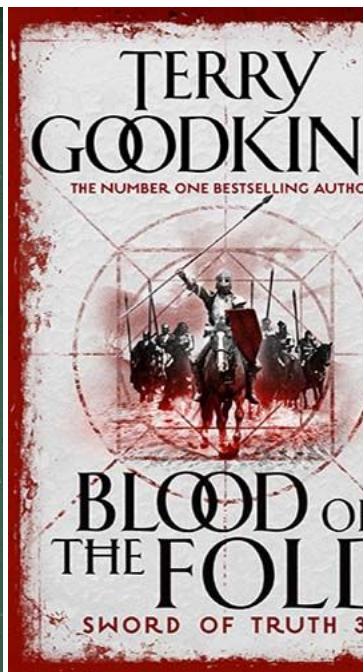
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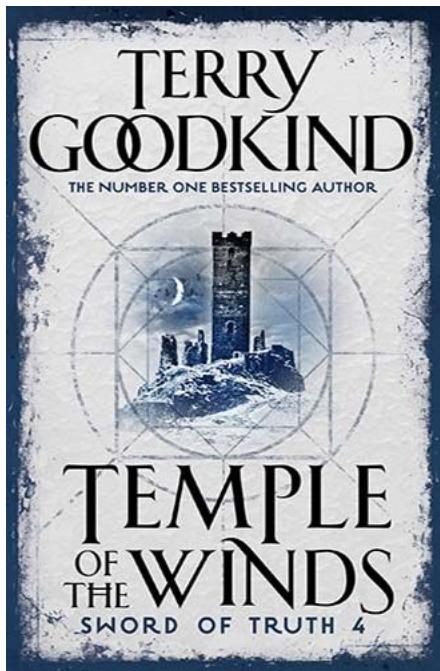
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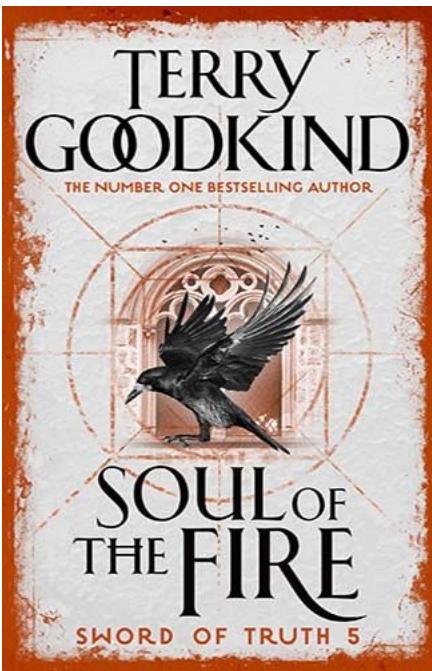
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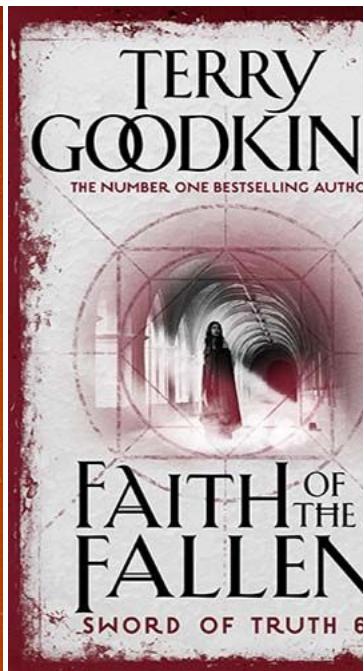
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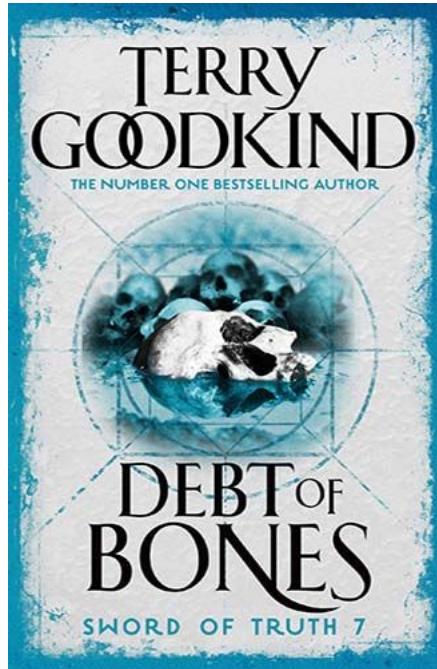
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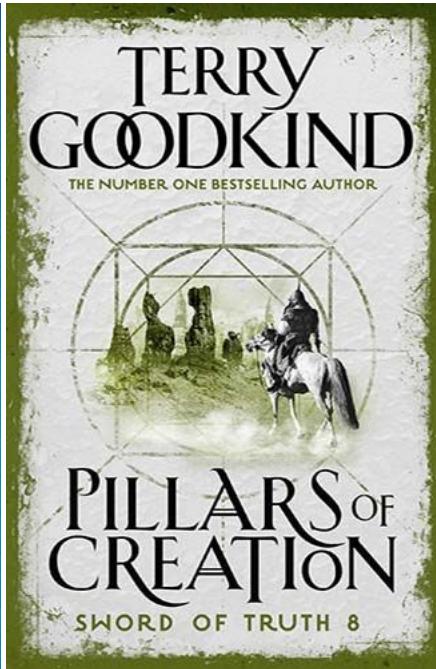
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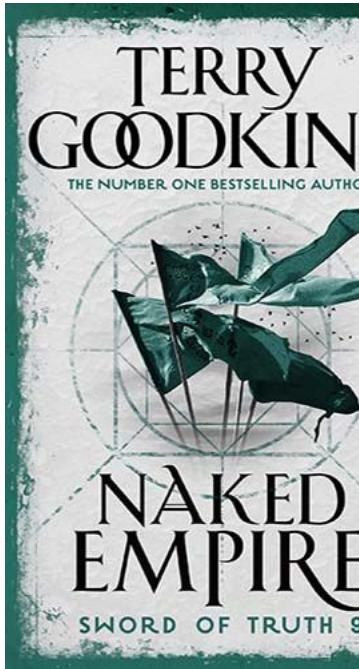
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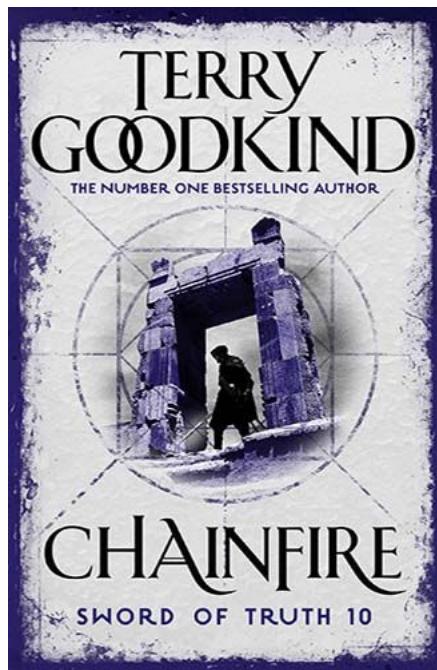
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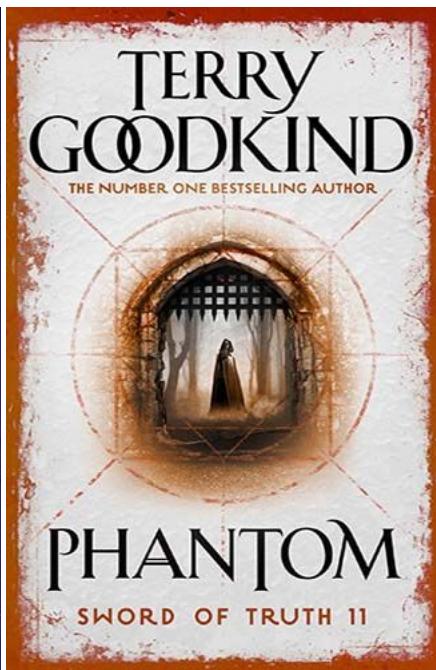
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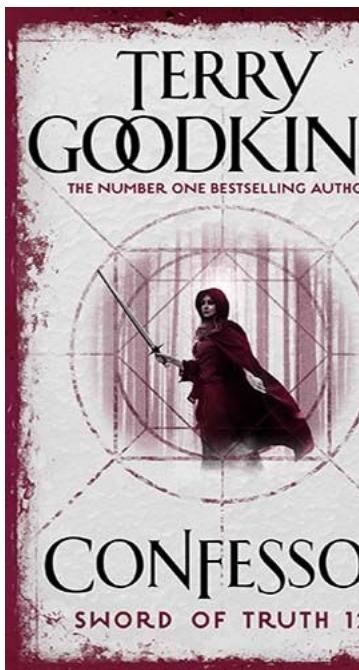
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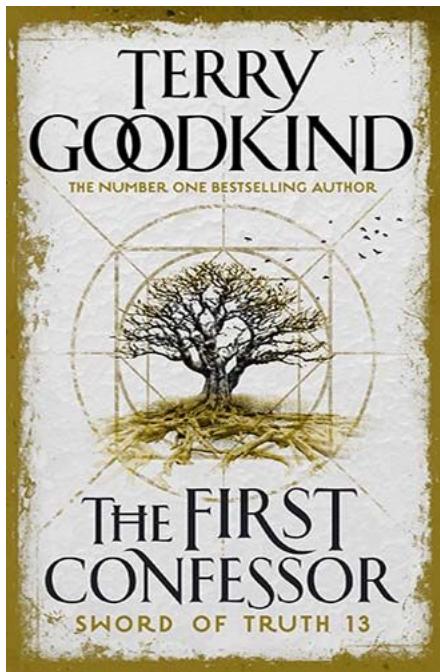
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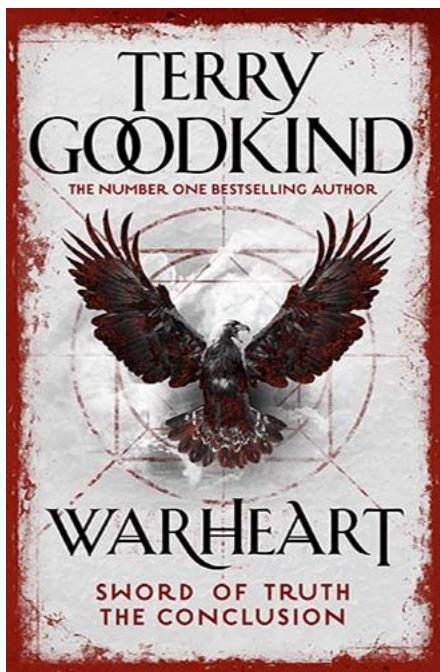
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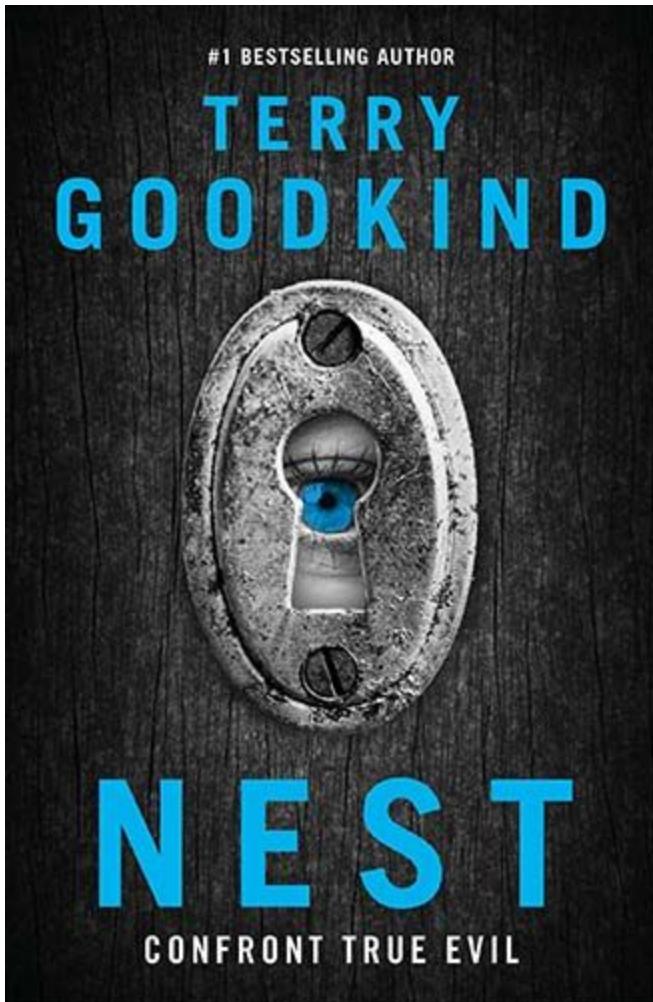
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