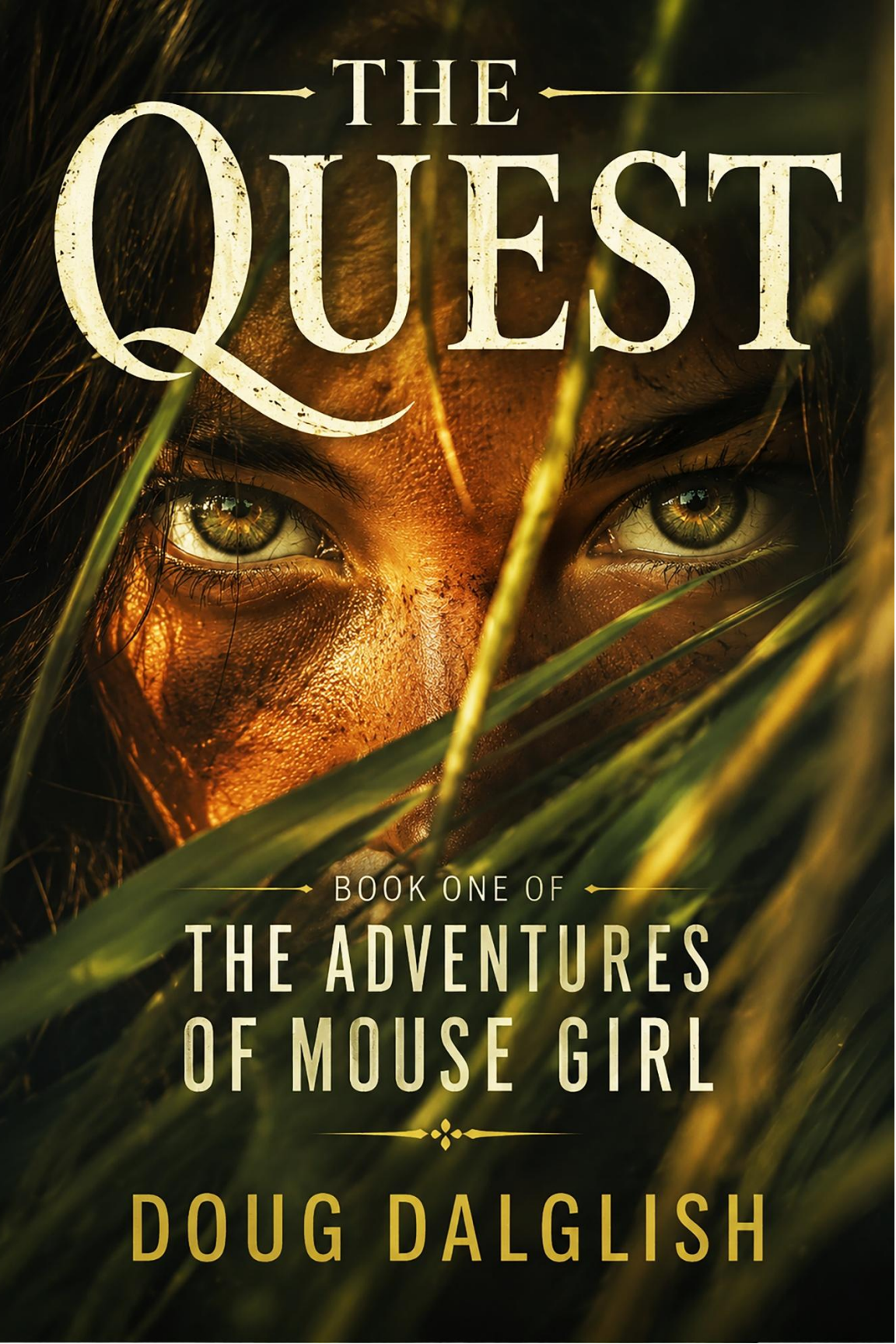
THE
QUEST
BOOK ONE OF
THE ADVENTURES
OF MOUSE GIRL
DOUG DALGLISH

The Quest

Book One of
The Adventures of Mouse Girl

By Doug Dalglish

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Dedicated to those who seek to understand the mysteries of the natural world.

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ONE: Coyote

(*In which we meet Ocelot Girl and Mouse Girl. Mouse Girl's mission is a failure and Frog Boy is lost. The story of origination is told. Beaver Boy and Ringtail Boy are chosen as guardians.)*

Ocelot Girl was perfect. She was fast, strong, and agile. She could outrun, outclimb, and outfight any other kid in the tribe. And she was smart. The adults of the tribe spoke to her almost like an equal. Her grandmother was the eldest member of the tribe's elders. It was assumed that Ocelot Girl would be an important and powerful person in the tribe's future. It went without saying that the members of Ocelot girl's quest followed her orders without question.

The other young people on Ocelot Girl's quest were almost as awesome as she was. Snake Girl was tall and brave. Beaver Boy knew the forests and prairie like no one else his age. Deer girl was smart and fast. Otter Girl was the tribe's best hunter, even though she was not yet an adult. Mouse Boy was an all-around good guy, except for his sister.

Mouse Boy's sister, Mouse Girl, was a problem. She was the leader of the tribe's second quest. The members of the second quest were losers—literally. They were put on the second quest because they had lost in every competition the young people of the Bird tribe faced as they grew up. The winners were the first quest. The losers were the second quest. Everyone knew that. That was the way it always was and the way it would always be. The Bird tribe was big on tradition.

But, back to Mouse Girl. One of the ancient traditions of the Bird tribe was absolute equality of all people. And Mouse Girl, the leader of the second quest, believed that she and her quest of losers were actually equal to everyone else. That was the problem. She would not accept years of evidence that they

were slower, dumber, and generally less awesome than the kids of the first quest.

Tradition was important, but it should never be allowed to obscure reality. Mouse Girl's belief in tradition, in the ideals of the Bird tribe, was a constant annoyance.

Mouse Girl's current status was an excellent example. She and her quest had spent the morning attempting the latest of the elders' challenges. They were told that one of the members of their quest was seriously injured and could not walk. Their job was to transport the injured member back to the tribe's home. But to make things difficult there were obstacles in the way—cliffs and river.

Ocelot's Girl's quest had made it home in a very short time. The sun had moved just two fists, and they were already happily jogging back into camp with Beaver boy on a hastily-made stretcher. Snake Father, the elder who had accompanied the quest, could not stop bragging about how wonderful they had been. Mouse Girl was not allowed to hear the details, but it was clear that the elders were very proud of Ocelot Girl and her amazing quest.

Soon after Ocelot Girl's return, Mouse Girl and her quest were led out of the camp to face the same test. They had to transport Badger Boy, which was unfair because he was far larger than Beaver Boy. Mouse Girl felt that she and her quest were constantly treated unfairly, and this was just one more example. Her tribe valued speed and agility over everything else. Ocelot Girl had the tribe's most awesome children and so, of course, they always won every competition. Mouse Girl had the biggest, slowest kids and they bumbled through every challenge. And now, they had to carry enormous Badger Boy over who knew what kind of terrain.

First, there was the river. The elders had chosen the swift, deep, and cold Green River. It had taken a long time for the kids of Mouse's quest to find a section of the river that was

shallow enough to cross as they carried Badger Boy on the stretcher. The place they chose had large boulders they could stand on for most of the crossing, but the current was strong and fast. They dropped Badger Boy repeatedly in the swift current. It didn't help matters that Ringtail Boy had a bum leg. He could hardly walk on level ground, much less jump from boulder to boulder carrying a stretcher. Ringtail nearly drowned trying to help, and the truth was, he wasn't much help anyway. But he was a member of the quest, so he had to take part in the challenge.

Badger Boy took a beating. They dropped him on the rocks a few times, mainly because he was so heavy. In fact, at one point, he was so bruised and wet and cold that he refused to get back on the stretcher. Squirrel Father had to agree to give him a few minutes to sit in the sun in order to warm up before he would agree to continue the test.

The sun had moved two fists before they completed the river crossing. Then there were still the cliffs they had to climb. The cliffs by this section of the river were composed of crumbling rock and were very difficult and dangerous to climb. Squirrel Boy had a hard time climbing the cliffs by himself. The quest had no idea how they were going to carry Badger up. And it was even harder to get Ringtail Boy up. Climbing these cliffs was just about impossible for him since his right leg didn't move well. The quest always carried rope to help get him up and over vertical terrain.

In this case, their experience in lifting Ringtail Boy turned out to be valuable. After they pulled him up, they used the same technique to lift Badger Boy. They simply tied the rope around Badger Boy's chest and lifted. With Squirrel Boy, Ferret Girl, and Frog Boy at the top of the cliff, lifting Badger Boy was no problem. He suffered a few more scrapes and bumps against the rocks as he was lifted up, but Squirrel

Father was impressed at how quickly the entire group made it up the cliff face.

After the cliff, they simply had to carry Badger Boy all the way back to camp. Even this wasn't simple. Ringtail always slowed them down. Unlike Ocelot Girl's quest, they would not be jogging back into camp. And the trail back to camp was dangerous. In the daytime there were few land predators to worry about, but aerial predators and other tribes were a constant threat. Mouse Girl was wise enough to always be ready for the unexpected.

Mouse Girl kept them in the shadows as much as possible. Walking in the open was like asking to be killed or kidnapped. Squirrel Girl was their best scout. She was assigned to watch the trees and hills for threats. Otter Girl kept close to Squirrel Girl because she was their best archer, after Badger Boy. The rest of the quest helped carry Badger through the thick brush. Badger was scratched by branches and poked by cactus, but they were making pretty good progress. And then Squirrel Girl gave them the danger signal.

Mouse Girl looked where Squirrel Girl's eyes were fixed. In a large oak just ahead of them sat a giant hawk. Otter Girl had her bow and arrow ready. The hawk was intently watching the group, but it made no threatening moves. It was too smart to attack a group of Bird people who were aware of its presence. But they would have to stay alert. It would be watching them and waiting for a moment of weakness. A hawk of that size could attack and kill an isolated person. And it only took an instant of carelessness for a hawk to strike.

The hawk flew off after a few moments. Squirrel Father had asked the group what kind of hawk it was. He had not needed to ask. The entire quest had seen the dark stripes on its rounded tail. It was a brush hawk, the kind that would dive through even thick brush to strike its prey. It was aggressive,

but not the largest of hawks. They were safe as long as they stayed in a group.

They continued in the shadows, hoping the hawk was the only predator. Mouse Girl looked up and measured the sun's progress. Three fists since they had started, and they were still far from home. She was not even tempted to try to hurry by sacrificing safety. The sun moved another fist before they finally reached home. No one was waiting for them.

Squirrel Father had to search to find one of the elders. He found Deer Father. Squirrel Father reported on Mouse Girl's quest but Deer Father did not seem very interested. Mouse Girl told everyone to go home, get some food, and rest. They would meet again at the evening campfire.

That had been Mouse Girl's morning. It had been another humiliating defeat. She sat beneath the small rock outcropping just outside the little cave home she shared with her grandmother and brother. Mouse Grandmother was a chief elder of their tribe, but Mouse Girl received no favoritism on her grandmother's behalf.

If anyone was shown favoritism, it was Mouse Boy. He was a member of Ocelot's quest. Ever since their parents had been killed, Mouse Boy had been the object of their grandmother's special attention, at least in Mouse Girl's opinion.

He and the rest of his quest are probably out celebrating right now, she thought. *And we, the losers, are left alone. We're nothing but replacements for the members of Ocelot Girl's quest, in case anything disastrous ever happens. But what could ever happen to them*, she wondered? *They were too perfect.*

Mouse Girl thought about the morning's challenge. Ocelot Girl and her quest had returned so quickly it was as if they had done nothing but jog straight to the river and straight home. How did they get back so fast? It was like the river and the cliff

had taken them no time at all. That thought nagged at her. She was as athletic and smart as her brother. Why wasn't she on the first quest? And if she had been on that quest, would she have found a faster way across the river and up the cliff? She knew she could be that good if only she were given chance to work with a strong team.

She looked outside. It was still midafternoon. They had plenty of time until the evening campfire. She decided that she and her quest would go back to the river and figure out a faster way home. They were going to learn to do things as well as Ocelot Girl, Mouse Girl decided.

She gathered her quest back together. They were not excited about going back out onto the trail.

"What about the hawk?" Badger Boy asked. "What if he's still out there?"

"Brush hawks won't attack a group of us," Mouse Girl answered. "You know that."

"But what's the point of going back out there?" Squirrel Girl asked. "No one will care if we find a faster way home."

"It doesn't matter who cares," Mouse Girl said. "What matters is that we should be able to do anything Ocelot and her quest can do. They were smarter and faster than us today…"

"And every day," Ferret Girl interjected. "Everyone knows they're better than us."

Mouse Girl gave Ferret Girl a disappointed look. Ferret Girl usually had a better attitude than this. She was the one Mouse Girl counted on to maintain a positive attitude. If Ferret Girl was discouraged, the whole quest must be in trouble.

"Listen, we are going back out there, and we are going to figure out how the first quest did their challenge so smoothly," Mouse girl said sternly. "Our true quest is coming soon and

we have to be ready. None of these failures matters if we do well on the real thing."

Her tone of voice made it clear they did not have a choice. When the quest leader made a final decision, it was going to be done. The Bird People followed their quest leaders, and that was all there was to it. Ringtail Boy picked up his little traveling bag and his bow and arrow. He was ready. The others reluctantly gathered their gear.

With Ringtail's cooperation, they were able to move very quickly down the trail. Ringtail rarely ran because of his crippled leg, but he wanted to get this task over with. They stayed close together and Squirrel Girl kept her eyes on the sky and the trees. The hawk was nowhere to be seen.

"Did you warn the elders about the brush hawk we saw?" Ferret Girl asked Mouse Girl. "They should keep a close eye on the little kids if the hawk is active in this area."

Mouse Girl shook her head. She had been so discouraged she hadn't thought of warning anybody about anything.

"Then we should get this done quickly and get back to tell someone," Ferret Girl said.

"Speed is what I'm aiming for," Mouse Girl said.

The group traveled quickly and quietly most of the way. The sun was hot, even though it was autumn, and the nights had been cool recently. When the group reached the cliffs they independently scrambled down the rock face. Even Ringtail had no trouble going down. He found a red oak growing near the cliff and he jumped for it. He grabbed a branch and shimmied down, hand over hand, from branch to branch until he could safely drop to the ground. In fact, he was down before Rat Boy, who had gotten stuck on a gravelly ledge with no obvious way down. Finally, he risked a jump from the ledge. He landed on uneven ground and tried to soften his impact by rolling. He rolled ungracefully down toward the river,

throwing up dust and making quite a racket as he tumbled through old, dry branches.

"Are you okay?" Ferret Girl said, running over to him. Rat Boy was lying still on the ground and moaning.

"I'm okay," he answered. "Just bruised and a little embarrassed."

Ferret Girl looked up. "That was quite a jump," she said. "I'm surprised you're not hurt."

Rat Boy sat up and took a deep breath. He rubbed one arm, which was scraped and bleeding. "I'll be okay," he said. "Thanks for asking."

The rest of the group watched Rat Boy and Ferret Girl during this brief exchange. Everyone knew that Ferret Girl had special feelings for Rat Boy. Normally, romantic feelings were not encouraged among the Bird People. Families were chosen by the elders. Falling in love with someone was a recipe for disaster because the elders gave no regard to whom anybody wanted as a mate. The elders chose as they saw fit.

This was the way of the Bird People. However, with Rat Boy and Ferret Girl, things were different. They were both so low in the informal caste system of the Bird People that it was possible the elders would not care whom they married. Both were from unremarkable families, and that was only the beginning of Ferret Girl's challenges. She had contracted a skin fungus as a small child that had left her chin and neck badly disfigured. It was unlikely that anyone would voluntarily choose her as a wife. But, for whatever reason, she had chosen Rat Boy as the least unattainable potential husband, and she had worked for a long time to earn his affection—or at least his friendship.

Rat Boy was a good person and he knew he would never be a high-priority mate in the eyes of the elders. He also knew that Ferret Girl was placing all of her hopes upon him. He saw her as a truly good friend. Still, he had a difficult time seeing

beyond her scars. He was as kind as he could be to Ferret Girl, but it was painfully obvious to the rest of the group that he did not share the same feelings she had for him.

After giving Ferret Girl enough time to show her concern, Badger walked over and offered Rat Boy a hand up. Rat Boy stood and took a few slow, limping steps. “I think I’m okay,” he said to his friends as they watched him with great concern.

Mouse Girl was satisfied that Rat was fine. She started to scout the riverbank.

“How did they cross so fast?” she asked. “They obviously did not go all the way down to the rapids and cross on the rocks like we did.”

Frog Boy and Ringtail joined her on the riverbank.

“That’s a deep and wide river,” Frog Boy said. “And the current is fast. Swimming it would be difficult, but swimming with an injured person would be crazy.”

Ringtail shook his head and shrugged. Squirrel girl looked up at the huge bald cypress trees, whose needles were already orange and beginning to fall. “Could they have used the trees somehow?” she asked. “Maybe they rigged a rope across?”

She walked toward a promising tree trunk. “How long a rope would you need to make it across?”

“Longer than any rope we’ve got,” Frog Boy said as he joined her near the tree.

From higher up on the bank, Rat Boy called out, “I know how they did it. I saw it from the ledge I was on.”

Mouse Girl looked back at him. “How?” she asked.

Rat Boy limped down the slippery mud bank toward her. He pointed slightly downstream. “See that big log lying in the middle of the muddy, low area?” he asked.

Mouse Girl saw the log and the footprints around it. “They floated him over on the log?” she asked.

Rat Boy nodded.

“Show me,” Mouse Girl said.

Rat Boy limped over to the log and rolled it into the river. The river was shallow and the current was slow at that particular place on the shore. “Can I have a victim, please?” Rat Boy asked.

Nobody was anxious to get into the cold river, but finally Squirrel Boy volunteered. Rat Boy asked him to lie on the muddy bank. Rat Boy grabbed him by the armpits and dragged him into the river. Once Squirrel boy’s body was afloat, Rat Boy maneuvered him to the floating log. Rat Boy turned him over and draped him facedown over the log. The log sank a little, but Squirrel Boy’s face was above the water. Rat Boy then began to swim as he tugged the log behind him. Squirrel boy floated without effort. As they moved out into the river, the current caught them, but they were floating well. Rat Boy continued to swim to the far shore.

Mouse Girl smiled. “Very good,” she said.

The entire group, which was by then spread out along the riverbank, watched Rat Boy swim across the river. They clapped for Rat Boy’s clever discovery. Now that that the mystery was solved about how the first quest had crossed the river so quickly, they were free to return home.

Unfortunately, their attention had been on Rat Boy for too long. Mouse Girl heard movement and then a small yell. She looked upstream and saw a coyote running away and dragging Frog Boy. She looked around. She saw two more coyotes, and she knew there were probably more. Her quest members were exposed to attack on the riverbank. They were scattered and no one seemed to have their weapons ready. This was looking to be a fatal mistake for the entire quest. Mouse Girl could see no way out. The Bird People were no match for coyotes in size or strength.

Having no other options, Mouse Girl ran for her bow and arrow. They were where she had dropped them just a few paces up the riverbank. Her movement drew the attention of

a running coyote, and it bore down on her. It was bigger and faster than she was. She had no chance to reach her weapons. She ran anyway, not knowing what else to do.

Suddenly, the coyote stopped and yelped. An arrow stuck up from its back. A figure plummeted down from the cliff face and landed on the riverbank. It was Snake Girl, a member of the first quest. She rolled forward and leapt to her feet less than a pace from the wounded coyote. Before the coyote could react, Snake Girl's spear was buried in its side. The back of the beast was almost as high as her shoulders. The coyote snapped at Snake Girl and then retreated, Snake Girl's spear still buried in its body. Arrows rained down from the clifftop onto the coyotes.

Mouse Girl reached her bow and arrow and had it ready in a flash. She scanned the riverside for her quest members. Ferret Girl was being backed toward the river by a threatening coyote. She was waving a stick in its face, a threat that was almost completely ineffective. Mouse Girl sent an arrow flying that hit the coyote in the face near its right eye. She and Snake Girl rushed toward the coyote. Faced with this aggressive onslaught, the coyote fled.

Slightly upstream, Squirrel Girl and Badger had found each other and were holding off another large beast. Mouse, Ferret, and Snake rushed over to help. That coyote had no interest in facing five opponents and it ran. They looked around for the rest of the quest.

Squirrel Boy and Rat Boy were safe in the river. Mouse Girl was relieved to be alive but also embarrassed that she had needed help from the first quest. And then she thought of Frog Boy. He was gone, taken by the coyotes. Her mistakes had led to this. She wanted to collapse to her knees in despair but, as her quest's leader, she had to remain strong. She had to make sure the survivors did not suffer the same fate. She ignored her anger and sadness.

Mouse Girl looked up at the cliff and saw the rest of Ocelot Girl's quest watching her. She sent out scouts to see if there were any signs of Frog Boy, but the coyotes were gone.

She looked for Rat Boy and Squirrel Boy. They were already back on the cliffside of the riverbank, but they were far downstream. The quest members waited for them, remaining alert for any other attack that might be coming their way. While they were waiting and looking for other possible attacks, they searched the area for arrows. They recovered as many as they could.

"Everyone," Mouse Girl said, "back up the cliffs."

Mouse Girl turned to Snake Girl.

"Thank you," Mouse Girl said. "How did you find us?"

Snake Girl shrugged. "We saw you leaving camp without an adult," she said. "I thought we should follow to see what was going on."

That was a typical answer from a member of the first quest. They always did their duty. There wasn't necessarily any emotion or feeling of friendship involved. Snake Girl had seen a possible problem, so she and her quest members sprang into action.

"That was an amazing attack on that coyote," Mouse Girl said. "All I saw was you flying through the air and then lunging at the beast with all your strength. I've never seen a person attack a coyote like that before."

"I know," Snake Girl said, smiling. "I wasn't sure what was going to happen."

Snake Girl turned away and began to scale the rocks back up to Ocelot Girl. She paused and looked over her shoulder.

"By the way, you owe me a spear," she said to Mouse Girl.

Mouse Girl nodded.

They returned to camp and immediately began their duties for the campfire. Mouse Girl didn't have time to gather her quest together and discuss the day's events. But she did go

directly to Squirrel Father to tell him about the disappearance and probable death of Frog Boy. Squirrel Father could have been angry that Mouse Girl had led her quest away from camp without him, but if he was, he didn't show it.

He took Mouse Girl with him to see Frog Mother. She was pregnant and busy with several little children. Frog Mother looked momentarily shocked when Squirrel Father told her the news. But then she simply nodded and turned away. She went back to tend to the other children, keeping her grief to herself.

Squirrel Father told Mouse to return to her duties with her own family. She nodded silently and left.

Soon the sun was setting and the campfire was burning brightly. The entire tribe was gathered around the fire, eating and talking. The only ones not present were the guardians, high up on the cliffs and in the trees, watching and listening for danger. Mouse Girl watched everyone. No one seemed to take notice of her. She felt guilty for the death of Frog Boy. She felt as if everyone should be angry with her. But no one was showing any unusual emotion. Everyone acted like this was just another campfire.

After they had eaten, Deer Grandmother took the place of honor. Normally, one of the elders would begin the tribal meeting, but today, due to Frog Boy's death, the cult would begin the meeting. Deer Grandmother was very old. She was blind in one eye from some kind of accident that had left an impressive scar on the right side of her face. She sat on a great log near the fire, and each person turned their attention to her.

Behind her, two other adults took their places, dressed in their cult regalia. The first was Ocelot Father, who walked with a permanent limp due to a badly injured leg. The second was Deer Mother who, Mouse Girl thought, was the most beautiful woman in the tribe. Deer Mother embodied everything the Bird People valued. She was graceful, reverent, wise, and kind.

When anyone speculated who might become the cult leader once Deer Grandmother died, Mouse Girl always hoped it would be Deer Mother.

At those moments, Mouse Girl also hoped Ocelot Father would not become the cult leader. Ocelot Father was a severe man, and he always favored his daughter over anyone else. If he ever ascended to be cult leader, with Ocelot Grandmother already a powerful member of the elders and Ocelot Girl as the leader of the first quest, Mouse Girl feared that their tribe would be forever changed. She was not sure exactly what might change, but there was something wrong with that family. They upheld all the traditions of the Bird People, to an extreme degree sometimes, but they somehow made themselves the center of it all. Mouse Girl had learned from Deer Grandmother that every member of the tribe was important and valuable. The Ocelot family didn't seem to understand that.

Ocelot Father stood perfectly straight and proud behind Deer grandmother. He wore a headdress of hawk feathers and on his back were the ceremonial wings that only the cult wore. Next to him stood Deer Mother, looking just as strong and proud. Her long, black hair was tightly braided back. She wore a woven headband with no feathers. She also wore the folded, dark, leather wings of the cult. Only the cult leadership was allowed to wear leather. The skins of animals were considered sacred, and animals were rarely killed. But when they were, their bodies were treated with the greatest of respect.

Still seated, Deer Grandmother spoke.

"We are saddened by the loss of Frog Boy," she said. "He died while faithfully preparing for his quest."

From her lap, she lifted a bow and arrow.

"These items represent his faithful service to the Bird People and his dedication to our ancient traditions and our holy purpose."

Deer Grandmother paused dramatically.

"Frog Boy's service to our people is now complete," she concluded.

Deer Mother stepped forward and took the bow and arrow. She walked to the fire and knelt on one knee, bowing her head. She then stood and was about to toss the bow and arrow into the flames when Frog Mother came forward. Frog Mother took the bow and arrow and then walked to where Mouse Girl was sitting. She knelt in front of Mouse and silently held the bow and arrow out toward her.

Mouse Girl stood in front of Frog Mother. Mouse then knelt down and said, "Your son died honorably on his quest." She took the items from Frog Mother's hands and bowed her head. When she looked up, Frog Mother's eyes were full of tears.

Frog Mother reached out and put one hand on Mouse Girl's shoulder. "Thank you for leading him on his quest. May you be as faithful as he was," she said.

Frog Mother stood and walked away from the fire and into the darkness. Mouse Girl stood and returned to her place. Most children sat with their parents, but in the case of Mouse Girl and Mouse Boy, who had no living parents, they sat alone.

Mouse Girl was glad that was over. When she had been named the leader of the second quest, she knew that her quest members could die, but she had never imagined having to face their parents afterward. She promised herself that she would do all that she could to make sure that never happened again. Her brother put his arm around her, trying to comfort her. But her ordeal was not yet over. Deer Grandmother summoned her to come forward.

"Mouse Girl," the old woman said, "please come forward and approach your elders."

The elders and cult leaders all congregated behind Deer Grandmother. Mouse Girl timidly walked toward them and knelt down before them.

"Mouse Girl," Deer Grandmother began, "In the midst of our grief over Frog Boy, we have yet to deal with you. We have spoken with Squirrel Father, the guardian of your quest. And we have spoken with Snake Girl who witnessed Frog Boy's death and your part in it."

I'm guilty, I know, thought Mouse girl. *I was thinking so hard about why we were always so much worse than the first quest that I let down my guard.*

"As sad as the death of Frog Boy is," Deer Grandmother said, "we still commend you for hard work and dedication. You did not accept failure, and you demanded more from your quest."

"I let a member of my quest die," Mouse Girl protested. "If I had done my duty, Frog Boy would be alive right now."

Deer Grandmother nodded her head. "You did make a mistake. And Frog Boy died as a result. But our people depend upon your boldness. If you do your duty as a quest leader, you may face death again and again. We want you to protect your quest members. But you must always do your duty first."

Mouse Girl was confused. She kept her head bowed and tried to comprehend what was being said.

"Do you understand?" Deer Grandmother asked.

Mouse Girl lifted her head slightly. "I am trying to understand, grandmother."

"Good," the old woman said. She then turned to the tribe. "Ocelot Girl! Please come forward and approach your elders."

This was a surprising request, and whispers murmured through the tribe. Ocelot Girl quickly stood up and knelt beside Mouse Girl.

"Ocelot Girl, leader of our first quest, do you understand what I have said to Mouse Girl?"

“I believe I do,” Ocelot Girl answered.

“Tell me then, what should we do to Mouse Girl—punish her or reward her?” Deer Grandmother asked.

Ocelot Girl’s mind raced. She looked surprised and confused for just a moment. Then, she regained her composure.

“We should do neither,” Ocelot Girl answered. “The loss of Frog Boy is more than enough punishment for her mistake. And as far as commendation, she has done her duty diligently. Her reward is to serve her people.”

Deer Grandmother nodded her head in agreement. “And what of Snake Girl?” she asked.

Ocelot Girl smiled. “Snake Girl saved the lives of the entire second quest. Her service to our people was beyond value today.”

Snake Girl’s father was a cult leader and her mother was an elder. They smiled with great pride at the words of Ocelot Girl.

“And yet,” Deer Grandmother continued, with a deadly serious expression, “I wonder why it was Snake Girl and not you, Ocelot Girl, who so aggressively protected her brothers and sisters of the second quest.”

The tribe fell absolutely silent at these words. Ocelot Girl was stunned. But yet again, her perfectly emotionless logic took control.

“Snake Girl did exceed me in both responsibility and heroism,” Ocelot Girl said.

Deer Grandmother smiled. “Indeed,” she said.

Deer Grandmother stood, and began to turn to walk away; the audience apparently over. But then she paused and turned back to the girls. “Your true quest is drawing near, both of you. Learn from what happened today.”

Deer Grandmother walked away and sat back among her family. The two girls remained kneeling with their heads bowed.

Otter Mother, a cult leader, came forward. She was an especially petite person. She signaled to the girls to return to their places. They did so. Otter Mother, wearing her headband and wings, began to tell a story.

"Long ago," Otter Mother said, "the Bear People ruled the land. They were savage and always ravenously hungry. They were so hungry they deprived all the other animals of food. And they were so large and strong no other animal dared to protest."

Snake Father came forward, playing the part of the Bear. He was a lean and strong man. His chest and arms were bare and well-muscled. He looked quite dangerous, though obviously not nearly as large as a bear.

"But more than hungry and selfish," Otter Mother continued, "the Bear People were violent. When they ran out of food, they killed and ate their fellow creatures."

Deer Mother came forward, and Snake Father swung a horribly stylized claw at her. She screamed and fell to the ground.

"But the gods were not content to leave the land to the gluttony of the Bear People. They searched the cosmos and found the kindest and most beautiful beings they could find. Among the stars they found the Spirit people."

Deer Mother arose from the ground. She stood perfectly erect and spread her wings. The wings were magnificent. They stretched from one side of the tribe's circle to the other. She carefully turned and one wing swept quickly over the flames of the fire.

"The gods explained to the Spirit People the evil of the Bears. The Spirit People were indeed concerned as they listened, but they knew their destiny was not to be found in

the land of the Bear People. They told the gods they could not dwell in the land of mortals among the bears. The gods were bitterly disappointed. But the Spirit People said there was one thing they would do. The Spirit People came to the land, and four of them joined with four of the Bear People."

Snake Father, the Bear, cringed in mock horror as Deer Mother, the Spirit, approached him with her wings outstretched. As she drew closer, her wings enveloped him.

"The children born of this union were the Bird people, people neither entirely of the land nor of spirit. We are forever torn between both worlds. But we are also eternally connected to both worlds. We care for the land, even as we reach upwards. And, one day, when we attain the stars again, both Bear and Spirit will accept us as brothers and sisters. Until then, our people are but seeds in the ground, awaiting rebirth."

Otter Mother bowed slightly and gracefully exited the circle. The other cult leaders did the same. The elders remained, sitting around the seat of honor. In the middle of them sat Mouse Grandmother.

"As your quest draws near, little ones, you have heard the first story, the story of origination," Mouse Grandmother said. "Three stories remain before you leave us on your quest."

Mouse Grandmother looked around the circle. "Will the quest leaders come forward?"

Once again, Ocelot Girl and Mouse Girl entered the circle and this time they knelt in the center.

"In a few weeks, you will be leaving us. We are in need of new land and new knowledge," Mouse Grandmother said. "For three generations, our quests have failed to find new land. Our territory grows more narrow. The influence of the ghosts comes closer and closer to us from the direction of the sunrise. Our enemies are more numerous. This is a time of uncertainty and fear. But it is also a time of hope."

Mouse Grandmother stood and walked toward the two girls. She placed her hands on their heads.

"All of our hope rests in you," Mouse Grandmother said. "This valley has been our home for generations, but our time here grows short. You must find us a new home." She paused. "Now stand!"

The girls stood.

"Four gifts are given to each quest. Tonight, I give you the weapon of the guardians."

Beaver Father came forward. In his hands were four smooth and shiny shafts of wood. Two of these shafts were fitted with arrowheads. The other two had a wide, rounded base.

"The atlatl was the weapon of our first ancestors, many generations ago. Few know how to use it well, but in the hands of the right person, it is mightier than the spear and swifter than the arrow."

Beaver Father handed each girl a weapon.

"Who will be the guardian of your quest?" Mouse Grandmother asked.

This was a tricky question to answer for Mouse Girl. The guardian caste was the lowest of the Bird People's castes in the eyes of many. Although all of the Bird People were said to be equal, guardians did not have the authority of elders, nor the spiritual aura of the Bird caste, who were the leaders of the cult. And all of these were commonly believed to be inferior to the mystics.

The answer was easy for Ocelot Girl. Beaver Boy was from a long line of guardians. In fact, it was his father who made these atlatls. Ocelot Girl spoke first.

"The guardian of the first quest will be Beaver Boy," she said. Beaver Boy stood and received the atlatl from Ocelot.

Mouse Girl had known for a long time that she would have to answer this question tonight, but she was not ready. She

had hoped to receive some kind of inspiration on today's challenge, but the day's events had completely overwhelmed her. Badger Boy was an excellent candidate for guardian, but he was by far their best archer. Mouse Girl couldn't afford to lose his skill with a bow and arrow while he was learning to use the atlatl. Rat Boy was big and strong, good qualities for a guardian, but if he did indeed marry Ferret Girl, being a guardian would limit Ferret Girl's possibilities. She was an excellent candidate for the Bird caste, if the tribe could ever see beyond her scars, and Birds were never wed to guardians. The Squirrels didn't seem right. And that left only Ringtail Boy.

Could she choose a lame boy as her guardian? He was loyal, and that was important in choosing a guardian. But would the elders even allow it? A guardian was not a ceremonial post. It was the job of the guardians to defend the rest of the tribe or die in the attempt.

Mouse Girl glanced around nervously. The elders were noticing her hesitation. Mouse Grandmother looked quizzically at her granddaughter. This was a pretty easy question to answer for most quest leaders.

"Ringtail Boy," Mouse girl said quickly. "I choose Ringtail as the guardian for our quest."

No one was more surprised by this answer than Ringtail Boy. With no parents to lobby for him and the obvious fact of his physical disability, he had half-expected that he would never be granted any caste at all. People like him were often left alone and unmarried for their entire lives. He stood and walked unsteadily to Mouse Girl.

"What are you doing?" he whispered to her as he took the atlatl.

"I am making you the guardian of our quest," she answered.

Mouse Grandmother smiled a very small smile as Ringtail Boy returned to his place. She then gave the closing benediction to her tribe.

“Tend our world. Remember our story. Continue our people.”

The gathered tribe sang the same words in response, quietly enough that the guardians on the cliffs, alert for trouble with bows ready, could just barely hear the song.

As the gathering ended, Mouse Girl quietly left the circle and returned to the cave that she shared with her brother and grandmother.

She rolled herself up in her bedroll in a far corner of the cave and faced the wall. There, she wept for Frog Boy.

2 - HAWK

(In which Mouse Girl returns a spear to Snake Girl. Beaver Father and one of his sons are killed.)

Ocelot Girl loved autumn. Training for a quest was hard work and the land of the Bird people was a hot place. Summer was brutal. But after months and months of almost unbearable sun and heat came autumn. On this cold morning Ocelot Girl was making her quest swim the creek. The creek was the center of the Bird people's territory. The creek erupted from the ground in the form of a cold, clear spring. No living person had ever known these springs to go dry. This fountainhead was surrounded by tall limestone cliffs on three sides.

From the fountainhead, the creek flowed between two walls for a very long way. The narrow land between these two walls was the camp of the Bird people. This little canyon valley and the highlands surrounding it comprised the entire territory of the tribe. There were other Bird tribes, but they were far away. They visited once or twice a year for trading purposes but, for the most part, this canyon was Ocelot Girl's entire world.

This morning Ocelot Girl was having her quest members jump from the high cliffs into the deep pool at the creek's origin and then swim the length of the creek until they reached the end of the cliffs. It was cold and difficult work, but Ocelot Girl had her reasons for making them do it. And as the last member of her quest jumped off the cliff, Ocelot Girl was right behind, encouraging them all and pushing them on.

After the second time of doing this exercise, Beaver Boy looked and sounded exhausted. He was not a great swimmer.

"Can you do it one more time?" Ocelot Girl asked.

Beaver Boy just breathed heavily and shrugged his shoulders.

"Could you do it if a child were swept away in floodwater and you were the only person who could save him?" Mouse Boy asked. This was not an entirely rhetorical question. Floods were frequent in the land of the Bird people, and the tribe still needed to gather food and water during those times. Simply avoiding flooded waterways was not always an option.

Beaver Boy nodded and jogged up the path to climb the limestone wall and jump into the pool one more time. Ocelot Girl spoke softly to Mouse Boy, "Stay close to him. I don't want anyone to drown." Mouse Boy followed quickly behind Beaver Boy.

Ocelot Girl was about to follow when she heard someone call her name. It was Mouse Girl. She was carrying a spear.

"I've come to replace Snake's spear and to thank her again for her bravery," Mouse Girl said.

Ocelot Girl looked at the spear. It was well made and it looked sturdy. Mouse Girl's family specialized in making spearheads and arrowheads. Since the death of her mother and father, they did not produce enough for the entire tribe, but Mouse Girl and Mouse Boy were known for making excellent spearheads.

"Snake Girl will be glad to have a spear made by your family," Ocelot Girl answered. "Do you want to wait here for her or do you want to take it to her?" Ocelot pointed to Snake Girl as she jumped from the cliff. Mouse Girl hated heights. And she knew that Ocelot Girl knew that she hated heights. Therefore, she knew this was a challenge. A good leader of the Bird people would not sit and wait for anything.

"Let's see if we can catch her before she reaches this end of the creek," Mouse Girl said. She took off running. Instead of running along the creek and then climbing the near-vertical limestone wall near the fountainhead, she ran away from the

creek and scrambled up the lower limestone wall downstream. This was the easier path while holding something in one hand, in this case a spear. She then had to push her way through underbrush as the cliffs climbed up. By the time she reached the top of the cliffs, Ocelot Girl was already there waiting for her. Mouse Girl was out of breath and her face and arms were scratched from the underbrush. She walked to the edge of the cliff.

"Let's go," Mouse said as she jumped from the cliff.

Mouse Girl hated the cliff. Her heart was racing and, due to her nervousness, her foot slipped as she jumped, causing her to fall ungracefully. She hit the water hard and the wooden shaft of the spear slammed painfully into her shoulder. Her body plummeted downward through the deep, clear water and she held on tightly to the spear. Her lungs begged for air. She looked up and saw that the surface was a long way away. She resisted the urge to panic and swam as quickly as she could to the surface. Once there, she took a deep, desperate breath and then looked around for Ocelot Girl. Ocelot was already swimming downstream, far ahead of Mouse Girl, as usual.

Swimming was a slow process with a spear in one hand. Ocelot Girl was not waiting for her, but Mouse swam as fast as she could. By the time she reached the end of her swim, Snake Girl was on the bank, having just stepped out of the water. Ocelot Girl was sitting calmly on the bank of the creek, looking like she had been relaxing there all morning. Mouse Girl was completely breathless and exhausted as she pulled herself out of the water. The spear was smeared with mud as she struggled to exit the creek.

Why do I always look so ridiculous next to these guys, Mouse Girl wondered. All I want to do is say thank you in a dignified way, but as usual I look like a clumsy, awkward kid.

She paused to dip the spear in the water to wipe the mud away. Then she stood and approached Snake Girl.

“I made this for you,” Mouse Girl said as she held out the spear.

Snake Girl smiled and took it. She examined the sharp and sturdy stone spearhead. It was one of Mouse Girl’s best efforts. The shaft was straight and strong, made from very good wood.

“I’m honored to have a spear made by the Mouse family,” Snake Girl said.

“You were very brave yesterday,” Mouse Girl said. “Thank you.”

“Yeah,” Beaver Boy said. “I can’t believe you single-handedly rushed a coyote. You should be dead right now.”

Snake Girl just smiled.

Ocelot Girl took this as a teachable moment. “When we are weakest, sometimes it is wise to make our enemies think we are strong. The battle is first won or lost in our minds.”

“That was an amazing battle yesterday,” Otter Girl said, joining the conversation. “The coyotes had every advantage. They could have killed half of the second quest and been gone before we made it down the cliff. But, as Ocelot Girl points out, we were quick and aggressive enough that they panicked and fled.”

“Well, we practiced that exact attack formation hundreds of times,” Mouse Boy said. “The hasty, ambush-from-the-front, counter-attack. We didn’t have to think, it was just a part of who we are and what we do.”

Ocelot Girl smiled. Her quest was ready.

Mouse Girl thought to herself how great a leader Ocelot Girl was. She not only learned all the lessons the elders taught, she was ready to share her knowledge in the right context at exactly the right time.

While the first quest was training, Mouse Girl’s quest was back in the camp making arrows to replace the ones lost in the coyote attack. The Bird people could never afford to be

without weapons. So today, they were spending their training time cleaning up after the mess she had made yesterday. And having lost Frog Boy, all of their tactics had to change. Every person on the second quest would have to take on extra responsibilities: guard duty at night, carrying weapons and gear that Frog Boy had carried. He would be missed.

Mouse Girl returned to camp, slightly discouraged. The problem with being in the camp as a kid was that the adults always found more work for you to do. When Mouse Girl returned half of her quest was grinding mesquite beans into flour instead of making arrows. She told Squirrel Boy and Squirrel Girl to get away from the flour grinding stone as soon as possible. They could hide in her cave and get arrowheads made.

Mouse Girl immediately pulled Ringtail off of grinding duty.

"You need to be practicing with the atlatl," Mouse Girl said, "and I can't help you much with that. I've hardly even touched one of those things before."

"Beaver Father showed me a little this morning," Ringtail said. "Come on! I'll show you what I learned."

Mouse Girl looked around the camp. Her quest members were all doing their duties. The other families were hard at work preparing food or repairing equipment. All the little kids were running around and playing. She could go into her cave and make arrowheads by herself or she could go with Ringtail and see what he had learned about the atlatl. She decided to go with Ringtail.

They passed by the Deer family. Deer Mother was making pinole for the two quests. Pinole was a food intended for traveling. Deer Mother's recipe consisted of dried persimmons for sweetness and amaranth and grass seeds for strength. She ground all of these together to make a long-

lasting food that could be eaten anytime without having to be cooked.

Mouse Girl also noticed that Deer Mother had made her special cactus fruitcakes. These consisted of nothing but cactus fruit, which the Bird people called tuna. The fruit was dried and formed into small palm-sized wheels about the thickness of a thumb. The resulting purple cake was delicious. Mouse Girl hoped these were intended for their quest as well.

She commented on the tuna cakes as she walked by. “Oh!” she said. “Those are my favorites.”

Deer Mother smiled and gave Mouse and Ringtail each a cake. Mouse Girl immediately bit into hers. Ringtail wrapped his up and put it in his pouch for later. This made Mouse Girl wonder. Ringtail had no family, but she often saw him with other families. This made sense, since he could hardly survive on his own. He had spent most of his younger life with the Snake family, but lately she always seemed to see him with the Fox family. Fox Mother had been widowed two years earlier. She had three small children. Mouse wondered if Ringtail might be another burden on Fox Mother or, knowing Ringtail, maybe he was trying to help feed the Fox children.

Mouse Girl and Ringtail walked down the creek to a hillside where the tribe often practiced marksmanship. A number of crude targets made of bundled grass were scattered in the area. There were smaller ones, representing birds of different sizes. And there were larger ones, most of them vaguely coyote-shaped.

Ringtail propped up a grass coyote and walked about twenty paces away.

“Don’t expect much,” he said. “I’ve never used one of these before today.”

Ringtail placed the butt of the large wooden dart against the spur of the throwing shaft. He stared at the grass coyote for a moment and then wound up his arm in a giant arc. When

he brought his arm forward, the dart flew out with impressive velocity. The dart struck the ground far to the right of the target, but it hit with such force that Mouse Girl felt the ground tremble. She began to understand the potential of this weapon. The dart was probably twice the weight of an arrow and it seemed to travel just as fast.

"That thing could do some serious damage," she said.

"I know," Ringtail agreed, smiling. He liked the idea of having something he could do that was in any way better than what others could do. Things were usually the exact opposite in his life. Mouse Girl ran to retrieve the dart and brought it back.

After several tries, Ringtail showed no significant improvement but he also showed no sense of discouragement. Life had taught him to be patient and persistent. Finally, Mouse Girl asked if she could try it.

Her first few tries went wildly awry. But her fourth attempt landed squarely in the grass coyote's ribcage.

"You are amazing!" Ringtail said, without a trace of sarcasm.

Mouse Girl decided to stop practicing before Ringtail realized that jealousy was an option. She handed the shaft back to Ringtail and ran to get the dart. As she returned, she felt the dart for weight and measured its length against her arm and its diameter with her fingers.

"I'm going to go and make more of these darts so we can stop chasing this one all the time," Mouse Girl said. "And I'll send Squirrel Girl out here to practice, as well. We all need to learn how to use this thing."

Ringtail nodded in agreement. Mouse Girl started to jog back to camp. She rarely walked anywhere, unless she was suspicious of danger. She had only gone a few strides when she heard yelling and commotion from the camp. She stopped to listen. There was trouble.

"Ringtail!" she called back, "Camp! Now!"

She took off running while Ringtail ran and limped along as fast as he could follow. When she arrived at camp, there was a crowd of people around someone who was lying on the ground. It was Beaver Father. From what Mouse Girl could see, he had some serious, bloody wounds.

Near the entrance to the family caves, Mouse Girl saw Beaver Mother crying. That was not a good sign. Why was she not with her husband? Squirrel Boy ran up to Mouse.

"A hawk attacked one of the Beaver children. He was climbing trees with a group of kids and somehow he got separated. The hawk struck while he was out in the open, then tried to drag his body off. Beaver Father was there right after the hawk struck, but it was too late. The hawk broke the boy's neck. Beaver Father was hurt pretty badly trying to get his son back. All he had with him was a knife."

"Did the hawk get away?" Mouse asked.

Squirrel Boy shook his head. He pointed to a shady spot beyond Beaver Father and his attendants. Beaver Boy was sitting with his head in his hands. The hawk's body lay in front of him. Mouse and Squirrel Boy walked over to him. Beaver Boy was sobbing. Mouse Girl sat next to him and put her arm around his shoulder. She said nothing; she could think of nothing to say that could help.

Mouse Girl looked at the hawk. The bird had been run through by a perfectly aimed atlatl dart. Beaver Boy had been the one to kill it. One wing was extended as it lay on the ground. Mouse Girl noted that the wing was as long as she was tall.

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That evening, it was quiet around the campfire. Beaver Father had died shortly after the attack. Families sat a little closer together than usual. Losing three tribe members in two days

was a serious loss. The elders had gathered together that afternoon to discuss what this might mean for the tribe. Some suggested that one or both of the quests should be cancelled. The tribe could not afford to send away so many useful members. As shocking as this proposal was, it was seriously considered before being decided against. The quest was too essential to the identity of the Bird people. And, as Mouse Grandmother insisted, they needed land.

In the end, the elders decided to send the quests out earlier than planned. Ordinarily they would have left in early spring, after the danger of seriously cold weather had passed. Instead, due to the desperate times they were in, the quests would leave as soon as the autumn harvests were complete. Each quest lasted a year, so every quest had to face the harshness of winter away from home, but these children would have to face winter at the beginning of their quest instead of at the end.

Mouse Grandmother made the announcement. "These are difficult times for our people. We are anxiously awaiting a change in our fortunes. Therefore, as people of action, not content to wait for what destiny chooses to hand to us, we are sending out our quests immediately."

Parents and children alike gasped at this announcement. Every mother knew that her child might very well never return from a quest. Every child knew this as well.

"We will complete the harvest, prepare food and weapons as quickly as possible, and the quests will leave before winter comes," Mouse Grandmother said.

"But what about the four stories and the four gifts," Mouse Girl asked. "The gifts must be given. And we need time to learn to use them."

Mouse Grandmother nodded. "You will have time. But not much of it. You will have to use it well."

After Mouse Grandmother finished answering the tribe's questions, the quests gathered together to begin their accelerated planning.

Mouse Girl's quest gathered around her.

"Ringtail, you heard Grandmother," she said. "I want you to practice every moment you have. And I want someone practicing with him at all times. From now on, no one goes anywhere alone."

"Did you see what Beaver Boy did to the hawk?" Squirrel Boy said. "And with just one dart? He's a fast learner."

"Either that or his father had been training him with the atlatl long before today," Squirrel Girl answered.

"That was a great thing he did," Mouse Girl agreed. "But it didn't matter much. As perfect as Ocelot Girl's quest is, even they could not stop the hawk from striking. Remember that. We are very small and the world is big and dangerous. I want you all to be on guard."

"We'll be ready," Squirrel Boy said.

"I hope so," Mouse Girl answered.

She wasn't confident that they were ready. Her quest members looked at her silently. Her doubts were infectious. They were about to fall apart if she didn't pull herself together.

"Rat Boy and Squirrel Girl," Mouse said. "I want you two to gather everything we need for the quest. All the food. All the packs and canteens. Warm clothes. Arrows. Tools. Everything. What we don't have, we'll make or find somewhere. This is your chance, Squirrel Girl, to use all of your good looks and charm. Get what we need."

Mouse Girl usually tactfully avoided mentioning Squirrel Girl's good looks. It was a topic that made the other girls, and often the boys, angry. But the adults mentioned it all the time. Ever since Squirrel Girl learned to walk and get around the camp, the adults could not get over her beauty.

Mouse Girl suspected Squirrel Girl could easily have earned a place on the first quest because she had ample strength and speed and agility. But she relied so often on her good looks to earn people's good will she never had to work hard to earn anything else.

That was true until she was placed on Mouse Girl's quest. Mouse Girl made her work, and she often pushed her harder than the rest. Oddly enough, Squirrel Girl had great respect for Mouse for this very reason.

"Squirrel Boy, Badger, and Ferret," Mouse Girl said. "How can we use you?"

They thought for a moment. "We still don't know who will receive the last three gifts," Ferret Girl pointed out. "Depending on who is granted which gift, we'll need to be doing different things. When is the next story?"

"Tomorrow night," Mouse Girl answered. "Until then, I want you three making arrowheads."

Arrowhead making was not very exciting, but someone had to do it. Ferret Girl was happy she had company.

"So…" she said, trying to make conversation as they chipped at stone. "Who here has the most awesome name? Would you prefer to be a squirrel, a badger, or a ferret?"

"Badgers are obviously the most awesome," Badger Boy said.

"Squirrels are cute," Squirrel Boy said. "And they climb very well. But they are annoying. Who started these names, anyway?"

Badger Boy shrugged.

"The elders say they are to remind us of our brothers and sisters around us," Ferret Girl said. "And to inspire us to treat them well."

"Do you think more kindly of ferrets due to your name?" Squirrel Boy asked.

Ferret Girl laughed and threw a rock shard at him.

“Actually, I do,” she said.

3- Spider

(In which preparations are made for the two quests. The second story is told of the origin of the Bird tribe, and Mouse Boy and Squirrel Girl are chosen as elders.)

Ocelot Girl stood up and stretched. She had been chipping stones for hours. It was late and the fire was dying down. The stars were bright in the sky. The only people still working other than her were Beaver Boy and Otter Girl. Ocelot Girl realized that Beaver Boy needed some distraction from life right now, following the loss of his father and brother. She had kept everyone working long into the night. One by one they had started to go home, but Beaver showed no desire to stop. Otter Girl was obviously staying around for Beaver's sake.

Ocelot Girl looked around. They had done a huge amount of work. They weren't making the best arrowheads she had ever seen, but they had made a lot of them. However, tomorrow was an important day and Ocelot Girl wanted everyone to be alert for the campfire and the granting of the second gift.

"Okay, guys," she said. "It's late. Go home and sleep. I want you alert tomorrow."

Beaver looked up and nodded. He hadn't spoken much today. He organized his arrowheads and swept up his mess. "Peace," he said, as he left for his home.

What would he find there? Ocelot Girl wondered. A bereaved mother, hopefully asleep by now. His two younger siblings. They must all be frightened and confused. Especially since Beaver Boy, now the eldest man of the family, was soon going to leave on his quest.

"Is he going to be okay?" Otter Girl asked.

"What choice does he have?" Ocelot Girl answered. "That could happen to any of us."

“I know, but he’s leaving his mother behind in a few days,” Otter Girl said. “How sad.”

Ocelot Girl put her arm around Otter Girl’s shoulders. “You and I are lucky,” she said. “We have complete families. We have both of our parents in our lives. I have my grandmother, still healthy and leading our tribe. But we’re unusual in that regard. Almost every family faces unexpected death. It’s always been this way with us.”

“It scares me,” Otter Girl admitted. “I like my parents and my sisters.”

Ocelot Girl laughed. “Good. I’m glad you do. I like my family, too.”

They walked in silence for a while. When they got to the entrance of Otter Girl’s cave, Otter Girl reached up and squeezed Ocelot’s hand on her shoulder.

“Thanks,” she said. “You are a good friend.”

They hugged and Otter Girl ducked into the entrance of her cave.

“Peace,” Ocelot said.

“Peace,” Otter answered over her shoulder, and then she disappeared into the shadows.

Ocelot Girl looked at the dark cave entrance. On the quest, they were trained to honor their dead, promptly and briefly, and then move on. It seemed a lot more complicated here among all their families.

Otter Girl crawled silently to her blanket. She slept in the outer entryway of her family’s one room cave. This place made sense because Otter was usually the last one in at night and the first one out in the morning. Ocelot Girl liked to have her quest up very early in the morning and working hard until late at night.

Otter Girl was arranging her blanket to lie down, when her mother crawled out of the back room.

“You’re very late tonight,” Otter Mother said softly.

"Yes," Otter Girl whispered back.

Otter Mother reached out and took her daughter in her arms. "I want you to know that I love you and I will miss you."

"I know, mother," Otter Girl answered.

"But I am very proud of you," Otter Mother said.

Otter Mother began to unbraid her daughter's long black hair. "You are my little star," she said as she began to brush Otter Girl's hair.

That was a phrase Otter Mother used only in special situations. From the stories Otter Girl had heard, Otter Mother had been one of the most promising quest leaders in the tribe's recent history. She had been called the tribe's "little star." She had been everything the tribe valued - hard-working, respectful of tradition, athletic, and super-driven to lead a quest worthy of legend. In fact, many in the tribe still saw Otter Mother in that way. She was already a highly respected cult leader and would, without a doubt, be revered more and more as she grew older.

"Tell me again about your quest," Otter Girl said. "The good parts especially."

Otter Mother laughed. "Only the good parts? You can't tell a story with only the good parts."

"I know," Otter Girl said. "But try anyway."

Otter Mother rocked her daughter back and forth in her arms. "Okay," she said. "I was just like you. Smart and fast and strong. And I was so excited to go out and see the world. We were sent far, far in the direction of the sunset. The journey was very long and very dangerous. We were constantly in danger. The Bear people were everywhere."

"Are they really as bad as the stories say?" Otter Girl asked.

"We were fortunate to not have to find out," Otter Mother said. "We outsmarted them at every turn. They never knew we were traveling through their land. But finally we reached the

land of our cousins, the Mountain Bird tribe. That is when I first saw your father. He was a very handsome boy. And I think he fell in love with me the first moment he saw me."

"You were pretty awesome," Otter Girl said. "A quest leader. A traveler through the land of the Bear people."

"I guess I was awesome," Otter Mother said. "I truly felt that way. I felt like I was a hero in one of our legends.

"But then things started to go wrong. The Mountain Bird people were not nearly as enthusiastic about the quest as they had been when they first told us of the new land. They said things were changing."

"If there was the possibility of a new land, why did they tell you about it?" Otter Girl asked. "Why not go there themselves?"

"They didn't have enough people to inhabit a new land," Otter Mother explained. "They needed help, and back then, we were a very numerous tribe. We had people to spare. The plan was for us to work together, so that we would get more land and then they would get more people eventually."

"What went wrong?" Otter Girl asked.

"They told us that the land they had hoped would be a safe place for us had become more dangerous," Otter Mother explained. "They begged us not to go there." She sighed. "But we were young and bold. And foolish. We went on and we found terrible things."

"What things?" Otter Girl asked. "More Bear people?"

Otter Mother shook her head. "Ghosts."

"Ghosts?" Otter Girl asked, shocked. "They really exist? You never told me this part before."

"We don't speak of them unless absolutely necessary," Otter Mother explained. "But you need to know that they are out there. And from what we discovered they are becoming more and more numerous."

Otter Girl was quiet for a moment. “I asked for a good story,” she complained.

“Well, we all survived,” Otter Mother offered. “The ghosts aren’t very smart. They’re dangerous and far more destructive than the Bear people, but they are easy to outsmart.”

“And the land you were searching for?” Otter Girl asked. “Did you ever make it there?”

“We did,” Otter Mother said. “And it was wonderful. It was beautiful in a way that is totally different from the way this land is beautiful. It could have been a paradise. But the ghosts were already there. We explored it. We enjoyed it for the short time that our quest lasted. But we could never stay there.”

“I’d love to see it someday,” Otter Girl said. “Tell me what it was like.”

“There were tall mountains. Beautiful mountains. And even in the summer, it was cool up there. And there were delicate and fragrant trees like I’ve never seen before. Your father and I fell in love up in those mountains, among the clouds.”

“You were as high as the clouds?” Otter Girl asked.

“Yes,” her mother answered. “Although clouds move up and down. In the morning, the clouds were low, down below us. We could see the sun and a clear blue sky above us. But as the day went on, the clouds would rise. For a while, they would be all around us. And then they would climb above us and it would be a cloudy day.”

“What is it like to be in a cloud?” Otter Girl asked.

“It’s just like a foggy morning here,” Otter Mother answered. “You can’t see much of anything.”

Otter Girl thought about this for a little while. “Where do clouds come from?” she asked.

“Too many questions, my little star,” her mother said. “Go to sleep now.”

Otter Girl wrapped her blanket around herself and reclined on the rock floor of the cave. “Maybe I’ll find my husband on my quest.”

Her mother smiled. “That’s not what usually happens, but who knows? Mysterious things often happen on quests.”

Not far away, under a rock shelf, Mouse Girl was trying to sleep in spite of her grandmother’s snoring. She rolled over and looked at her brother. He was also awake.

“What do other families do at night after dinner?” Mouse Girl asked. “Families that have parents and little brothers and sisters?”

Mouse Boy shrugged.

“I mean, we work with our quests all the time. Grandmother is always with the elders. We don’t hang around each other all the time like other families. What would a normal family be doing on a night like this?”

“Sleeping,” Mouse Boy answered.

“Before sleeping,” Mouse Girl said. “What if we had little kids running around? What would it be like to have parents to talk to?”

Mouse Boy shrugged again.

“You don’t ever think about that?” Mouse Girl asked.

“Sometimes,” Mouse Boy answered.

“Like, for instance, Deer Girl,” Mouse Girl said, “when she goes home, there’s a giant family. She plays with her little brother a lot. What else goes on over there?”

“If I were in Deer Girl’s family,” Mouse Boy said, “I’d spend a lot of time staring at Deer Mother. She’s gorgeous.”

“But would you think she was gorgeous if she were your mother?” wondered Mouse Girl. “Or would she just seem ordinary?”

“I think Deer Mother would still be gorgeous,” Mouse Boy said.

“Do you think our mother was pretty?” Mouse Girl asked.

“Why are you so interested in parents all of the sudden?” Mouse Boy said.

“I don’t know,” Mouse Girl said. “Someday we’ll be parents. How will we know what to do?”

“I guess we’ll figure it out somehow,” Mouse Boy answered.

“Do you think I’ll get a handsome husband?” Mouse Girl asked. “I mean, will I think he’s handsome?”

“Do you think Squirrel Mother thinks Squirrel Father is handsome?” Mouse Boy asked.

“She’d better! He’s a very good-looking man,” Mouse Girl said. “I’d be happy with someone like that.”

“What about Badger Father?” Mouse Boy asked.

“You’re kidding, right?” Mouse Girl said. “I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but I can’t imagine anyone thinking he was handsome. He’s so round and heavy.”

Mouse Boy laughed. “Badger Mother must have thought he was okay. They made Badger Boy together. And then another Badger boy. And then a Badger girl.”

“I wonder what our mother was like,” Mouse Girl said. “What if our kids don’t remember us? What if we die while they’re young?”

“Shut up,” Mouse Boy said. “Too many questions.”

He rolled over and went to sleep. His sister stared at his back for a while, still wondering about their future.

Meanwhile, Ocelot Girl was sitting by her father. He was on top of the cliffs, on guard duty. It had been a quiet night. He had had to send a few arrows in the direction of a raccoon family. They retreated without making trouble. Ocelot Girl quietly snored, her bow and arrow still in her hands.

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The next day, everyone was up early. The weather was cooler and everyone was aware of the short time they had to lay up

food for the winter and for the two quests. Fortunately, it had been a year of plentiful rain, and food was abundant – grains, seeds, greens, roots, fruit, acorns, and soon it would be time for the pecan harvest. The food was abundant, but it still took time to gather and prepare for storage and travel.

Fox Mother and her children were in charge of gathering acorns. They shelled the acorns and then placed them in large, fine-meshed baskets that Fox Mother then placed in the swift, clear water of the creek. After four or five days of water running through them they lost their bitterness and they were ready for drying, then grinding into flour.

If Fox Mother and her children worked hard throughout the harvest season, they would have enough acorn flour to last the tribe well into summer, in a good year. In a dry year, when acorns were few, or in the year when one of the Fox children had been very ill, this important flour would not last through the winter.

Every family in the tribe had a specialty. The Deer family made pinole and tuna cakes. The Beaver family gathered wild rice from the rivers. The Ferret family had extensive knowledge of healing herbs. They knew how to get salt from the yellow water lily (They discovered this from observing porcupines). The Frog and Squirrel families gathered roots of the sunflower and morning glory and water lily, and they made flour from cattails. The Tortoise family specialized in making Mouse Girl's favorite food, roasted yucca roots.

Mouse Boy and Mouse Girl were in charge of gathering mesquite beans, but that took place in the middle of the summer. They had the dried beans stored in baskets, but now they had to grind them into flour. That chore would take several days.

In addition to preparing all that the tribe needed for food and medicine and twine and rope, the tribe also needed to have extra goods in case another tribe came in search of trade.

In short, autumn was a busy season and no one had time to spare.

Rat Boy and Squirrel Girl went around explaining what their quest would need and getting commitments from all the different families. All day long they carried pouches of goods back to the secret storage room of the second quest. The storage room was a little hollow Rat Boy had discovered inside his family's cave.

High up in the entry to the Rats' cave, Rat Boy had noticed a narrow crevice that no one had ever explored. It looked like no more than a minor crack in the ceiling. But one day when Rat Boy was very young, he shimmied up the wall and managed to squeeze his head and one arm into the crack. He felt around with his arm and realized he had found a rather large, dry space. The next day he used a burning stick as a light source and saw that he had discovered a fair sized room. Over several weeks, Rat Boy secretly enlarged the opening until he could squeeze his body in. The room was big enough for the entire quest to sit in, if they didn't mind being tightly packed together and no one wanted to stand up.

Rat Mother and Rat Father knew about the room, of course, but they had no need or desire to explore it themselves. They happily left it to the kids of the second quest. The first quest also had a secret meeting place, but no one outside their group knew where that was.

After a long day of work, the families of the Bird tribe prepared another communal meal in preparation for the next story. After the meal, the tribe turned their attention to the seat of honor again. This time it was Snake Father who told the tale.

"The Spirit people lingered in the land long enough to care for their new children. The Spirit people taught their children what food to gather and what water was safe to drink. They instructed them in medicine lore. But once the children

reached the age of fourteen summers, the Spirit people told them it was time for them to learn to live in the land on their own. The Spirits told the children to go and explore the land and that they would wait for one year for the children to return.

"The children scattered throughout the land. They were excited to explore new places and learn new things. Being children of the Spirits, they were so beautiful that all the animals welcomed them and taught them whatever knowledge they had.

"Not all of the children were the same. Some of the children looked and acted more like the Spirits. Some looked and acted more like the Bears."

At this point, Deer Mother and Ocelot Father entered the circle. Deer Mother was graceful and beautiful, as always. Ocelot Father was a strong and handsome man, even considering his twisted right leg that had been badly broken years before. Deer Mother wore a white tunic, representing the Spirits. Ocelot Father wore a dark tunic, representing the Bears.

"Soon, the children began to gather in tribes for friendship and support. The Spirit tribes were true friends to the animals and they learned to care for the land."

Deer Mother went around the circle giving dried, sweet persimmons to all the children.

"The Bear tribes learned all that they could from the animals, but only because they wanted all they could get for their own enjoyment. The Bear tribes soon angered the animals."

Ocelot Father approached one of the Fox girls. He tried to snatch away her persimmon, but the girl was too fast for him. The elders began to throw small rocks playfully at Ocelot Father. Soon all the children were doing the same.

"The Bear-like children caused so much trouble the animals soon began to distrust and avoid even the children of the Spirits. The Spirit tribes reached out to the animals, but the animals would no longer trust them.

"Alone in the world, the Spirit children all gathered together to decide what to do. The Bears were greatly enjoying their powerful position over the animals. They would not listen to their smaller and gentler sisters and brothers. In fact, the Bear children decided that even their sisters and brothers could be of use to them… as slaves!"

Ocelot Father grabbed Deer Mother, holding her in an arm lock as she struggled to get free. The little children were shocked at this sudden display of violence. One infant began to cry. Deer Mother sank to her knees, still in Ocelot Father's grip.

"With sadness, the Spirit children decided they had to abandon their Bear siblings. Being smaller, swifter, and smarter than the Bears, this was easy for them to do."

In a flash, Deer Mother performed a backward somersault, somehow managing to fit under Ocelot Father's legs. Before he could react and turn around, she was gone, outside the circle, invisible in the shadows. A moment later, her white tunic flew back into the circle.

"The Spirit-like children learned to live in the shadows of the world. They were in constant danger from the violence of the Bear people and from all the animals of the world, who now hated all of their kind. Great wars erupted between the animals and the Bear people."

Otter Mother jumped into the circle wearing a giant set of deer antlers. She and Ocelot Father fought a stylized battle until Ocelot Father pulled out a knife. In a final great clash, both Ocelot Father and Otter Mother fell to the ground, apparently dead by each other's actions.

“But like their Bear parents, the Bear people were strong and stubborn. They did not die easily. They lived on and became stronger and more selfish.”

Ocelot Father sat up and slowly arose, flexing his muscles and looking angry.

“The animals of the world also survived, for they too were stubborn and strong.”

Otter Mother also arose, swinging her antlers at Ocelot Father as she retreated from him.

“As a result, the land became a wild and dangerous place for all creatures. And still in the shadows, the Spirit-like children watched and learned. Having learned all they could from the animals of the land, they now turned their attention to the animals of the air. Smaller and lighter than their Bear brethren, they reasoned that they should learn from the birds. They took to living in trees and cliffs. Like the birds, they began to understand the advantage of being small and swift. Their small size freed them from the clumsy, noisy, and destructive ways of land animals. They became lighter and freer.”

Deer Mother dove over the sitting audience, somersaulting in the air and landing gracefully in the circle again. As Ocelot Father lunged for her, she jumped and somersaulted over the fire, landing safely on the far side. Children gasped in amazement. She leapt again over the far side of the audience and disappeared into the night.

“The Spirit-like children took the name of the Bird people. They observed how their brothers and sisters became larger and dumber, becoming less like Spirits and more like bears with each generation. Therefore, the Bird people reasoned that they could become more like Spirits with each generation. They strove to be wiser, kinder, and less dependent on the things of the land.

"To this day, that is our goal. We strive to be like our Spirit ancestors until one day we have the strength and wisdom and knowledge to bring peace to the land again."

Behind Snake Father, all the cult leaders assembled, once again wearing their ceremonial wings. Beautiful Deer Mother, one-eyed Deer Grandmother, half-crippled but still strong Ocelot Father, and tiny Otter Mother. His story complete, Snake Father stood and returned to his place among the cult leaders. This is who we are, thought Mouse Girl, battered by the world, few in number, but we have a purpose, a plan.

The cult leaders stepped out of the circle. The elders came forward and sat around the seat of honor. Once again Mouse Grandmother took her seat in their midst.

"Your quest draws nearer, little ones. You have heard the second story, the story of wisdom and foolishness," Mouse Grandmother said. "Two stories remain before you leave us on your quest.

"However, before we attend to matters of the quest tonight, we have another matter before us. Beaver Father has died and his position among the elders must be filled. The elders and cult leaders have selected Tortoise Father."

Tortoise Father stood. He looked nervous, Mouse Girl thought. No, she corrected herself, he's holding his right forearm, but not out of nervousness. His forearm was large and swollen. Mouse Grandmother looked at him dubiously.

"Come forward, Tortoise Father," Mouse Grandmother said. He complied. "Has someone looked at your arm?"

"I showed it to Ferret Mother," Tortoise Father explained.

Mouse Grandmother turned to Ferret Mother and raised her eyebrows. Ferret Mother came over and conferred quietly with her.

Mouse Grandmother looked toward the circle. "Quest leaders!" she said. "Come forward."

Mouse Girl and Ocelot Girl approached, and Mouse Grandmother called Tortoise Father over, as well. Ferret Mother examined his arm.

"Girls," Ferret Mother said, "What is wrong with this arm?"

Mouse Girl saw the painfully swollen arm. "When did this start?" she asked.

"Yesterday morning when I awoke is when I first noticed some pain," Tortoise Father explained. "It has been swelling ever since."

Mouse Girl looked at Ferret Mother. She had no idea what this was. Ocelot Girl felt the arm. The skin was stretched tight due to the swelling.

"Think about the time of year," Ferret Mother said.

Ocelot Girl turned the arm over. There was a red bump just below the elbow and in the middle of the red bump Ocelot Girl pointed to two red dots.

"Spider bite!" she said. "It's harvest time and we've been pulling out baskets from storage, and, in the process, disturbing the spiders."

Ferret Mother nodded.

"How do you treat that?" Mouse Girl asked.

Ferret Mother sighed. "We can leave it alone. It may heal on its own. Or it can get worse and begin to rot. He could lose the arm. Or worse."

Mouse Girl looked at Tortoise Father's face. He was taking this news with perfect stoicism.

"Can we cut the poison out?" Ocelot Girl asked. Tortoise Father winced slightly at this thought.

"That is another option," Ferret Mother said. "But that can be even more dangerous than leaving the body to deal with the poison on its own."

"But we are people of action," Ocelot Girl said.

Ferret Mother shook her head. “The body is better left to itself. Our action is not always the best action.”

Ocelot Girl nodded. Mouse Girl was relieved. Mouse Grandmother nodded at the girls. That was their signal to return to the circle.

“Tortoise Father,” Mouse Grandmother began. “Are you willing to take the responsibility of being an elder among this tribe?”

Tortoise Father nodded.

“Are you willing to give your life in defense of your people?” Mouse Grandmother continued.

“Yes,” Tortoise Father answered.

“In times of famine, will you share your family’s food regardless of how much is required and how little you have?”

“I will,” he replied, glancing over to his wife. Mouse Girl watched her. Tortoise Wife showed no reaction.

“In times of flood, fire, and danger, will you serve the tribe, even if this means you cannot protect your family?”

“I will.”

This is harsh, Mouse Girl thought.

“Finally, will you treat all people fairly and equally as an elder?”

Tortoise Father nodded. “I will.”

Mouse Grandmother smiled and nodded. “You may take your place among the elders.”

Mouse Grandmother’s eyes found Mouse Girl and Ocelot Girl in the audience again. “Quest leaders! Come forward!”

Ocelot Girl and Mouse Girl entered the circle and knelt before Mouse Grandmother.

“The days grow short and your training, by necessity, is coming to an end,” Mouse Grandmother said. “Our people depend upon you to continue our great purpose.”

Mouse Grandmother stood and placed her hands on the girls’ bowed heads.

"Our hope rests in you," Mouse Grandmother said. "Now stand!"

The girls stood.

"Four gifts are given to each quest. Each person who receives such a gift ascends to the Bird caste, a sign that they are one step closer to our people's goal. Tonight, I give you the pipe of the elders."

Squirrel Father brought forward two wooden pipes. Squirrel Father was an excellent wood carver. Each girl took a pipe.

"Which of your quest members do you appoint to represent the elders on your quest?" Mouse Grandmother asked.

"The elder representative of the first quest will be Mouse Boy," Ocelot Girl replied.

Mouse Boy came forward to take the pipe. Mouse Girl was surprised by this decision. There were several good choices Ocelot Girl could have made. Mouse Girl honestly didn't think her brother was the best selection. Could it be that Ocelot Girl chose Mouse Boy to please Mouse Grandmother? Was Ocelot that much of a schemer?

Mouse Girl noticed that Mouse Grandmother was staring at her. It was her turn. This time she was ready.

"The elder representative of the second quest will be Squirrel Girl," Mouse Girl said.

Squirrel Girl came forward and took the pipe from Mouse.

Mouse Girl was satisfied with her choice. She had also considered Rat Boy, because he was a natural leader and had a true concern for the people around him. However, she feared making Rat Boy an elder would inevitably take him away from Ferret Girl. Ferret Girl would most likely never ascend to Bird caste – the tribe had great prejudice against people with visible deformities that were not won in battle. It occurred to Mouse Girl that by not choosing Rat Boy, she was as much of

a schemer as Ocelot Girl. She was slightly ashamed of herself, because thinking less of Ocelot Girl had made her feel good.

In any event, Mouse Grandmother seemed pleased with the choices. “The new elders will be expected to serve on the elder council until their quest leaves.”

Mouse Boy and Squirrel Girl nodded. Ferret Mother gave them each a pouch of tobacco and sumac leaves. The tobacco was especially valuable since it did not grow in the land of the Bird people. It could only be obtained through trade.

Mouse Grandmother then gave the closing benediction to her tribe.

“Tend our world. Remember our story. Continue our people.”

The people sang the quiet response.

As they left the campfire, Mouse Girl walked up to Mouse Boy and gave him a hug. “Congratulations! An elder! My twin brother!”

Mouse Boy smiled. “I hope I can live up to this,” he said. “I wasn’t expecting it.”

“You’ll do a great job,” Mouse Girl said. “Or grandmother and I will strangle you.”

Mouse Boy laughed. And then he turned serious. “You know, we may not have to worry about leaving children behind. Elders and quest leaders are the most likely to die on the quest.”

“That’s your first thought as an elder?” Mouse Girl asked.

Mouse Boy shrugged and put the pipe in his mouth. Mouse Girl thought of Beaver Father and how he had died defending his son. They walked back to their cave in darkness and silence.

4 - The Cliffs

(In which the story of Bird Sister is told. Deer Girl is chosen as a cult leader and Mouse Girl's choice for cult leader is rejected by the elders.)

Ocelot Girl sat under an oak tree on a little hill. Below her, her quest members were helping the tribe dig roots. Many other tribe members had joined them in this work. Right now, the roots were the biggest and fattest they would be. Over the winter they would get smaller, harder, and drier until the early spring rains. Ocelot Girl and Beaver Boy were on guard duty. From the hill they could see long distances in almost any direction.

This was not what Ocelot Girl wanted to be doing. She and her quest had preparations that needed to get done. But there was something suspicious going on. Every one of the cult members was missing, including her father.

This work is normally done every year by the Frog, Squirrel, and Tortoise families, she thought. *Why do we suddenly need more roots this year?*

Ocelot Girl was in a bad mood. Mouse Girl was in an even worse mood. She was out digging in the sun and soon everyone was going to be asking for arrowheads that she should be making right now. She looked around. The adults were far too cheerful. What was wrong with them? They had just as many chores that were going undone. Why were they happy to be in the dust and hot sun all day away from camp? At least all the kids had enough sense to be in bad moods.

Mouse Girl was in the middle of digging up a particularly stubborn yucca plant when she heard someone calling her name. It was Ocelot Girl calling from the top of the hill. Mouse Girl grabbed her bow and quiver and ran to the hilltop. Deer Mother was there with a deadly serious look on her face. She

was breathing hard and sweating. Evidently she had run to get here.

"Ocelot Girl needs to return with me to the village quickly," Deer Mother said.

Ocelot Girl gave no indication of knowing what was going on. "Mouse," she said, "take over guard duty. You're in charge while I'm gone."

"Okay," Mouse Girl said. She was a little worried about the situation, but no one was saying anything. Once Deer Mother and Ocelot Girl had left, Mouse Girl asked Beaver what was going on.

"Deer Mother wouldn't say," Beaver Boy said. "But I didn't like the look on her face. Something's wrong."

Mouse Girl was worried, but that meant it was even more important for her to take guard duty seriously. She worried in silence as she scanned the horizon. She and Beaver continued this until mid-afternoon.

Finally, it looked as if the tribe was finishing their work. They were gathering in little groups and talking down in the valley. Soon they gathered up their harvest and the entire group headed for the creek to clean what they had collected. Mouse Girl was still in charge of security. Guarding a group this big as they traveled was a challenge. She enlisted Ringtail and Squirrel Boy to help.

It was late afternoon by the time the tribe had washed and dried each root. Everything was placed in baskets and they began the trip home. Mouse Girl wondered what was happening with Ocelot Girl. Why hadn't they heard any news? If there was trouble, it was an odd kind of trouble.

Back at camp preparations began for the third story. Another meal was prepared and the tribe gathered again to hear the story. Ocelot Girl was there but she said nothing about her afternoon. The look on her face told Mouse Girl to not even bother to ask.

It was Otter Mother's turn to tell the story. The rest of the cult leaders were not present. Otter Mother sat on the ground and signaled all the children to come near and listen. Otter Mother was a small and quiet person. But she was very kind and the children all loved her. They crowded near her.

"Tonight's story is one of great importance for all of you children. As you recall from last night's story, the first Bird people were sent out to explore the world by their Spirit parents. To this day, this is our greatest tradition. On the eve of adulthood, every child must spend an entire year away from the tribe, learning about the world. It is the duty of each child to find new things in the world.

"Throughout the generations, our children have made amazing discoveries on these journeys. The Bird tribes have spread all over the world because of our quests. Everywhere we can live, we do, because we leave no place unexplored. And we know amazing things about the world because we have traveled so far.

"We have found lands where winter never ends. The ground stays frozen all year long."

"How do people live if the ground is always frozen?" Ferret Girl asked. "Do plants grow in the frozen ground?"

"They survive with great difficulty," Otter Mother said. "I've never been to such a place, but I've been told that the Bird people there eat almost nothing but meat. Animals are their only food."

"But animal flesh is sacred," Ferret Girl said. "We are only allowed to eat it if there is no other choice…"

Otter Mother nodded. "And so it is in that place…"

The children listened in horrified silence. Ferret Girl could not imagine how many animals would have to be killed for a tribe to live on nothing but flesh.

“Our sisters and brothers have also found a land in which summer never ends,” Otter Mother continued. “Fruits of a hundred different sorts may be harvested all year long.”

“That sounds like a much nicer place,” one of the young Deer children said.

“It does sound nice,” Otter Mother said. “But life in that place is even more difficult than life in the frozen land.”

“How can life be hard if food is always available and cold weather never comes?” Ferret Girl asked. She couldn’t help but ask questions when stories like this were told. She had an insatiable thirst for knowledge.

“Food is always available and so animals of all sorts live in that land. So many animals want to live in that land that competition is fierce. I am told it is one of the most dangerous places to live that anyone can imagine.”

Ferret Girl nodded her head in understanding. “And so, winter, although harsh, is a blessing to us.”

Otter Mother nodded. “Indeed it is. The discomforts of winter keep many enemies away from us. But even more than winter, the dryness of our land is a gift. On the edge of the desert here, few animals are able to live.”

“Few animals!” Ferret Girl said. “Raccoons and coyotes and hawks threaten us every day.”

“They do,” Otter Mother said. “But if you ever travel to a greener, lusher land, beware! Your enemies will be even more numerous than they are here! It is such a land that I come from.”

“You’re not from our land?” the youngest Deer Girl asked.

“I am not,” Otter Mother said. “I was born far from here. I come from the land where the sun rises.”

“Tell us about it,” Ferret Girl insisted.

“What I remember most were the tall, straight pine trees. They left the land covered with soft pine needles,” Otter

Mother said. “The entire land is covered with pine needles like a blanket. The ground is always soft and fragrant.”

Otter Mother spent the next few minutes explaining what a pine tree was, what pine needles were, and what pine trees smelled like. Fortunately, this tribe had one tall, coniferous tree species to compare other pines to.

“But our baldcypress trees along the creek lose their needles each winter. The pine trees where I grew up never drop all of their needles.”

Details like this could have kept the children interested all night long, but the story had to continue.

“Throughout the generations our quests have brought us knowledge and helped us to understand and care for the lands in which we live. Tonight, I will tell you the story of Bird Brother and Bird Sister.

“Long ago, the Bird people began to live separately from the Bear People. The Bear people valued war and violence. They took land from the animals, and when they could, from the Bird people. At first, life was difficult for the Bird people. The beasts of the land hunted them as food and the Bear people took their land and killed them. The Bird people became few in number.

“The oldest and wisest of the Bird people was Bird Mother. It was she who began to notice how some animals prospered no matter how much they were hunted, while other animals did not prosper. The animals who prospered were the animals who would eat anything and who could live anywhere. She began to teach her children all the plants they could possibly eat, not just their favorite ones, like sunflower root or morning glory root—foods that might taste bitter, but that would be available when no other food could be found.

“From the squirrels, she learned that acorns, although bitter, could be relied upon when many other foods were difficult to find. She learned that some foods have a strong

odor to keep animals away, like onions, but she could learn to ignore the bad smell and even learn to like it.

"Bird Mother taught her children to sleep in the trees, and in caves, and on the little ledges halfway up cliffs… anywhere that the Bear people could not go. Soon, the Bird people were entirely free of the Bear people.

"Bird Mother had two children, Bird Brother and Bird Sister. Both of them learned all that Bird Mother had to teach, but they were very different from one another. Bird Sister lived like the birds. She would travel from place to place, stopping only on occasion, staying only for a season in a new place. And when she left a place, it was impossible to tell she had been there. She lived very lightly on the land. She had all she needed and the lands in which she lived never ran out of things to give her.

"Bird Brother, on the other hand, lived like a rabbit or a squirrel. When he found a good, safe place to live, he would build a home and stay there. But he soon found that all the plants he used for food were eaten up. And then he had to travel farther to find food. He would keep his home warm by burning wood, but soon all the wood near his home would be used up. He never had enough of what he wanted and the land around him was always running out of the things he needed.

"Bird Sister, who lived lightly, always had more than enough of what she wanted. Bird Brother was a burden on the land. He was always hungry and he always wanted more. When these two raised families, their children learned to live as their parents lived.

"Bird Sister would often visit her brother and encourage him to leave his home behind and come and follow her. But he would always say, 'No, my home is warm and comfortable. Why would I want to sleep on a tree branch or on a hard rock in the cold wind? I will stay where I am.'

“But Bird Brother and his family grew more and more hungry as the good plants around them were slowly eaten up. When his children were hungry, his wife would push him out of his warm and comfortable house and tell him to go and find food for them. Bird Brother searched and searched for food, but still his young ones were hungry.

“Finally, Bird Brother got an idea. He remembered that the Bear people were greedy and selfish and they always had an abundance of food. Bird Brother snuck up to the campsite of the Bear people and found that, sure enough, they had food stored up around them, and they ate so much that at the end of the day their campfire was surrounded by food they could not finish. Bird Brother gathered up their leftover food and, that night, Bird Brother’s children ate well.

“When the Bear people awoke they wondered who had cleaned up the food they left on the ground, but they thought it was probably just wild animals and they didn’t worry about it. The next night Bird Brother did the same thing again. But the next night, he thought, why should I eat only what the Bear people throw away? They have plenty of good food stored up. And so, that night he broke into their storage baskets and took food from there.

“This angered the Bear people. Their food had been stolen before by raccoons and foxes, and they knew how to deal with food thieves. The Bear people were expert hunters and they set a trap for the troublesome animal that was stealing their food.

“The next night, as Bird Brother was stealing food, the Bear people’s snare caught him. The Bear people came quickly to see what they had caught, but Bird Brother had managed to cut the rope of the snare and he hobbled away on a broken leg. The Bear people searched and searched for him, but they could not find him. The Bear people are big and clumsy, and they don’t see well at night.

“Bird Brother easily hid from the Bear people. His plan was to hide until they returned to sleep and then he would make his way home, even with a broken leg.

“But Bird Brother never made it home. While he was hiding, the big, ferocious dogs that live with the Bear people found him. The great beasts have an excellent sense of smell, so they knew that Bird Brother was hiding nearby. And they can see in the dark, so they found him quite easily. And sadly, like the Bear people themselves, the dogs are always hungry. They gobbled up Bird Brother in one bite.”

The youngest Deer Boy let out a little squeal of terror and buried his head in Otter Mother’s lap. Otter Mother stroked his head.

“The wife of Bird Brother stayed where she was, for that was the only life she knew. Her children were always hungry. And the land around her home was always bare because they ate every little plant that grew near them. Her children grew up on the dusty, dirty ground and slept in a dusty, dirty hole.

“Every spring, Bird Sister would visit them and invite them to come and travel the land with her. But they would always say, ‘No, our home is warm and comfortable. Why would we want to sleep on a tree branch or on a hard rock in the cold wind? We will stay where we are.’

Otter Mother stopped speaking. The children were listening with their mouths hanging open and their eyes wide. They were listening for the sounds of dogs who might be hunting for them at this very moment.

“What do we learn from this story?” Otter Mother asked.

“Dogs are scary!” one child offered.

“Stay away from the Bear people,” another child said.

“If we live lightly on the land, we will always have what we need,” Ferret Girl said. “But if we live for comfort and security, we will hurt the land and our chances for survival.”

Otter Mother nodded. “Excellent summary, Ferret Girl. The less we need, the more we will have.”

This lesson was pretty well accepted by even the youngest of children. They had been hearing it all of their lives.

“Will we ever have to leave this valley?” the little Deer Boy asked.

“Of course,” Otter Mother said, smiling. “This has been a wonderful home, but someday we will move to another.”

Deer Boy quietly thought about this.

“That’s what I don’t get about the Bird Sister story,” Ferret Girl said. “We’ve been here for three generations. We don’t move around season to season as she did.”

Otter Mother nodded her head. “You begin to see our difficulty,” she said. “For three generations quests have failed to find a new and safe land for us. This is why we need you to succeed where others have failed.”

Ferret Girl nodded in understanding.

“And now, parents and small children, that is the end of tonight’s story. You may go home and get ready for bed.” Otter Mother said. “The two quests have more work to do tonight, so I need them to stay.”

Otter Mother picked up the little Deer Boy and handed him to his father. The parents and small children left. Otter Mother motioned for the remaining children to gather close to her.

“Since you are about to begin your quest, you must hear the end of Bird Sister’s story.”

Otter Mother stood. “Follow me,” she said.

She stepped out of the circle and walked the dark path to the rock wall. She carefully found the walking path that led up to the top of the cliffs over the fountainhead pool. She climbed over large boulders and jumped from small boulder to small boulder. The children followed her. Coyotes howled far in the

distance. Mouse Girl's hand went automatically to her bow, which was slung over her shoulder.

Once at the top of the cliffs, Otter Mother found a place to sit. The children gathered around, huddling together in the cool air.

"Now, let me tell you the rest of Bird Sister's story," Otter Mother said. "The simple version of the story is as Ferret Girl suggested. Bird Brother was greedy and lazy, and he lost his fear of the Bear people. Bird Sister stayed free and independent. But that is not how the story ended.

"Bird Brother's wife was hungry and desperate to feed her children. She had no choice but to try to do the same thing her husband had done—steal from the Bear people. She learned from his mistake and she and her children learned to avoid the dogs of the Bear people. And so they became like raccoons and opossums, living off the trash of the Bear people.

"But even the Bear people, as slow as they are, cannot be fooled forever. One day they caught one of Bird Mother's children. They were amazed. They had heard stories of their smaller, wilder cousins but had never seen one before. They didn't know what to do with him. Should they kill him for stealing from them? Should they take him back to his home and steal whatever he had? They put him in a big, leather sack and debated what to do with him.

"Meanwhile, Bird Brother's wife was waiting for her son to return and knew something must have gone wrong. She snuck to the camp of the Bear people to see what was happening, but they were waiting for her. They trapped her and put her in a sack. And one by one, as the children came to search for their mother, they captured all of them.

"Bird Brother's wife begged them for mercy. She said they were just a poor, hungry family and they were just trying to survive. 'Are there more like you?' the Bear people asked. 'No,'

Bird Brother's wife answered. 'Your dogs killed my husband.' But then she remembered Bird Sister and her family.

"'We are the only poor and hungry people living near you,' Bird Brother's wife said. 'But there is another family who has all they ever want and more. If you let us go, we will lead you to them. And then we can all feast on their food.'

"It was a horrible thing for her to offer to do, but years of being hungry and lonely had hardened her heart. She would steal from anyone and betray anyone. The Bear people agreed, but they would not set Bird Brother's wife and her children free. They bound them with ropes and forced them to lead them to Bird Sister.

"Fortunately, Bird Brother's wife did not know exactly where Bird Sister lived. And so the Bear people and their dogs trampled and tore through the forest searching for them. Bird Sister heard them from far away and had plenty of time to send her children away to safer places. But Bird Sister could not bear to leave Bird Brother's wife and her family as prisoners of the Bear people. She waited until the Bear people grew tired and had to rest. While they slept, Bird Sister quietly snuck up and untied one of her nephews.

" 'Come with me," she said, "and be free. You can live in the trees and on the cliffs with my children. You will always have enough acorns and grass seeds and sunflower roots to eat. You will never go hungry again.'

"But Bird Sister's nephew had never known any life other than eating the meaty scraps stolen from the Bear people's trash. He had never known any home but the dusty hole in the ground.

"'I don't want to eat bitter acorns or dig through the mud to find some rotten old root!' he said. 'And I'd probably fall off a cliff if I ever tried to climb one. And the Bear people said they would kill me if I tried to escape.' He grabbed the rope Bird Sister had untied and put it back around his neck. Then he

kicked the nearest Bear man. He grabbed Bird Sister's arm and held onto her. 'I caught Bird Sister,' he screamed, hoping the Bear people would reward him for her capture.

"Bird Sister managed to escape his grasp but by then all the Bear people and all of their dogs were awake. Bird Sister was surrounded. She climbed a tree to escape, but her enemies surrounded the tree. The Bear people told Bird Brother's children to climb the tree and bring her down. The children had never climbed trees before. Most of them were too fat and weak to try. But a few of them began to climb into the lower branches. They searched and searched the tree but they never found Bird Sister."

Otter Mother paused. The children were staring at her, mouths agape and eyes wide. Otter Mother said no more.

"What happened to her?" Ferret Girl demanded.

Otter Mother smiled. "No one knows," Otter Mother said. "All we know is that the Bear people did not capture her. She disappeared. We know that she had spent her life learning all that Bird Mother had taught her and learning ever more from the world around her. Somehow she escaped. She appeared mysteriously to her children one last time, and then they never saw her again. They say she left to rejoin the Spirits.

"Her children learned a number of lessons from this experience. First, always stay far from the Bear people. Second, stay far away from anyone who does go near the Bear people. The Bear's ways are dangerous and seductive. And finally, if Bird Sister did find a way to rejoin the Spirits, it must be possible for us to do the same."

"And that's our job?" Mouse Girl asked. "To discover how to rejoin the Spirits?"

Otter Mother nodded her head. "Learn all that this world can teach. And then keep learning. The knowledge beyond the world is what the cult leaders seek. Tonight, you will choose the cult leaders for your quest."

Otter Mother stood and walked closer to the precipitous drop down to the pool. This is where Mouse Girl and Ocelot Girl had jumped into the pool just a few days earlier. Mouse Girl didn't like being up here in the daylight. At night, it was even worse.

Mouse Girl heard movement beyond the place where Otter Mother was standing. She saw something in the shadows and her body tensed, ready for danger. But then she saw the distinctive silhouette of the wings of the cult leaders. The entire band of cult leaders was walking towards them.

As they drew closer, Mouse Girl noticed that Deer Mother was carrying something in her arms. They stopped and faced the children, their backs to the cliff. Deer Mother knelt down, placing her burden on the ground.

Mouse Girl looked at the cult leaders now that they were closer and noticed that Ocelot Father was not among them. She had little time to wonder about this because Deer Grandmother began to speak.

"Quest leaders! Come forward."

Ocelot Girl and Mouse Girl moved to the front of their group. Mouse Girl could feel her stomach get queasy as she stepped closer to the cliff edge.

"We are sending you to learn all you can from the world and then to keep learning," Deer Grandmother said. "Our people depend upon you."

Deer Grandmother reached out her hands. Ocelot Girl and Mouse Girl came still nearer to her and bowed their heads. Deer Grandmother placed her hands on the girls' heads.

"Our hope rests in you," Deer Grandmother said. "Four gifts are given to each quest. Each person who receives such a gift ascends to the Bird caste, a sign that they are one step closer to our people's goal. Tonight, I give you the gift of the cult leaders."

She removed her hands and indicated two long, dark bundles lying on the ground. They were what Deer Mother had been carrying.

"Which of your quest members do you appoint to represent the cult on your quest?" Deer Grandmother asked.

"Deer Girl will represent the cult on the first quest," Ocelot Girl said. Ocelot Girl picked up the dark bundle and handed it to Deer Girl. Deer Girl accepted it reverently. She unwrapped the bundle and discovered a set of cult wings inside. She seemed uncertain of what to do with them.

Deer Mother came forward. She took the bundle and turned her daughter around. Deer Mother held the folded wings while her daughter slipped her arms into the sturdy leather straps. Deer Mother tied the straps snugly. She then guided her daughter's hands to the hand-straps that were attached to the wooden structure of the folded wings. Under her mother's guidance, Deer Girl spread her arms. The wings spread dramatically. All the children backed out of their way. The great leather contraptions spread more than twice Deer Girl's armspan. They were magnificent, even in the starlight.

Mouse Girl could see Deer Mother smiling with pride. Unlike the previous night's selection of her brother as an elder, Mouse Girl had no doubt that Deer Girl was a great choice for cult leader. She was intelligent and serious and very well-versed in the lore of the Bird people.

Deer Girl retracted her wonderful wings and returned to stand with the rest of her quest. Deer Grandmother turned her gaze onto Mouse Girl. Mouse was ready with her choice.

"The representative of the cult for the second quest will be Ferret Girl," Mouse Girl said.

Ferret Girl stepped forward. Mouse Girl was about to pick up the wings and hand them to Ferret Girl, when the cult members began to stir. They whispered to each other as Deer Grandmother held her hand out, signaling Mouse Girl to stop.

The cult leaders continued to confer with each other. Deer Mother reached out for Ferret Girl's arm and drew her into the circle of cult leaders. More whispering ensued. After a few minutes, which seemed like an eternity, Deer Grandmother turned to face the quest groups.

"The cult leaders have refused your selection of Ferret Girl as a cult leader for the second quest," Deer Grandmother said. Ferret Girl stepped away from the cult leaders and stood on her own.

Mouse Girl was shocked. *Does this have to do with her appearance?* she wondered. She thought about the cult leaders and realized that, not only were they intelligent and reverent, they were all exquisite physical specimens. They performed in all the legend and lore stories. Were they really rejecting Ferret Girl because of her facial disfigurement? Mouse Girl was growing outraged.

"Deer Grandmother," Mouse Girl said, trying not to sound angry. "I have worked with these children for years. I have been trained in the lore of our people. I understand my responsibilities and my authority as a quest leader. With all due respect to my elders of the cult, I have made my decision. Ferret Girl is everything a cult leader should be. If you see any fault in her, I assure you there is nothing about her that will keep her from excelling in this role. Ferret Girl will be the cult leader for the second quest."

Snake Father stepped forward.

"Mouse Girl," he said, "your decision has been overruled. Ferret Girl will not be the cult leader for your quest."

Mouse Girl's face grew hot with anger. Never in her life had she disobeyed an adult, but she would not allow anyone to treat Ferret Girl unjustly.

"Snake Father, I do not wish to be disrespectful, but we will be risking our lives together for an entire year for the

benefit of our tribe. The cult leader I need on this quest is Ferret Girl."

Mouse Girl stood her ground. Snake Father was bigger than her, very muscular, and her elder. She wasn't sure what he would do but she had to stand up to him. She was surprised when he smiled instead of growing angry. He turned back to the circle of cult leaders. They conferred together. A long moment later, Deer Mother turned to Mouse Girl.

"Mouse Girl," Deer Mother said, "the cult leaders are willing to accept your decision on one condition. Does Ferret Girl agree with your decision?"

Of course she does, Mouse Girl thought. I'm her quest leader. Mouse Girl was relieved Ferret Girl would get what she deserved.

Deer Mother looked toward Ferret Girl. "Ferret Girl, do you agree with Mouse Girl's decision?" she asked.

Ferret Girl stepped forward. "I do not," she said.

Every child in both quests gasped in horror. This appeared to be an unimaginable breakdown in their social order.

"With the greatest respect for my quest leader, I must disagree with her decision," Ferret Girl continued. She bent down and picked up the bundle of wings.

"After conferring with the cult leaders, I believe Mouse Girl herself should be the cult representative of the second quest."

Ferret Girl held the bundle out to Mouse Girl.

Mouse Girl leaned toward her and whispered, "Are you sure? Why are you doing this?"

Ferret Girl whispered back. "Just trust me. Take the wings."

The sacred trust between the Bird people meant that honor and respect flowed both ways between superiors and subordinates. Mouse Girl could not overrule Ferret Girl's own

desire to give away her chance to be a cult leader. She bowed her head and accepted the wings from Ferret Girl.

"You had better be right about this," she whispered. Ferret Girl smiled.

Mouse Girl unwrapped the wings. She was very self-conscious. Quest leaders never chose positions of honor for themselves. Sometimes, if they greatly deserved it, later in life they would be accepted as elders or cult leaders. But this was too early.

Ferret Girl took the bundle and turned Mouse Girl around. She helped Mouse Girl fit the wings and open them. Mouse Girl was too uncomfortable with the night's proceedings to enjoy any of it. After Ferret Girl had gone through the obligatory fitting and operation of the wings, Mouse Girl and Ferret Girl quietly rejoined their quest.

Deer Grandmother stepped to the front again.

"Cult leaders hold a sacred place in the destiny of the Bird people," Deer Grandmother explained. Behind her, Snake Father extended his wings to their fullest breadth. His silhouette was impressive against the stars. "When the wisdom of the elders, and the courage of the guardians fails, when the strength and tenacity of the Bird people draws to its end, it is then that the cult leaders must lead us away from the old stories of our people and write new stories for us."

Just then, a strong gust of wind blew and Snake Father was thrown off-balance. He fell backward, wings still extended. The wind against his ceremonial wings forced him over the cliff edge.

Ocelot Girl screamed. Mouse Girl realized she was screaming, too. When those wings hit the water, she thought, they're going to break. And they might drag Snake Father down into the deep water of the pool. She ran to the edge of the cliff, ready to jump in and help Snake Father if he needed

it. She wasn't thinking of her fear of heights, or the fact that she was also strapped into a pair of wings.

But then she saw an amazing sight. Snake Father did not fall into the pool. His wings carried him far down the creek. He was floating on air!

Snake Father's wings carried him far down the creek and eventually he was too far away to see in the dark. Mouse Girl looked around and noticed that all of the other children were now standing at the edge of the cliff, amazed.

Deer Grandmother spoke from behind them. "Remember, there are always new stories to be written. That is the purpose of your quests."

5 - Infection

(In which Ocelot Girl learns to treat a broken arm and the pecan festival is celebrated.)

Ocelot Girl sat quietly outside her family's cave. Her father had been absent from the previous night's ceremonies because he had been seriously injured while practicing wing-diving off the cliffs over the pool. He was the one who was supposed to gracefully float down the creek, not Snake Father. Unfortunately, he flew too high and his wings snagged on the branches of a baldcypress tree. He fell from a great height. One arm was badly broken, and he was bruised all over. He was in great pain.

Ferret Mother had been tending to him all night, giving him soothing teas that would reduce the pain and help him rest. It was almost dawn before she was able to get him to sleep. She left Ocelot Mother with a gourd full of the sleep-inducing tea, and instructions that no one else was to drink any of it. It was dangerous, especially for children. Ferret Mother then went home to her own bed to get some sleep.

Now, Ocelot Father was deeply asleep and snoring loudly. This was an unusual sound to Ocelot Girl because the Bird people usually did not allow snoring. They also did not allow babies to cry or children to be loud while they were playing. In a world as dangerous as theirs, the Bird people could not afford to draw attention to themselves. But today, Ocelot Father was allowed to snore. Ferret Mother said it was more important for Ocelot Father to sleep deeply than it was for him to sleep quietly.

Ocelot Girl was filled with conflicting emotions. She should have been excited to be leaving on her quest. She should have been anxious that the quest was leaving so much earlier than planned. But mostly, she was sad for some reason.

She had never seriously thought of her parents dying. She knew it was a possibility, but her father had always been strong and seemingly invincible. Seeing him cared for as one would care for a child was a shock to Ocelot Girl's vision of the world.

Beaver Boy walked up the path to Ocelot. "The elders say it's time for us to gather," he said.

Ocelot Girl nodded. She crawled into the cave and grabbed her stuff. She gave her tired mother a quick and silent hug, then left.

"How is your father?" Beaver Boy asked.

"Sleeping for now," Ocelot Girl said. "Ferret Mother says he needs to sleep and heal."

Beaver Boy nodded. It was mid-morning as they walked to the campfire circle where all the quest children were gathered. Deer Father started to speak as soon as Ocelot Girl arrived.

"Today we begin the pecan harvest," he said. Many children gasped in excitement at this news. "But before the fun begins, Ferret Father has a few things he would like to show you."

Ferret Father stood. He looked at Ocelot Girl as he began to speak.

"Ocelot Father had a serious accident yesterday and he broke one arm," Ferret Father said. "I would like to show you how to treat a broken arm before your quests begin."

The children fixed all of their attention on him. They knew their lives might depend on what he was saying, and they were all especially aware of this due to Ocelot Father's condition.

"The body will heal broken bone, but it will heal it in whatever position the bone is in," Ferret Father said, holding up a stick. He broke the stick in half, and the children winced, imagining a human bone. "So, it is important to try to

reposition the bone the way it should be in order to heal correctly."

Ferret Father demonstrated by putting the broken stick back together.

"But this is hard to do. First, the wounded person will be in extreme pain. Moving the bone is very painful. The best time to reposition the bone is as soon as you can do it. After a big accident, the body is often stunned. The bone should be moved while the person is still in this state. If you wait until they recover a little, it will take many people to hold them down for the bone to be moved. Do it quickly and do it as soon as possible.

"The muscles in the broken arm will be pulling against the bone, so it will take a lot of strength. As you can see, the ends of broken things can be very sharp." Ferret Father poked his finger against the sharp end of the stick. "Sharp, broken bone can cause more bleeding, so you must be careful how you move the bone. Usually, you must slightly pull the broken pieces apart and then move them into the right position.

"Afterwards, you must hold the bone in place. You can place sticks on either side of the arm and then gently and firmly wrap the sticks snugly to the arm."

He signaled for Ferret Girl to stand up. As she did so, Ferret Father showed the children how to position the sticks around the broken arm and how to immobilize the bone by wrapping a piece of cloth around the sticks and the arm.

"Once this is done, the person must avoid moving the arm for many, many days. They should rest and do as little as possible. The bone will be weak for much longer than you might think. If you ever break a bone, do not try to be brave and get back to normal as quickly as possible. Be careful and protect that bone, or it may cause you problems for the rest of your life."

Ocelot Girl thought of her father's limp. His leg had never healed correctly. She wondered about the story behind that.

"Make sure the person gets plenty of food as they heal. They may not be hungry right away, but once they are hungry, their body will need strength to heal."

"What about the pain?" Mouse Girl asked. "What can we do to help with that?"

Ferret Father nodded his head. "As you have been taught your entire life, there are plants that can ease pain, but they are very dangerous. The safest thing is willow bark. Chewing willow bark will help. You can make it stronger by boiling the bark in water and having the person who is in pain drink the resulting tea.

"I am afraid to share the secrets of anything much stronger than that, but in a very severe emergency, like the one Ocelot Father had last night, there is one more secret I will let you know. You all know that the white and furry nightshade plant is poisonous. If you need a very strong painkiller, boil half a leaf in water and let the person in pain drink that tea. But be careful, this plant can kill. Always use less than you think you need. Half a leaf at most."

The children nodded seriously.

"And remember, unlike bark, leafy plants change throughout the year. What is safe in spring may not be safe in winter."

The children nodded again.

"Half a leaf, at most," Mouse Girl repeated. Ferret Father nodded.

Deer Mother came forward. "It's now time for the pecan harvesting festival to begin. The two quests should prepare themselves and gather at the great pecan tree."

Along the banks of the creek, numerous pecan and black walnut trees grew. Not far downstream from the cliffs, the riverbank spread out into a wide, flat plain. In the middle of

the plain grew an old pecan tree. According to the elders, this tree had given them pecans faithfully for the seven generations the Bird people had known of this valley. It had been an old tree even then, and it was still strong and vigorous.

However, as with all pecan trees, it did not produce pecans consistently every year. In years when the great old tree was not producing, other large trees were used. But it was always a happy occasion when the pecan festival was able to take place at the great tree. Mouse Girl took this to be a good sign.

The elders determined that the first quest would be the first to climb the tree to harvest pecans. According to the rules of the pecan harvest game, they could send one person up into the tree to throw down pecans. The rest of the quest had to catch the pecans before they hit the ground. Their goal was to catch one hundred pecans before being knocked out of the tree by the opposing quest.

The second quest took their places around the tree. The only weapons they could use for the task of knocking the pecan-picker out of the tree were blunt-tipped arrows. The tribe had made dozens of these arrow shafts in anticipation for the festival. In addition to the shafts the entire tribe had made, Badger Boy had been saving up some shafts he had made out of the very hard and dense wood of the persimmon tree.

“It’s too bad you can’t use your atlatl for the festival,” Badger Boy said to Ringtail Boy.

Ringtail Boy did not smile at this. “The atlatl dart could kill at this distance, even without a spearhead.”

“Ah,” Badger Boy said, understanding that he had overestimated Ringtail’s willingness to joke about his newly gained position as guardian of the quest. “Good thing you’re not using it, then.”

Badger Boy returned to arranging his arrow shafts in his quiver. His strategy was to use ordinary shafts as the pecan-picker climbed the tree. When the pecan-picker had grown accustomed to the weight and impact of the regular arrows, he would hit them with the dense and heavy persimmon shafts.

Deer Mother came by to give the quest more arrow shafts and to inspect the ones they had. Shafts with arrowheads were forbidden to be in the possession of children on this day. It was too easy to accidentally shoot a sharp arrow in the excitement of the moment. Deer Mother ran her finger over each of Badger's arrow tips. She had no trouble detecting the difference in the persimmon shafts.

"Be careful with these," she said.

"I'm not trying to hurt anyone," Badger said. "I just want them to know that somebody's shooting at them."

"Oh, I wasn't worried about you hurting the first quest," Deer Mother said. "You can shoot at them as hard as you want. I was just thinking it would be a shame to lose one of your persimmon shafts."

Badger smiled. He was glad he wasn't climbing the tree today.

The second quest had taken their positions around the tree. They signaled to the elders that they were ready. The elders signaled for the competition to begin.

From behind the large rocks at the foot of the cliff, the first quest appeared. They spotted Badger and immediately turned away from him. It was well-known that he was the best archer in the second quest. The first quest made a wide arc around the tree and began their running approach to the tree. The second quest could not shoot at them until they crossed into the circle of pecan baskets that surrounded the tree.

The first quest was running quickly. They formed two columns with Ocelot Girl in the center. It was no secret that she would be their pecan-picker. She was the fastest,

strongest, and most agile. That was why she was the quest leader. They all carried shields of woven reeds to protect Ocelot Girl. The instant they reached the circle of baskets, arrows rained down on them. Being the highly disciplined team they were, not a single arrow made it into their midst to strike Ocelot Girl.

As they reached the tree, Deer Girl dropped her shield and turned to face Ocelot Girl. Without even breaking her stride, she cupped her hands and gave Ocelot Girl a boost into the tree. Ocelot Girl flew into the air and was among the branches before a single arrow could find her.

That was awesome, Badger Boy thought.

At that same instant, Mouse Girl gave a silent hand signal and the second quest scrambled, changing positions. Badger Boy watched carefully where Mouse Girl had been standing. Mouse Girl's job was to find the best position to shoot from and Badger's job was to be in that position before Ocelot Girl reached the first pecan.

Ocelot Girl was high in the tree before Badger even had a chance to shoot at her. Her wrists and ankles were protected by wooden bracelet-shields. She moved out onto a large branch to reach a big group of pecans.

Badger Boy aimed an arrow low on her body, where it was hardest to move without shifting balance. It was perfectly aimed, but Ocelot Girl saw it coming and easily avoided it. Arrow after arrow flew by her as she tossed down the first batch of pecans. Every pecan was caught by her quest members. When she finished with that cluster of pecans, she moved on to another nearby group.

Ocelot Girl seemed to have eyes in the back of her head. She gracefully curved her body around every arrow. Badger Boy knew he had to keep shooting. The only way to win against her was to fire so many arrows that she couldn't possibly avoid them all. He released arrows as fast as he could. Finally, he

saw the one pecan she would have to turn away from him to reach. He watched her carefully and the instant she began to reach for that particular pecan, he released the arrow he had been aiming with all of the strength he had. It hit its mark.

Although it was a normal arrow shaft, Badger had put a lot behind it, and it struck Ocelot Girl hard in her back ribs. She paused. He could tell it stung. But she threw the pecan down and was off to another branch. Arrows continued to miss her. She was amazing.

She climbed higher and higher, collecting more and more pecans. The higher branches were tricky because, although you were higher and generally harder to hit with an arrow, you also had more leaves and branches blocking your view of your opponents. Moving out of the way of arrows at this height was not practical. As Ocelot Girl began to approach the goal of one hundred pecans, she was getting hit by arrows on occasion, but wasn't paying them much heed. She might be bruised tomorrow, but none of these arrows were going to knock her out of the tree.

Badger drew closer to the tree and began to use his final persimmon arrows, hoping to get lucky. He annoyed her with some very accurate and painful shots, but she managed to throw down the hundredth pecan and the contest was over.

As Ocelot Girl climbed down, Badger Boy began collecting arrows. Halfway down the tree, Ocelot Girl called out to him.

"Nice shooting, Badger," she said.

"Thanks," Badger Boy answered. He felt simultaneously angry because he was pretty sure this was a condescending remark, but also happy to get any positive feedback at all from the leader of the first quest. He decided to ignore his realistic self-critique and take her comment as a compliment.

After all the arrow shafts were gathered up and the two quests completed their obligatory mutual compliments, the second quest went to the cliffs to organize.

“Did you see the way Deer Girl threw Ocelot up that tree?” Squirrel Girl asked.

Everyone nodded. They had nothing like that planned. They were pretty sure Mouse Girl was going to take a beating as she went up the trunk of the tree.

“I’ll climb like we planned,” she said. “Just get your shields up as high as possible. Maybe I could try climbing onto Squirrel Boy’s shoulders to get a little bit of height.”

Her quest looked discouraged. They were really hoping to keep the first quest from reaching a hundred pecans. Now, even if they did great, all they would do was equal the first quest’s performance. Winning was no longer an option.

“Any other ideas or questions?” Mouse Girl asked.

The quest was silent.

“Just make sure you catch every pecan,” Mouse Girl said. “As many times as we hit Ocelot Girl, I don’t think she is going to show me any mercy.”

Mouse Girl put on the wrist and ankle guards. Squirrel Girl helped her tie them tightly. Mouse turned and faced the tree. Her quest formed around her.

“Run!” she said.

They ran in formation. When they crossed into the basket circle, the arrows began to fly. Mouse Girl heard her friends yell in frustration each time an arrow made it past a slightly misplaced shield. None of the arrows managed to slow her down. Squirrel Boy got to the tree as planned. He leaned against the trunk while Squirrel Girl protected him with her shield. Mouse Girl paused and looked up the trunk. The arrows stopped.

They’re waiting for me to make a move, she thought. She grabbed Squirrel Boy’s shield and lifted it quickly above the line of defending shields. Arrows flew towards it instantaneously. The moment the arrows hit, Mouse Girl

dropped the shield, jumped onto Squirrel Boy's shoulders and then leapt up the trunk.

An arrow hit her squarely on the cheek. Arrows were not supposed to be aimed above the shoulder, but sometimes it happened. It was shocking how much it hurt, but she did not allow herself to be distracted.

She was up to the lowest branch and almost over it when another arrow hit her knee. *Ouch!* she thought, t*hese guys know where to aim.* She kept moving and found the branch she wanted. She scrambled away from the direction of the arrows that had hit her. They were most likely fired by Beaver or Ocelot, but exactly who shot them didn't matter. The fact that they hit and she was still thinking about how much they hurt is what mattered.

Mouse Girl ran out onto the branch. She saw the first quest changing position below her. She grabbed for the first pecan, threw it, and easily dodged an arrow. She did this with pecan after pecan. She was able to see just about every arrow coming. She knew how to keep moving, keep circling, keep planning her next move.

One of the dark figures in the grass below was shooting arrows that seemed to be coming a lot faster than the others. They made a higher whistling sound. *That must be Beaver using hardwood arrows,* she thought. But even his fastest arrows could not touch her.

Mouse Girl jumped to the next branch and kicked down two pecans as she went. The arrows continued to fly and she continued to dodge. She was almost up to fifty pecans and had not been hit once since she started throwing pecans. She finished one branch, leaving a few pecans that might have exposed her too much. She jumped to the next branch. She threw down the first pecan from this group and an arrow slammed into her shoulder. She hadn't seen that one.

That direct hit made her lose her balance a little, but she regained her poise and continued to work. She was throwing another pecan when her arm was hit hard by another arrow she hadn't seen.

Where are those coming from? she wondered angrily. They had both traveled in a downward path to strike her. It happened again as she reached for another pecan. Her hand was knocked away from the big nut and she fell forward. Fortunately, there was another branch for her to jump down onto. She landed perfectly on it.

That could have been the end, she thought.

But she kept moving and considered the next branch to jump onto. She found her target, dodged an arrow, and was about to jump when another arrow came down and hit her on the collarbone. She misplaced her foot and her jump was far short of what it needed to be. Instead of landing gracefully on the branch, her torso slammed into it and she had to wrap her arms around it to keep from falling. The first quest took this opportunity to pound her with arrows. It was horrible, but she scrambled up onto the branch and began to dodge the arrows again.

She now knew what was happening. Somebody was ricocheting arrows off the higher branches at just the right angle to hit her. *Who could aim that perfectly?* she wondered in anger. *Probably anybody on the first quest. Most likely Beaver.*

She had lost count of her pecans, but guessed she was in the sixties. She began moving slower and looked for arrows aimed obviously too high. Sure enough, one came in high, glanced off a high branch and flew by the exact place Mouse Girl had been an instant before.

Okay, I can avoid those, too. Mouse Girl thought. *I just have to concentrate a little more.*

She threw down ten, maybe twelve more nuts, and the arrows continued to miss her. She was feeling pretty confident now. She had to decide whether to stay here and rely on her reflexes to get out of the way of quick, powerful shots or to go up higher as Ocelot Girl had done and simply take the beating from arrows that could no longer knock her off balance but simply inflict pain.

She was doing so well she decided to stay low. She really had no idea how close she was to finishing. Suddenly two arrows flew toward her, coincidentally timed so that she could not avoid both. She had to stay in the path of one and it hit her hard in the chest. She kept working, even though that arrow had shaken her up a little bit. And then, again, two arrows flew, boxing her in with no escape. She took one in the knee. She was slowing down now due to the pain.

Who can shoot two arrows that perfectly coordinated? she thought. She took a moment to concentrate on the archers and saw that Ocelot Girl and Beaver Boy were clearly working together. She immediately retreated to the other side of the tree. As she located a branch, she saw the archers below reposition themselves. She worked quickly but saw the dual arrows coming at her again. She ducked and covered her face as both arrows struck her in the head.

That was a stupid move, she thought.

The impact of the arrows knocked her backwards. She had almost no time at all to glance down before she fell, but she managed to flip backwards and land on another branch. *And this branch has pecans!* she thought. She ran for them.

The arrows kept flying and she realized she was too low now to even make an attempt to get up higher out of the dangerous realm of the arrows. She hid from the dual arrows, but they were herding her away from any pecan clusters. She felt ridiculous, cowering from the first quest, instead of

moving forward, but they had her trapped. She decided she had to make a run for another part of the tree.

She sprinted across the limb and jumped for another, higher one. Arrows pounded her legs, but she managed to land on the higher branch. And then the dual arrows came, hitting her squarely in the chest, and she had no choice but to fall. There was no lucky branch to catch her this time. As she fell, she managed to hit one more pecan toward the ground. She landed feet first and rolled, the impact quite painful due to the height from which she had fallen.

"Ninety-nine," Deer Mother yelled out. "We'll count again just to make sure, but I'm pretty sure that was ninety-nine pecans."

Mouse Girl remained flat on her back and did not even try to stand up. *Ninety-nine!* she thought. *Lizard crap! Just one stupid pecan less than Ocelot Girl!*

This result was actually received quite well by most of the second quest. They were accustomed to losing by much wider margins. Coming within one pecan of Ocelot Girl was seen as a huge accomplishment. Unless, of course, you were the one who had been mercilessly targeted by the first quest's arrows. Mouse Girl just felt beaten up.

However, as the quest leader, she bravely commended her quest. They massaged her wounded arms and legs. As they did so, Mouse Girl noticed that Deer Mother was talking to Ocelot Girl. After that conversation was over, Ocelot Girl walked back in the direction of the caves. The adults who had been guarding against coyotes and other predators during the competition gave her encouraging looks as she walked by, but Ocelot acknowledged none of them.

"I think Ocelot Girl just got some bad news," Mouse Girl said, sitting up. The second quest turned and saw Ocelot walking away. They watched in silence, not knowing what to do.

The members of the first quest came over.

"Ocelot Father is doing worse," Snake Girl said. "He's getting hot and can't sleep."

"Getting hot?" Ferret Girl asked. "From a broken bone?"

Snake Girl shrugged. Ferret Girl thought for a moment.

"Has anyone here seen him?" Ferret Girl asked.

Everyone shook their heads.

"I'll be back," Ferret Girl said. She ran toward the caves.

Mouse Girl looked around. The first quest looked lost without their leader. Beaver Boy, whose father had just died, looked absolutely traumatized. Mouse Girl looked around the group and noticed that, except for Beaver and Mouse Girl's own brother, every kid in the first quest had both parents still living. With two parents and being a part of the tribe's best quest, they probably weren't accustomed to dealing with loss.

Losing was one thing Mouse Girl knew about. She knew this was the time she needed to take control.

"Okay," she said. "Since Ocelot Girl is where she needs to be right now, let's get to work shelling these pecans."

The two quests carried the baskets back upstream, closer to the caves and began the shelling. The children of the Bird tribe were good at shelling pecans. It was hard work but it gave them one of their favorite foods, so they were glad to do it. Plus, it was a social activity and that made the work enjoyable.

Without needing any instructions, the children broke up the work into the necessary tasks. Badger and Beaver found large rocks just the right size for cracking the pecan shells without smashing the meat inside. They began to crack the shells. The rest of the kids took the cracked pecans and started to break the hard shells away to get at the nut inside. It was boring and somewhat painful, since the shells were sharp as they broke, but they talked as they worked.

“I think you did great up in the tree today,” Snake Girl said to Mouse Girl. “You were really making Ocelot Girl work hard. She was running out of ideas.”

Mouse Girl smiled, thankful for the compliment. “Thanks. But you guys were so good, it didn’t feel like you were running out of ideas.”

“Ocelot Girl was impressed at how hard it was to stop you,” Otter Girl said. “She kept thinking she had you in a no-win position, but you recovered every time. That back flip was amazing.”

Mouse Girl’s face flushed. She wasn’t used to being praised. She wasn’t quite sure how to respond, so she just nodded, smiled, and kept working. Snake Girl reached out and touched her face.

“It looks like you got hit pretty hard just below your eye,” she said. “That’s going to be a nasty bruise.”

“That was me,” Beaver said. “I’m sorry about that. I was trying to guess when you were going to jump up onto the tree trunk, and I let the arrow go a little early.”

“It’s part of the game,” Mouse Girl said. “It’s my job to be ready for anything.”

“I can’t even imagine how you do that,” Snake Girl said. “I could never do that well up there.”

Mouse Girl smiled again. Being praised by the first quest felt pretty good. Ever since the death of Frog Boy, she had been feeling pretty bad about herself. Receiving a few well-deserved compliments felt great.

The children worked on in silence, happy to have meaningful work to do. Plus, they got to eat as many pecans as they wanted. It was odd how life worked. At this time of year there was more food than they could possibly eat. If they worked every moment of the day, they would still never be able to shell every pecan. But later in the winter, they always

had to take extreme care to stretch the food out as long as possible.

After some time, Ferret Girl returned. She slipped into the group right next to Rat Boy, as was her custom. Rat Boy smiled at her.

"What were you up to?" Mouse Girl asked.

"No one told me that Ocelot Father was cut up so badly," Ferret Girl said.

"What difference does that make?" Otter Girl asked.

"All the difference in the world," Ferret Girl said. "Not only is his body having to deal with the trauma of the broken bone and whatever else got smashed inside of him, the open wounds mean his body is having to fight off infection."

"He had a lot of cuts?" Mouse Girl asked.

"Some deep cuts," Ferret Girl said. "And the herbs we've gathered recently haven't been looking very good. The last big batch I gathered with my parents didn't look very healthy. We had good rains in the spring, but it's been dry for a while. I don't think our ordinary cleansing herbs are working."

"What do we do then?" Snake Girl asked.

"I told my parents about my concern and they're going to try using some fragrant pine compresses. They make it from the baldcypress and the cedar."

"How is Ocelot Girl?" Mouse Girl asked.

Ferret Girl looked around and noticed all the first quest people looking to her for the answer to this question.

"She's very concerned," Ferret Girl said. "But she's doing well."

Ferret Girl was afraid to say anything more. Ocelot Girl looked really scared but it wouldn't help anyone to say that out loud. They continued working together in silence.

6 - Trade

(In which the final story is told and Otter and Ferret are chosen as mystics. Visitors arrive and Squirrel Girl is traded away to another tribe while Jaguarundi Girl is accepted into the Bird tribe.)

Over the next few days Ocelot Father only got worse. He was feverish and restless. At one point he was having nightmares that caused him to awake screaming in terror. Ferret Mother gave him as much calming tea as she dared. She had stopped giving him nightshade, for fear it might be causing his nightmares.

Ocelot Girl and her mother looked tired all the time. They were often absent for meals and their contribution to the harvest was sorely missed. Everyone else was working extra hours.

Finally, the elders decided the fourth campfire could wait no longer. News had come in from the outside world that significant events were transpiring. Two men from another tribe had arrived and met for many hours with the elders. Whatever was happening was so urgent the men were reluctant to even stay and share a meal. However, they were prevailed upon to stay and join in. They were introduced as Wolf and Turtle. Mouse Girl was not aware that anyone named their families for wolves or their relatives. The Bird people had a deeply rooted disdain for those creatures.

As the meal was being eaten, Deer Mother approached Mouse Girl and asked her to come with her outside the circle.

“Mouse Girl, you seemed surprised and offended by our refusal to allow Ferret Girl to become your cult representative,” Deer Mother began.

Without saying anything, Mouse Girl nodded in agreement.

"I would like to explain why that was," Deer Mother continued.

Mouse Girl waited for the explanation. She was actually quite happy to hear this because she had decided to designate Ferret Girl as her final appointee. If the elders rejected her again, she was going to be furious.

"The final designation, which will take place tonight, is for the tribal mystic," Deer Mother explained. "For this task, we ask for someone both clever and honest, an unusual combination. What the mystic will do is not commonly shared among our people, but an ability to be absolutely honest, even painfully honest at times, is needed."

Mouse Girl nodded. She knew all of this, having memorized it when she was first appointed quest leader.

"Ordinarily, the quest leader has complete authority to make these designations. However, in the case of extraordinary children, we occasionally interfere."

Mouse Girl wondered why she might be considered an extraordinary candidate for a cult leader. She had never been widely recognized for much of anything. *Why would they want me as a cult leader?* she thought. *I'm not very good at telling stories. Or even remembering the details of the cult stories.*

"In the case of your quest, we have been watching Ferret Girl very closely," Deer Mother said. "We would very much like to see her become a mystic."

"Oh," said Mouse Girl. "I see. Well, I'll be happy to designate her as such. Very happy."

Deer Mother smiled and put her hand on Mouse Girl's shoulder. "She would have been a great cult leader. You have chosen all of your designees very well."

Mouse Girl smiled politely. "Thank you," she said.

"Listen, Mouse Girl," Deer Mother said. "I was the quest leader for a second quest. I know how it feels to think that

everyone in the tribe considers you to be second best. But the truth is, we really do love and value all of you. You were chosen because we knew you could be a great leader."

"You were a second quest leader?" Mouse Girl asked. She could not believe someone as perfect as Deer Mother would ever have been put on the second quest.

"Yes," Deer Mother said. "And Beaver Father was the first quest leader. I was so angry they made him first. But, the truth is, every quest is important. Beaver was a little more aggressive than me, and he was chosen first. That's just the way it was."

Mouse Girl's mind began to work on this news a little more. "If you were a quest leader, then what was Deer Father?" she asked.

"Deer Father wasn't even a member of our tribe," Deer Mother explained. "He was brought into out tribe after my quest was finished."

"He was from another tribe?" Mouse Girl asked. "What was his name?"

Deer Mother laughed. "You won't believe it!" she said. "His name was Lizard Boy."

Mouse Girl laughed.

They returned to the circle. Mouse Girl took her place, but noticed that Deer Mother stood back. She seemed to be watching the visitors very closely.

For the final time, the cult leaders took their place around the seat of honor. Each of them wore a symbol of some important creature. Deer Mother wore deer antlers. Deer Grandmother wore the pelt of a coyote. Seeing the pelt made Mouse Girl cringe. Not only was it an animal skin but it was a skin of their most hated enemies. Finally, Snake Father wore hawk feathers in his headband. Otter Mother came forward to tell the last story. She was wearing the wings of the Bird people.

Mouse Girl looked at the wings more carefully than she ever had before. *Those are functional gliding wings,* she thought. *Amazing! I've seen them all my life and never realized what they really were*. In fact, now that she thought about it, if they were intended to symbolize the Bird people, the lack of feathers was a major defect. They actually looked much more like bat wings. *Why don't we call ourselves the Bat people?* she wondered.

"The Bird people wandered the world searching for clues to the identity and location of their ancestors, the Spirits," Otter Mother began. "They found plenty of evidence of their Bear ancestors, but not of the Spirits."

The cult leaders dressed as animals began to wander inside the circle. Otter Mother carefully avoided them.

"Every time they thought they had found something related to the Spirits, they found that it already had a connection to the bears. And so, for instance, they reasoned that language made them intelligent and able to communicate over long distances. Could that be a gift of the Spirits? They thought so until they noticed that birds and squirrels and even coyotes speak to each other. Next, they wondered if maybe music was a sign of the Spirits' mark upon them. But birds and crickets and frogs sing.

"Finally, they reasoned that human mothers love and nurture and sacrifice for their children. Surely these were qualities worthy of the Spirits. But as they observed the animals around them, many of the animals showed these very same qualities. To their surprise, even the bears and the Bear people did these things."

Otter Mother acted out this great search, looking inside the kids' packs and under the log on which they were sitting. She continued to avoid the animals around her.

"This was a great mystery to the Bird people. Nowhere they looked could they find anything good that the animals did

not also have. Everything in this world seemed to have been touched by the Spirits.

"Therefore, one great thinker among our people came up with a new story. Although the Spirits and the bears worked together to create the Bird people, maybe that had not been the first time the Spirits had come to this world. Maybe, since their mark was upon everything in the world, maybe the Spirits helped create everything in this world."

Mouse Girl considered this. *Could it be true?* she wondered. *Were hawks children of the Spirits? Were coyotes?*

"Our great thinker did not know this to be true, but he suspected it to be true. And, he reasoned, if it were true, then there were two other things that must also be true. First, if we are in the world created by the Spirits, we must treat all things of this world with respect and love, as we would treat the Spirits themselves. And second, we know of no way out of this world, although we have searched diligently. The only exit we know is death."

Children gasped.

"The final quest is to rejoin our Spirit siblings. Does it happen in life, in death? Does it happen through great achievement, through peace among our siblings? It is up to you to discover these things."

The cult leaders gathered back together behind the seat of honor. The elders gathered in front of them, this time Ocelot Grandmother taking the seat of honor. The highest elder presided over this final assembly. She held in her hands two leather pouches.

Ocelot Grandmother spoke. "Quest leaders! Come forward."

Ocelot Girl and Mouse Girl moved to the front of their group.

"We are sending you to complete our purpose in the world," Deer Grandmother said. "You are the Bird people. Whatever you become, we will all become."

Ocelot Grandmother stood. She tied the two small leather sacks to her belt and placed her hands on the girls' bowed heads.

"Our hope rests in you," Ocelot Grandmother said. "Four gifts are given to each quest. Each person who receives such a gift ascends to the Bird caste, a sign that they are one step closer to our people's goal. Tonight, I give you the gift of the mystics. The final gift."

Ocelot Grandmother handed each girl one of the leather pouches.

I wonder what is in here, Mouse Girl thought.

"Which of your quest members do you appoint to represent the mystics on your quest?" Deer Grandmother asked.

"Otter Girl will learn the ways of the mystic for the first quest," Ocelot Girl said.

Otter Girl came forward and Ocelot Girl handed her the pouch.

"Open the pouch when you are alone," Ocelot Grandmother instructed. "We will teach you its purpose before you leave on your quest."

Otter Girl felt the pouch for weight. She had no idea what might be in it. She returned to her place.

"For the second quest, Ferret Girl will learn the ways of the mystic," Mouse Girl said. This time there was no nervousness. The decision was out of her hands.

Ferret Girl came forward, smiling. She took the pouch, gave Mouse Girl a small bow, and then returned to her place.

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The next morning everyone was back to work. Even Ocelot Mother and Ocelot Girl were working. Ocelot Father was still very ill, but he was peaceful for now.

Ferret Girl sat by Mouse Girl to shell pecans. Rat Boy kept looking at her, wondering why he had been forsaken this morning. Ferret Girl leaned toward Mouse so that she could speak to her quietly.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you that my mother and Alligator Grandmother have been training me as a mystic for a long time now. I didn't know that was what they were doing; I thought they were just telling me stories about our history and about healing plants. I think I suspected they had some plan for me, but they told me to keep quiet whenever I asked about it."

Mouse shrugged. "I assume the elders know what they're doing. I just felt a little stupid being told I couldn't choose my own cult leader. But I know you'll make a great mystic."

"Are you wondering what was in the pouch?" Ferret Girl asked.

Mouse Girl smiled. "Yes, I was thinking about that all night."

"You know I can't tell you, right?" Ferret Girl said, also smiling.

"Right," Mouse Girl said.

"All I will say is that I have no idea what it is, even after examining it all night," Ferret Girl continued.

"When do you think you'll get to find out what it is?" Mouse Girl asked.

Ferret Girl shrugged. "It has to be soon. We're leaving in a few days."

Those words made the butterflies start in Mouse Girl's stomach. She wasn't ready to leave her home and wander in the wilderness. *We're just children!* she thought. *The world is dangerous! How are we going to survive out there?*

She didn't have long to worry about that. Ringtail came up and sat on her other side.

"Did you notice that Antelope Boy is gone?" Ringtail said.

"Yes, I did," Mouse Girl said. In fact, Mouse Girl noticed everything Antelope Boy did. He was several years older than her and still unmarried. And he was very strong and good-looking. The girls of the tribe speculated that the elders intended him as the husband for one of the girls of the two current quests. Whose husband he might become was the great, and often debated, mystery.

"And the visitors are gone," Ringtail said.

"Good," Mouse Girl said. "I was tired of them staring at us."

"The elders think they were advance scouts for a raid on our tribe," Ringtail said.

Mouse Girl's stomach suddenly felt sick. "That makes sense," she said. She realized they had been staring at her because they hoped to steal her to be a bride—or worse, as a slave. Her hand felt for the knife hanging from her belt where it always was.

"Antelope Boy followed them after they left this morning," Ringtail Boy said.

"Now that you are a guardian, do the elders tell you all these things?" Mouse Girl asked.

"Now that I am a guardian, it's my job to know these things whether or not the elders tell me. They still see me as an awkward, lame boy," he said. "My job is to keep our quest alive."

Mouse Girl was impressed. Ringtail had said this with no hint of anger or self-pity. He was simply doing his job.

"Make sure the rest of our quest is ready," Mouse Girl said.

"Will we defend ourselves as a quest or do we maintain our old jobs of defending the camp?" Ringtail asked.

Mouse Girl had not even considered this. She had not imagined they would defend themselves independently of the tribe.

"We are still here," Mouse Girl said. "Our duty is to the tribe until we are told to leave."

Ringtail nodded.

"Make sure the first quest knows," Mouse Girl said.

"They know," Ringtail said.

Mouse Girl looked over to the grain grinding stone. Ocelot Girl looked back at her and winked. *Of course they know*, Mouse Girl thought. *They're always one step ahead.*

The rest of the day was quiet. Everyone seemed to be on guard. Ocelot Mother and Ferret Mother spent much time going back and forth to the Ocelot cave. Several other adults were gone all day, presumably out scouting for the raid.

This left plenty of work for the children to do. The children of the quest worked without ceasing, knowing that they were providing for their own survival and the survival of their families while they were gone.

The smallest children had the job of hiding the food as fast as it was prepared. Food ready for storage was placed deep in the inner recesses of caves to make it as hard as possible to steal, either by animals or by other people. At the same time, the oldest and stalest food had been dug out of the storage places. It was kept beside the workers at all times specifically to be a decoy for any raiders that might make it into the camp itself.

Everyone worked with their weapons strapped to their backs, tied to their belts, or laying within easy reach. The oldest and strongest adults positioned themselves at the easiest approaches to the camp. The young and especially the women of child-bearing years were kept well-guarded.

For all of this readiness, it was not a very eventful day. Finally, as the sun was setting, the food preparation was called

to a halt and another community meal was prepared. The scouts stayed out beyond the camp watching and listening for anything unusual.

As the communal meal was drawing to a close, Deer Grandmother leaned near Ferret Girl's ear and whispered something. She was very sneaky about it and Mouse Girl saw it simply by chance. As families were returning to their caves and their night sentry positions, Ferret Girl wandered casually over to a storage cave. She was carrying a bag of pinole and nobody would have wondered if she was doing anything unusual, unless they were watching her closely as Mouse Girl was.

Mouse Girl was torn. As a quest leader, knowledge could mean the difference between life and death. It was her duty to know what was going on. On the other hand, what the mystics did was secret. Or was it simply forbidden for them to tell what they did? If no one told her anything, if she found out on her own, then maybe no rules would be broken.

Mouse Girl grabbed a sack of old pecans and headed over to a cave near the one into which Ferret Girl had gone. It was twilight and she was sure that she was hard to see. She looked around for any guards. Hare Mother was cleaning off a grinding stone. It seemed to Mouse Girl that maybe Hare Mother was watching her. No one else was around.

Making sure Hare Mother saw her, Mouse Girl carried her sack into a cave near the one Ferret Girl had entered. Mouse Girl waited in the shadows and the moment Hare Mother turned away, she slipped into Ferret Girl's cave. These were caves for low-priority storage. No one lived or slept in them as was the case for the caves with the most important food. At this time of day the cave was very dark and looked like nothing but a dusty and dry crevice. Old baskets were stacked up pretty high. Old blankets lay in a dusty pile. Mouse Girl

searched the ground for footprints, but it was too dark for her to see anything.

She was certain Ferret Girl had come in here, but it was a narrow cave and Ferret Girl was nowhere to be seen. Therefore, there must be an exit. Before she could search for the exit, a small noise outside the cave caught her attention. In a flash, she was under the old blankets. A head looked into the cave, silhouetted against the twilight outside. It looked like Hare Mother.

So, Hare Mother must be a part of the mystics' organization, whatever that was, thought Mouse Girl. Hare Mother and Hare Father were very young, probably about the age of Antelope Boy.

Hare Mother entered the little cave and looked around, then left. Mouse Girl decided to stay perfectly still where she was. This was a classic trick the Bird people had learned from baby fawns. A young deer could stay so still and quiet that a person searching for it could almost step on it before it was seen. Mouse Girl was barely breathing and she was perfectly still.

That was when she heard the noise. From the walls came a faint tapping sound. It would repeat four or five times, then stop. Then start again. Then stop. Mouse Girl could not tell where it was coming from. After a short while, the sound stopped.

Mouse Girl heard nothing else for quite some time. Eventually she realized she was going to be missed at home, and, with a raid being feared, if her brother or grandmother started asking questions concerning her whereabouts, the whole tribe would soon be searching for her. Having heard no other sounds inside or outside the cave, Mouse Girl quickly and quietly slipped out into the darkness. She saw nobody on her way back home.

Mouse Boy and Mouse Grandmother were fast asleep. Mouse Boy was sitting facing the cave entrance with his bow in his hand. Mouse Girl quietly crawled up to him and almost touched him before he awoke.

"Mouse Girl!" he exclaimed. "Don't sneak up on me like that. I could've hurt you."

"Yes, you looked very dangerous sleeping there," Mouse Girl said, not wanting to humiliate him, but at the same time not wanting him to think he was doing a good job of guarding the cave entrance. She crawled inside the cave onto her blanket and fell asleep instantly. But she also had her bow in her hand.

She awoke to yells coming from outside the cave. They were not the cries of danger or fighting. People sounded excited. Mouse Girl rubbed her eyes and crawled out into the bright morning sunlight. She had slept late.

A number of adults were gathering in the campfire area. Some of the adults were unknown to her. This had to be a delegation from another tribe. Mouse Girl crept closer and noticed the strangers had brought very full packs loaded with goods, evidently for trading.

Ringtail found her and caught her up on the morning's events.

"It's a trade delegation from far downstream," he said.

"Why didn't anybody wake me up sooner?" Mouse Girl asked.

"Everyone slept late," Ringtail said. "Most of the adults were awake until sunrise, watching for a raiding party. When none came, those who could be spared went off to get what sleep they could. Soon after sunrise, the visitors appeared. They had been traveling at night for safety."

The children were sent to work while the adults began the trade discussions. In late afternoon the entire tribe was called together. Members of both tribes worked together to make a

special meal, since it would be comprised of foods that both of them would find unfamiliar.

Finally, at mealtime, the visitors were introduced, four men—Cougar, Elk, Bobcat, and Seal, as well as two women—Elk and Raccoon. Mouse Grandmother began the official trading deliberations.

"Our friends have brought many strange foods, useful herbs and beautiful shells. They are also master weavers and have brought us baskets and nets that we will find useful. Of our goods, they hope to find some of the renowned bows that we make from the hardwoods of the forests in the direction of the sunrise."

Mouse Girl was not particularly interested in this. She and her quest had made their plans and those plans did not include any new or exotic goods. As a younger child, trade delegations had been the most exciting things imaginable. There were new people to meet, new foods to eat, new tools to see, but now, her mind was elsewhere.

And so her mind was wandering when she noticed that the elders were no longer speaking of food and tools. The first quest was invited to come and speak to the visitors. Mouse Girl noticed that the visitors were speaking, not just to Ocelot Girl, the leader of the quest, but to each quest member. In Mouse Girl's experience, protocol usually demanded that the leaders of a group did most of the speaking. Perhaps these visitors were more egalitarian than her tribe.

Not longer afterwards, the first quest was dismissed and the second quest was invited to speak to the visitors.

Deer Grandmother introduced Mouse Girl.

"Mouse Girl is the leader of our second quest," Deer Grandmother said to Cougar Father, who seemed to be the leader of the visiting delegation. "Her quest members have proven to be dedicated and innovative. I might also add that Mouse Girl demands a high regard for respect and courtesy."

“I am glad to meet such a good quest leader,” Cougar Father said. “Both of your quests have female leaders! I am very happy to know that the women of your tribe have proven to be excellent leaders.”

Mouse Girl was not accustomed to being commended for her gender. The Bird tribe considered unnecessary attention to gender in leadership, or any other vital skill, an unwise distraction. In a world as dangerous as theirs, they could not afford to overlook anyone’s skill.

“It is an honor to meet you,” Mouse Girl said. “You have traveled far to honor us with your presence, and we are grateful for your efforts. I hope our trade discussions will make your travels worthwhile. May our friendship alone be worthy of many such trips!”

Mouse Girl hoped this was an adequate greeting. Visits from outside tribes were few and far between and they demanded all kinds of formalities.

The visitor named Elk Woman spoke next. “May I ask who the elder representative for this quest is?”

Squirrel Girl stood. “I am,” she said nervously. “Squirrel Girl.”

“Is it true you have a brother on this quest?” Elk Woman asked.

“It is,” Squirrel Girl replied.

“How can your quest trust that you will treat all of them fairly, when your brother is on the quest? If there was danger or shortage of food, wouldn’t you favor him over the others?” Elk Woman asked.

“Each member of the Bird tribe is my sister or brother,” Squirrel Girl said. “It would be unfair and unwise to show favoritism to anyone. Our survival and our happiness depend upon the justness of our leaders.”

“That is a wise answer,” Elk Woman said.

Another visitor spoke, the one named Bobcat.

“I understand you have an excellent bowman among you by the name of Badger.”

Badger stood. “That’s me,” he said.

“Our tribe greatly esteems your bowmen and the bows you make,” Bobcat said. “May I hold your bow?”

“Of course,” Badger said, holding his bow out for inspection.

Bobcat held it and ran his fingers over the wood. “You do not know how fortunate you are to live in a land where this wood is abundant. We often suffer for lack of a good bow.”

Badger nodded.

“Would you string it for me?” Bobcat asked. “I would very much like to feel it in action. Perhaps after our formal discussions you can show me how well you use it.”

Badger agreed.

The trade delegation spoke to each one of the quest members and seemed to know about every one of them. They even treated Ferret Girl with a regard equal to all the others, which had worried Mouse Girl. In previous years, she had seen visitors react badly to Ferret Girl’s disfigurement.

“Tell me,” Elk Woman said to Ferret, “as one who will be walking the paths of the mystic, which of the three high virtues of our people is most important – tending our land, remembering our story, or continuing our people?”

Ferret Girl smiled. “You know that is a trick question,” she answered. “All three must be treated with equal regard.”

Elk Woman smiled and nodded. “Then tell me, what quality is most valuable in a tribe member? Is it our internal self or our external bodies that make us who we are?”

Ferret Girl smiled again. “Once again, every child knows that the internal and external self are of equal value and must be regarded equally.”

“Why is that?” Elk Woman asked. “If a person is honest and hard-working, what does it matter what they look like or how big they are?”

“In our own quest, we have a member with a lame leg,” Ferret Girl answered, indicating Ringtail. “He is an excellent quest member. He is smart and strong and faithful. But it would be unfair and unwise to rely upon his speed for our survival.”

Elk Woman nodded. “And in a mate,” she asked, “what qualities are most important?”

“They are too many to name,” Ferret Girl answered, laughing slightly. “We are a people who rely upon agility of body and mind for survival. We live lightly on the land and always demand more of ourselves than we ask of others. Our lives demand strength in body and spirit. I would look for these qualities in a spouse.”

Mouse Girl noticed that Ferret Girl could not help glancing at Rat Boy as she said this. Elk Woman seemed to notice this also. She smiled.

“I am confident that a woman of your wisdom will be blessed with such a husband,” Elk Woman said.

“Agile, light, and strong,” Cougar Father said, repeating Ferret Girl’s list of the classic virtues of the Bird people. “I am very impressed with your quest, Mouse Girl. You have trained them well.”

“We are ready to begin our quest,” Mouse Girl said. “I am confident of that.”

“I agree,” Cougar Father said. “And yet there is one more virtue of our people that your quest has not named. At least not directly.”

Mouse Girl thought for a moment, but could not think of what had been omitted.

“Of what virtue do you speak, Cougar Father?” Mouse Girl asked.

"We are a people," Cougar Father said. "All of our tribes are one people."

"This is true," Mouse Girl said. "And we celebrate our unity."

Cougar Father nodded and continued his dialogue with Mouse Girl, although Mouse Girl could not guess where this discussion was headed. "And this is why we have traveled so far. We have come to trade more than food and bows."

Mouse Girl's mind was racing. *More than food and bows*, she thought. *What is he getting at?* And then she understood. Her stomach clenched and her heartbeat raced. *They have come to trade people! They want one of my quest members!*

"I will be happy to hear what it is you ask of us," Mouse Girl said as politely as she could.

Cougar Father looked at Elk Woman. They shared a nod of agreement.

"We would like to take Squirrel Girl to join our tribe," Cougar Father said.

Squirrel Boy gasped. Mouse Girl tried to show no reaction. Her mind was quickly trying to calculate all of Squirrel Girl's attributes and what they meant to her quest.

"Squirrel Girl is a highly valued member of our quest," Mouse Girl said. "We greatly rely upon her."

"I am glad to hear this," Cougar Father said. "It is for her great attributes that we ask the honor of her presence among us."

Mouse Girl bowed her head. "I will confer with our elders. We will consider your request."

"Thank you," Cougar Father said.

Mouse Girl wanted to get away as fast as she could. She could not believe she was being asked to send away her lifelong friend. As soon as the quest left the delegation, the discussion erupted.

“And what are they offering for her?” Squirrel Boy asked. “A basket of dried fish?”

“We don’t know what they are offering yet,” Ferret Girl said.

“Squirrel Girl,” Mouse said. “What do you think of this?”

Squirrel Girl had been silent. She was understandably more shocked than anyone else. Her world had just been torn out from under her.

“It is my duty to go, if that is what the elders decide,” she answered.

“What if we leave right now on our quest?” Rat Boy said.

“What if we say Squirrel Girl has some horrible defect that will keep her from breeding?” Mouse Boy said. He had been listening in on his sister’s business, as he did whenever possible.

“No,” Squirrel Girl said. “This is who we are. This is what we do as a people. My quest will be this new thing.”

“What are we going to do without you?” Mouse Girl said. “Every plan we made has you as a part of the quest.”

“We all knew that some of us might not make it back from the quest,” Squirrel Girl said.

This was true. Since birth they were told to go out on their quest with no thought of returning home. Some would probably make it back. Many would not.

Squirrel Girl hugged her brother. If the elders approved this trade, she would probably never see him again. She held onto him and would not let go.

“Should we go and see mom and dad?” Squirrel Boy asked.

His sister nodded. They looked at Mouse Girl.

“Go,” Mouse Girl said. “I will go and speak to the elders. Ringtail, come with me.”

Mouse Girl and Ringtail went back to the campfire and saw the elders deep in conversation. They stopped speaking as the children approached.

"Mouse Girl, you have heard the visitors request," Ocelot Grandmother said. "What do you say?"

"I know nothing of these strangers," Mouse Girl said. "But if you know them to be honorable members of our people, then their request is valid and we will honor it. However, we must ask for an appropriate trade. Squirrel Girl is invaluable to our quest. I cannot imagine how many bags of grain we should ask for her. Certainly more than these visitors have carried with them."

"And Squirrel Girl is our elder," Ringtail added.

Ocelot Grandmother laughed softly.

"You do not quite understand," Ocelot Grandmother said. "Our visitors are not offering to trade goods for a girl as valuable to our tribe as Squirrel Girl."

"Then what?" Mouse Girl asked.

Ocelot Grandmother turned and called out. "Deer Mother, show Mouse Girl our proposal for a trade."

Deer Mother walked forward with a girl Mouse had never seen before. Mouse Girl understood. Still, she didn't like it.

"But what's the point of trading one girl for another?" Mouse Girl asked, letting a little more anger show in her voice than she had planned.

"You know what the point is," Ocelot Grandmother said, angered by Mouse Girl's rebellious attitude. "Or would you like our honored guest to explain it to you?"

Mouse Girl bowed her head slightly. "We must combine the strength of all our people if we are to grow stronger," she said softly. "Excuse me, for my rudeness, grandmother. It's difficult to send away a lifelong friend."

"Indeed it is, child," Ocelot Grandmother said, kindly. "Indeed it is. But Jaguarundi Girl will serve you well."

“Jaguarundi?” Mouse Girl said. “I am honored to meet you.”

The two girls clasped wrists in the traditional Bird tribe greeting among friends.

7 - War

(In which a raiding party attacks the Bird people and Mouse Girl sees the Bear people for the first time. Mouse Girl's quest is taken from her and the story of Scorpion Man is told.)

Ocelot Girl sat next to her father. It was early morning and the light was just beginning to show in the sky. Ocelot Girl knew her quest would be waiting for her but she hated to leave her father's side. He was still suffering from a terrible fever and cold sweats. His restlessness had almost completely gone away and most of the time he was simply still and silent. One way or another, Ocelot Girl hoped this would be over before she left on her quest. Not knowing whether her father was dead or alive, whether her mother was alone or not… that would be difficult to bear on the quest.

Ocelot Girl crawled out of the cave, but before she left, she carefully placed her father's bow and quiver by him and moved his hand onto the bow.

The trade delegation had left in the night and there was almost no sign of them remaining. Whatever goods had been traded for were carefully stowed away. All that was left was the new girl standing silently and awkwardly with the second quest.

Mouse Girl approached Ocelot Girl.

"We've been asked to meet with the elders, just you and me," Mouse Girl said. "Something big is happening."

"Like what?" Ocelot Girl asked.

Mouse Girl shrugged. She sent her quest off to continue their training with the atlatl.

"And see what Jaguarundi can do with a bow and arrow," she said to Ringtail.

Ocelot Girl conferred with her quest. The two quest leaders then found the elders and were asked to sit down with them.

"We have some important news," Deer Father said. "The trade delegation informed us of Bear people traveling near."

This sounded very bad to Mouse Girl.

"It might surprise you to know that we have friends among the Bear people," Deer Father said. This did surprise Mouse Girl. "We think this group may be friends who travel near here each year at about this time. I intend to go and gather news from them; news that will be important for your quests."

Ocelot and Mouse nodded in understanding.

"The elders would like you both to come with me," Deer Father said. "It will give you experience in dealing with the Bear people if the need arises. And it will give me the opportunity to show you how to move about in the world when you are far away from our home."

"We will do as you ask," Ocelot Girl said.

Deer Father nodded and looked inquisitively at Mouse Girl.

"Will we need to provide security from our quests?" Mouse Girl asked.

"The tribe will provide security for us," Deer Father said, "but it is not a bad idea for your quests to learn a little from this. If you would like, you may bring a guard from each of your quests."

"Thank you," Mouse Girl said. "I think this could be a valuable learning opportunity for them."

"Prepare yourselves," Deer Father said. "We leave at sundown."

The girls nodded and returned to their quests. Mouse Girl found her people at the archery grounds.

"How is Jaguarundi doing?" Mouse asked Ringtail.

Ringtail smiled. “She is a very good archer. And she already knows how to use the atlatl. It’s a more common weapon for her tribe than it is for us. She’s been giving us some important lessons in its use.”

“Good,” Mouse Girl said.

“Did you know she has a pair of cult wings?” Ringtail said.

“No, I didn’t,” Mouse Girl said. “Was she a cult leader in her tribe?”

“I asked her about that, and she said things were done differently in her tribe,” Ringtail said.

“Interesting. She knows how to use an atlatl and apparently wings as well,” Mouse Girl replied. “We’ll have to watch her carefully to see what else she knows.”

“What did the elders want?” Ringtail asked.

“You and I will accompany them tonight on a small trip outside the camp,” Mouse Girl said. “There are interesting things they wish me to see. And you will be learning how to function as a guard out in the world.”

Ringtail looked eager and scared, all at the same time. “I’ll be ready,” he said.

Mouse wandered over to where Jaguarundi was working with the rest of the quest. Rat was slinging the atlatl without much success. Squirrel Boy and Badger were laughing at him. Jaguarundi was trying to be helpful.

“Everyone back to camp,” Mouse Girl said, “We have more work to do, and we’re still watching for a raiding party.”

They walked back to camp, looking and listening for signs of trouble. Once home, they gathered around the pecan shelling stone and immediately got down to work.

“Jaguarundi,” Mouse Girl said. “Our guard, Ringtail, says you are good with a bow and arrow.”

Jaguarundi nodded.

“Are you ready to defend our camp against raiders?” Mouse Girl asked.

"Of course," Jaguarundi said. "You are now my tribe. I have no people but you."

"Everyone listen," Mouse Girl said. "Tonight, Ringtail and I are accompanying a group of elders to gather information for our quest. We will be dealing with Bear people, if what our elders suspect is true."

"Bear people?" Ferret Girl asked. "That sounds crazy. And suicidal."

Mouse Girl shrugged. "I'll tell you about it when we return. While we are gone, I'm assigning Jaguarundi to the Mouse family cave to help defend its contents. Jaguarundi, Mouse Boy will instruct you in our defense tactics. Ringtail and I will be preparing for this trip; I want you all to continue preparing food for winter."

Badger raised his hand. "Now that Squirrel Girl is gone, who will be helping me gather supplies? Will Jaguarundi take her place?"

Mouse Girl thought for a moment. "No. Jaguarundi doesn't know our tribe or our plans for the quest yet. Ferret Girl will take Squirrel's place."

Ferret Girl cleared her throat. "My mystic training is going to demand a lot of time. Can we have Jaguarundi help us?"

Mouse Girl considered this. "Yes. That will work."

"Thanks," Ferret Girl said. "Especially since I can't really charm people like Squirrel Girl could."

"Everyone loves you," Squirrel Boy said, trying to be supportive. "No one is going to deny you anything you ask for."

"Nevertheless, this will give Jaguarundi a chance to learn about us," Mouse Girl said. "Now, let's get to work while we can."

They worked in silence for a while. Finally, Squirrel Boy spoke.

"What is a jaguarundi, anyway?" he asked.

“A small wildcat that lives downstream from here,” Jaguarundi answered. “They look like small cougars. They hunt by day, although they are very secretive and we seldom see them. They stay mostly solitary.”

“Do you have a large family?” Ferret Girl asked.

Jaguarundi nodded. “I think we have bigger families than your tribe. I lived with my five siblings, my parents, and my grandparents.”

“That’s a lot of people,” Ferret Girl said. “None of our caves would be big enough for a family that size.”

“Do you know why our elders chose you for our tribe?” Badger asked. “Did your tribe bring other kids with them, or were you the only one?”

“We brought several others. They don’t bring them into a strange tribe’s camp in case the tribe decides to take them by force,” Jaguarundi said. “No offense,” she added.

“No offense taken,” Mouse Girl said. “Children are very valuable and I know there are people who would take them if they could. No one in our tribe, I hope. But you are wise to guard them carefully.”

“But why did we choose you?” Badger asked again.

Jaguarundi shrugged.

“That’s a very personal question, Badger,” Mouse Girl said. “I’m sure we’ll discover all of Jaguarundi’s excellent qualities very soon.”

“Do they have a husband in mind for you?” Badger asked.

“Too personal,” Mouse Girl interceded. Badger stopped asking questions.

The rest of the day was filled with work and talk. Jaguarundi was a quiet girl, but she seemed anxious to fit into the quest and the tribe. As evening approached, Deer Father gathered his expedition together. Mouse Girl was glad to see Antelope Boy was one of the guards. The other adult guard was Frog Mother. The final adult was Badger Father. The total

group numbered eight, including Mouse, Ringtail, Ocelot, and Ocelot's guard, Beaver.

They ate quickly and climbed out of the canyon before sunset. Once they were up on the plateau, the main group remained still, hidden in the brush while the guards spread out and carefully watched in all directions.

After what seemed like a long time, Antelope Boy reappeared. He had a long and quiet discussion with Deer Father after which Deer Father instructed the group to begin moving.

"I want two guards to precede us. The rest stay together and keep your eyes open," Deer Father said.

They were traveling in the direction of the setting sun, taking a relatively conspicuous route, Mouse Girl thought. She would be much more careful about staying hidden than Deer Father seemed to be. But they had adult warriors with them; maybe they were more confident than Mouse Girl.

Deer Father and Badger Father were talking casually and being a little loud. They walked directly over a hilltop, which was something Mouse Girl would never do. That path allowed them to be seen for miles. *These adults are totally disregarding everything we've been taught about stealth,* Mouse Girl thought. She was beginning to worry for her safety.

Just over the hilltop, Deer Father signaled for everyone to stop. He gathered them together in the shelter of a large group of boulders.

"As we left the canyon, Antelope Boy spotted warriors watching our camp. I've tried to make our expedition as obvious as possible, so that whoever is watching us will think we are unsuspecting and that our tribe is short a number of warriors. Antelope Boy saw the scouts heading downstream not long ago," Deer Father said.

"Now, we will follow them. We must be quick and silent," he continued. "And ready for war."

The sky had very little light left in it as the expedition headed down the hill in complete silence, staying in the shadows and moving very quickly. The group had completely changed. Instead of relaxed and lazy and loud and visible, they were now on the hunt for their enemies, disciplined, silent, and hidden in shadows. They headed in a generally downstream direction for quite some time, and then Antelope Boy picked up a trail of someone who had recently passed through the area. They followed the trail back in the direction of the rising sun. They were now headed straight back to camp, as far as Mouse Girl could tell.

Antelope Boy stopped near a grove of oak trees. He pointed into the shadows and the expedition swarmed the grove, bows and arrows ready. It was indeed someone's camp, but no one was here. It looked big enough for eight or more people. It had not been cleaned very well, so Mouse Girl guessed the inhabitants had left quickly.

They headed in the direction of sunrise, running now. Mouse Girl began to recognize the terrain. Deer Father sent Badger and Ringtail on the path to the cliffs above the camp.

"Look out for enemy archers up on the cliffs," Deer Father said. "And be ready to stop anyone who tries to escape up the cliffs."

The rest of the expedition headed toward the creek and the bottom of the canyon. As they approached they heard shouts. They moved forward even as they prepared to be in position to ambush anyone coming down the trail away from camp. They saw people struggling as soon as the camp was in sight. Two men were dragging away one of the Snake daughters. The men were running with the girl down the path. They never saw the archers who sent them to their death. Deer

Father and Frog Mother had no desire to show mercy to armed raiders who were kidnapping their children.

As soon as the two raiders fell to the ground with arrows in their throats, Snake Daughter ran for cover. If the girl had any sense she would hide motionless under the darkest rock she could find until she heard her mother's voice calling for her. Deer Father's expedition continued upstream.

Mouse Girl looked up to the cliffs and could see no one, friend or foe, from where she was. They moved quietly through the high grass on either side of the path hoping to be able to surprise anyone trying to escape by the path. Sounds of conflict continued to come from upstream, deeper inside the Bird people's camp.

As the trail turned, Mouse Girl could see almost to the campfire ring. At first, no one was visible. Soon, however, two men fell onto the path, struggling with each other. Deer Father's expedition was upon them quickly. In very little time, the raider was subdued and tied up. His opponent, Squirrel Father, joined Deer Father's group.

"Some are trying to escape up the cliffs," Squirrel Father said. "They seem to be after children, not supplies."

The expedition ran from cave to cave, looking for trouble. All they found were tense tribe members pointing weapons at them. As they approached the Ocelot family cave, Ocelot Girl was visibly nervous. There was a badly injured raider on the ground of the entrance. Deer Father dragged him aside and bound him while Ocelot Girl crawled inside. She found her mother and father lying on the ground, motionless. She called out for her sister and grandmother, but received no reply.

She saw her mother move slightly, so she knelt by her side. Her face was badly bruised and she was not responsive to Ocelot Girl's gentle shaking. Ocelot Girl could see no other obvious injuries. However, when she turned to her father, she saw that his blanket was soaked in blood. She moved to his

side and examined him. She could feel no pulse in his neck. Mouse Girl came up next to her. Ocelot Girl was still and silent as she looked at her father's body.

Without turning to look at Mouse Girl, she said, "Look after my mother. I've got to find my sister."

Mouse Girl moved Ocelot Mother to a more comfortable position. There was not much more she could do. She wondered if she should do something with Ocelot Father's body. He looked too big to move by herself, so she left him there. Then he coughed. He was still alive!

Going outside the cave, Mouse saw people of her tribe hurrying to and fro. The raid seemed to be over.

It was not long before Ringtail hurried by. When he saw Mouse Girl he stopped.

"How is everything down here?" he asked.

Mouse Girl shook her head. "Not good. Ocelot's father is almost dead. Ocelot's sister is missing. I'm not sure what else is happening. How did it go on the cliffs?"

"No one escaped that way," Ringtail said in a grim tone of voice. Mouse Girl wondered what had happened. "Let's find the others."

Mouse Girl nodded and they headed to the campfire ring. A few adults were gathered in the dark and talking. Mouse Grandmother was one of them. They seemed to be taking tally of who was injured, killed, and missing. Antelope Boy ran up to them.

"We've counted five bodies from the raiders' party. We have three prisoners. They say there were twelve raiders in all. They come from the direction of sunrise. 'Forest tribe people' is what they claim," Antelope Boy reported.

"Their clothing and weapons are from the sunrise direction, but I'm guessing they're lying about their tribe," Mouse Grandmother said. "This is too shameful an act for them to admit who they really are."

"What will we do with the prisoners?" Otter Girl asked.

"There will be some who will demand that we kill them," Mouse Grandmother said. "That would be the safest thing for us to do. More likely, we will hold them for a few days and then release them one at a time in different places. If we had more warriors, we would ransom them back to their tribe. But we cannot send that many people away for as long as it would take to make that journey."

"At least we proved to them that raiding our tribe is a foolish thing to do," Antelope Boy said.

"We can only hope that's true," Mouse Grandmother said.

More adults gathered, bringing in reports from the entire tribe. Guards were still watching the cliffs and the trail into camp. In all, it seemed that only four of the twelve raiders escaped. In order to get away more quickly, the raiders had released Ocelot's sister. She returned to camp terrified but unharmed.

"This is a dark day for our people," Mouse Grandmother said. "Such a useless waste of life! Our people should be growing, but instead we are killing each other."

"What do we do now?" Mouse Girl asked.

Mouse Grandmother looked at her, and realized that she was not out with the expedition.

"Why are you here, Mouse Girl?" Mouse Grandmother asked.

"We saw the raiders watching us and we came back to help fight them off," Mouse Girl explained.

"I am glad you did so," Mouse Grandmother answered. "But now you must find Deer Father and continue with your journey. Your work there is more important than anything that you can do here, now that the raid is over."

This urgency surprised Mouse Girl, but she obeyed. As the rest of the tribe reorganized after the raid, Deer Father's expedition left once again, this time much more quickly. They

headed in the direction of the sunset, walking very fast and quietly for many hours. Mouse Girl was hungry and tired, but they never paused to rest. Suddenly, Deer Father stopped. He knelt by a trail, but it was not an ordinary trail. It was wider than anything Mouse Girl had ever seen.

Deer Father signaled for the children to come forward. They did so.

"The trail of the ghosts," he said, indicating the wide pathway. "Ordinarily we stay away from these. The ghosts will not travel far from these trails. Somehow they are tied to them."

"Ghosts are real?" Ringtail whispered to Mouse Girl.

Mouse Girl shrugged. "Something terrible made that."

They crossed the trail. It was rocky and dusty and virtually no plants lived on it. Mouse Girl estimated that five or more adults could lay foot to head across the width of the trail. She paused in the middle of the trail. It extended for a long way in either direction, its lifeless presence leaving a gap in the horizon in both directions. *This is a place of death,* she thought. She quickly caught up to the others.

They walked on as the first rays of dawn began to show. Antelope Boy paused and sniffed the air. *Is that the smell of fire?* Mouse Girl wondered. They began to walk more slowly, creeping through the underbrush until Deer Father signaled them to stop.

In the distance was a campfire. A single man was trying to reignite the flame. In the darkness, Mouse Girl could see two other men sleeping on the ground near the fire. They were sleeping out in the open and making little effort to conceal themselves. *Could these be the Bear people?* Mouse Girl wondered. *They look like us, but they seem to have no fear of being discovered.*

"Badger and I will go and speak with them," Deer Father said. "The rest of you stay hidden and run if anything goes

wrong. These are very powerful people. But we are quicker and quieter."

Deer Father and Badger approached the campfire, which was now burning brightly. Suddenly, things started to look strange. Deer Father and Badger kept walking and walking but they never seemed to reach the Bear people. When they finally approached the fire, Mouse Girl realized why her eyes were playing tricks on her. The Bear people were more than twice the height of Deer Father!

Deer Father and Badger greeted the Bear man with what appeared to be some familiarity. All three Bear men were now awake and sitting with the Bird men. The Bear men were loud and boisterous. Mouse Girl could not hear much of what they were saying, but the noise from the conversation carried a long distance. The discussion went on for quite some time, and the sun began to rise. Finally, the Bird men took their leave. They left the Bear camp in a direction far from the direction in which Mouse Girl and the others were waiting. But this was a common tactic of the Bird people. The Bear people watched them go and then turned back to the fire, paying little heed to the Bird people or anything else in the outside world.

Deer Father and Badger eventually reappeared, signaling for the group to move farther away from the Bear people. When they had left the Bear men far behind, he spoke.

"Our friends tell us that there are new dangers in the places we are sending our quests," Deer Father said.

"What kind of dangers?" Badger Father asked.

"Ghosts," Deer Father said. Both men seemed to know what that implied, but Mouse Girl had no idea what it might mean.

"A question, Deer Father," Mouse Girl said.

Deer Father smiled. He seemed to be anticipating Mouse Girl's question. "Speak, little one," he said.

“Why were we never told that the Bear people are giants?” she asked.

“We don’t think of them as giants,” Deer Father explained. “They have made choices different from ours. They value size and brute strength. They live heavily on the land.”

“They seem to have no fear of coyotes or owls or hawks,” Ocelot Girl observed. “Their size gives them that advantage.”

Deer Father nodded. “It does,” he admitted.

“If we were that big, our quests could go anywhere without fear,” Ocelot Girl said.

“In some respects, their size gives them advantages,” Deer Father agreed.

“But we have chosen a different way, father?” Mouse Girl asked, hoping for more information.

“Let me give you an example,” Deer Father said as the children gathered near. “In the late summer, the fruits of the persimmon tree become ripe. The fruit is sweet and delicious and each one can sustain one of our people for a day or more. But if we were the size of the Bear people, the fruit from the entire tree would not satisfy a man for even one meal.”

The children nodded in understanding.

“Therefore, the Bear people must search the land far and wide, taking all the fruit off of every tree they can find. They work very hard to feed their families. And often, there simply is not enough food. And so they are forced to eat meat almost everyday. They have grown so large that the land cannot sustain them, so they must kill their animal brothers and sisters constantly to go on living.”

Ringtail looked shocked at this idea. “They kill every day?” he asked.

Deer Father nodded.

“They eat flesh whenever they can get it. And they eat whatever else they can find. This is why we can never live near

the Bear people. There would be no food for us at all," Deer Father concluded.

"And so there is little land left for us," Ocelot Girl said.

"Yes," Deer Father said. "There is very little land that is safe for us. And this has always been true. There has always been very little land for the Bird people, but there has always been enough. This is why our quests are so important to us. The Bear people greedily eat up new land all the time. They are constantly moving into our lands. And so we quietly move to new places, places that are useless to them or difficult for them to reach."

"Like our canyon?" Mouse Girl asked.

"Yes," Deer Father nodded in agreement. "The Bear people are too big to climb very well. Our cliff homes are quite safe from them."

"Now, tell them the really bad news," Badger Father said. "Tell them about the ghosts."

A dark cloud seemed to move over Deer Father's face. *There's more bad news than this?* Mouse Girl thought.

"Another time," Deer Father said. "Before you leave on your quest, we must speak of other dangers, but not now. Learning about the Bear people is enough for one day."

If they're trying to scare us, Mouse Girl thought, *this is the perfect way to do it. Show us the most terrifying thing we could ever imagine - giant, greedy, always-hungry enemies, and then tell us there are worse things that they can't talk about. Adults drive me crazy sometimes.*

"And finally, there is one more thing," Deer Father said. "You must speak to no one about the Bear people when we go back home. Only the cult is allowed to speak of them."

"But surely our quests need to know this?" Ocelot Girl objected.

"You will tell them this after you begin your quest," Deer Father said. "But when you return, again you must keep silent."

Why keep such important information secret? Mouse Girl wondered. But the way Deer Father commanded them to keep silent told her that it would not be wise to ask this question just now. There would be time enough to find out before they left on the quest, she hoped.

They made the trip back to camp quickly, even though they were traveling by day. The only time they moved with extra care was near the ghost trail. Crossing it for the second time was just as bad as the first time. Why would anyone want such a huge, lifeless area? How could anyone want such a thing? And how was it made? Mouse Girl couldn't imagine the answers to these questions.

They made it back to camp exhausted, but just in time for the evening meal. Mouse Girl's quest gathered around her, anxious for news from the outside world. She told them what she could of the trip. But she also noticed that Rat Boy's foot was bandaged.

"I hurt it during the raid," he said.

"Will you be able to walk on it by the time we leave for our quest?" Mouse Girl asked.

Rat Boy nodded confidently. "Of course," he said.

"Let me rephrase that question. Does Ferret Mother think you'll be able to walk on it by the time we leave for our quest?" Mouse Girl asked.

"She hasn't said definitely no," Rat Boy answered.

"Take care of it. We need you," Mouse Girl said.

As the dinner came to an end, Ferret Girl was summoned away for mystic purposes. Mouse Girl intended to get some answers from Ferret Girl at some point. She was sure Ferret Girl would not hide any helpful information from her. But then she realized that she had just been asked to hide helpful

information herself. *Ferret Girl and I are going to have to come to an understanding about this secrecy stuff*, she decided.

That evening the tribal gathering was small, due to the absence of injured people and their caretakers, extra sentries guarding the camp, and whoever was working with the mystics. Ocelot Grandmother took charge of the meeting. She and Deer Father had been in an animated conversation during the entire meal.

"Preparations for the winter and for the quests are almost complete," Ocelot Grandmother said. "Soon the new quest members will leave us."

The quest members sat up straight and were anxious to hear any news concerning when they would leave.

"Deer Father has returned with useful information that will help our quests greatly," Ocelot Grandmother continued. "He has helped us make some difficult decisions. First of all, in the defense of our village, Rat Boy has seriously hurt a bone in one foot. He will not be able to go out on his quest."

All the members of the second quest gasped.

"This is a serious decision, but his health is more important to the tribe than his quest. And, assuming his foot heals, we may need him to defend our camp."

Mouse Girl was about to protest, but Rat Boy caught her eye and shook his head. She controlled her anger and decided to wait to hear what else Ocelot Grandmother had in store for them.

"The second grave decision we have made is that there will be only one quest," Ocelot Grandmother said. "The remaining members of the second quest will join the first quest."

The second quest members could not control their anger and bewilderment at this announcement.

"Why?" Squirrel Boy exclaimed.

“But one quest can’t explore as much as two,” Badger argued.

Mouse Girl could say nothing at first. She couldn’t believe they were taking away her quest.

Ocelot Grandmother shook her head and silenced the dissenting voices.

“There are not enough members of the second quest for it to safely continue,” she explained. “And furthermore, Deer Father reports that some of the territory we were most interested in exploring has been claimed as ghost land. It is lost to us.”

Ocelot Mother sighed a deep sigh. Mouse Girl drew some small consolation from the fact that Ocelot Grandmother truly seemed grieved to be abolishing her quest.

No one in the tribe had much desire to say anything else after these grim announcements. They quietly began to disperse. Mouse Girl looked for Ocelot Girl to begin to make plans to end Mouse Girl’s quest. But Ocelot Girl was not anywhere to be seen.

Exhausted and angry, Mouse Girl ordered her quest members to join her one more time at their meeting spot. They silently followed her there.

“What are we going to do?” Rat Boy asked. “I can’t stay here. I’m not a child anymore. And what good is an adult who hasn’t been on a quest?”

“You are going on the quest, if I have to carry you in my pack,” Mouse Girl said.

“That’s great for you to say, but it’s not your quest anymore,” Squirrel Boy said. “Ocelot Girl’s in charge now.”

Mouse Girl glared at him. He was right, but she still didn’t like to hear it.

“Listen,” Badger said, “The first quest is already trained and ready to do their job. They don’t need us. What if we go

along with them and then slip away to go on our quest without the blessing of the elders?"

Mouse Girl could not believe she had just heard this.

"And how would we ever come back?" Mouse Girl said. "We couldn't come back after having defied the elders."

"Why come back?" Badger said. "We can search until we find a land of our own."

"And start a new tribe with four boys and three girls?" Mouse Girl asked, sarcastically. "That sounds great for us girls, but one of you boys would be lonely. Seven people isn't nearly enough to start a new tribe."

Jaguarundi Girl cleared her throat. The rest of the quest looked at her.

"Excuse me," she said timidly, "but in the story of our tribe, we are told that just two people began the tribe."

"That has to be a legend," Mouse Girl said. "One family can't have healthy offspring over many generations. Every child knows that. That is why the elders carefully choose mates for each one of our people."

"Yes," Jaguarundi agreed. "But just because we start with only seven, doesn't mean we cannot find new people."

"Why would a tribe give us people if we have no one to trade?" Mouse Girl asked.

"My tribe has too many people," Jaguarundi said. "Too many people and our land has grown full. That's why I was sent out. Me and five others like me."

"But we traded Squirrel Girl for you," Mouse Girl retorted.

Jaguarundi nodded. "But the trading delegation will not return home with six children. At another place, they may trade two or three children for one new and promising child."

"You mean, we might have been able to negotiate for more children?" Mouse Girl said. "If we had just one more child, maybe our quest could go forward."

“They are very far away by now,” Jaguarundi said with sadness in her voice.

Badger nodded his head. “We could go downstream, to Jaguarundi’s tribe to find more people.”

“But they have no land,” Rat Boy said.

“No more of this!” Mouse Girl insisted. “We are not going to rebel against our tribe! We will not dishonor our traditions!”

She said this emphatically, but the seed of doubt had been planted in her mind. Their tribe seemed to be growing weaker. They were down to only one quest. Maybe it made sense to start something new.

As these thoughts were battling in her mind, Deer Girl approached their group.

“Ocelot Girl requests the honor of the presence of the second quest,” Deer Girl said solemnly.

These verbal niceties did not make Mouse Girl feel any better. Her purpose in life was being taken away. What will I be on someone else’s quest, she wondered? I’ve trained for so long to be a quest leader. Am I supposed to just fit in somewhere new and try to be satisfied?

“Let’s go and see what Ocelot has in store for us,” Mouse Girl said.

The quest obediently stood up and followed. When they arrived at the meeting place of the first quest, they were surprised to see the mystics, Ferret Girl and Otter Girl, in the gathering.

“Welcome, Mouse Girl,” Ocelot Girl said. “Our mystics have returned and are ready to give us a message if you are ready to listen.”

Mouse Girl stared at Ferret Girl with anger in her eyes. She wanted to ask Ferret why she had reported back to the first quest instead of to Mouse Girl. Was Ferret this anxious to move away from Mouse Girl’s leadership?

Ferret Girl glanced at Mouse Girl and seemed confused by her angry stare.

"Otter Girl," Ocelot Girl called out. "Tell us what you have learned."

Otter Girl stood up. "We have learned much, but it is not I who must speak to you. Ferret Girl has been chosen as the messenger for the one remaining quest."

"What?" Ocelot Girl exclaimed. "They are taking away your designation as a mystic?"

"No, I will remain a mystic. I was named by my quest leader and that cannot be taken away," Otter Girl explained. "But Ferret Girl is the greater of the two of us. She will be the messenger."

Ocelot Girl obviously did not like this answer, but Otter Girl seemed convinced that this is how it must be.

"Speak to us, then, Ferret Girl," Ocelot said.

Ferret Girl stood. Mouse Girl knew that Ferret did not like to be the center of attention. But this time she stood without hesitation. She showed no sign of nervousness as she faced all the remaining members of both quests. Mouse Girl looked around at the gathered youth. No one seemed to notice Ferret's disfigurement. Or, more likely, they noticed but were so accustomed to it that it no longer mattered to them.

"There is much about our people that we have not been told," Ferret Girl began. "There are many mysteries in the world that are difficult to understand. Otter Girl and I are only beginning to study these mysteries."

Ferret Girl found a big rock to sit on and she began her story.

"Many generations ago, one of our ancestors, named Scorpion Man, found an interesting plant. It was a wild squash, like the ones that grow around us. But this one had fruit with soft and tasty flesh. As you know, we can eat the wild squash that grows around us, but it is bitter and stringy. The

squash Scorpion Man found was so good that he gathered all of its fruit and he saved the seeds so that he could plant more of this tasty squash. But the next summer when his new plants grew, all the squash was bitter and stringy."

The children who were listening looked confused. Ferret Girl paused.

"Shouldn't the new squash have been like the old squash?" Mouse Boy asked.

"That's what Scorpion Man thought," Ferret Girl answered. "Just like strong and healthy parents tend to have strong and healthy children. But it does not always work that way. Sometimes things go wrong. That's just the way it is, or so most people think. But something strange happened to Scorpion Man. One seed that he planted, and only one seed, grew into a plant that was a little more tasty than the others.

"So, Scorpion Man saved the seeds from that plant and for many years he planted as many seeds as he could. He saved the seeds from the best squash, so that he could grow better squash."

This seemed to be making sense to everyone. This was pretty much how they imagined the world worked.

"Scorpion Man noticed it was often the squash that grew downstream that were the best tasting. He thought maybe it was better soil or more rain. But one day a visitor from that direction came as part of a trading delegation, and he brought with him a lot of good tasting squash. Scorpion Man traded for as much of that squash as he could get.

"He planted seeds from the good squash and good squash grew. Even in the soil where bad squash had grown before, good squash was growing. He was very happy for many years. But slowly his new squash began to grow bitter and stringy again.

"He was beginning to think that his land turned squash bitter. Somehow maybe the land infected the seeds slowly. But

he had one last idea. He went all around his good squash. He searched for all the native squash he could find and he tore it out of the ground. And the next year, his good squash seemed a little better."

Ferret Girl paused for dramatic effect, but no one seemed impressed.

"Scorpion Man discovered that plants influence each other," she said and still no one reacted.

"Scorpion Man reasoned that plants breed like animals," Ferret Girl said.

Several of the children laughed. "That's impossible!" Rat Boy said.

"That's what everyone told Scorpion Man," Ferret Girl said. "And so he began to watch his plants very closely. Did they get up and walk around at night, looking for mates? Did they somehow reach out to each other?"

There was more laughter.

"Nothing like this happened at all. But Scorpion Man did notice that bees travel from plant to plant. They go from flower to flower. Scorpion Man examined the flowers and he noticed a sticky powder in them. He wondered if this sticky powder might be the male seed. If so, then the bees could carry the male seed to other flowers."

Some of the children looked interested in this thought.

"People still laughed at Scorpion Man's ideas. But they liked his squash, so they didn't laugh too loudly. And then Scorpion Man noticed something that all of us have seen before but we've probably never noticed. There are two types of squash blossoms. One type leads to squash fruit. But the other blossom looks and grows differently and it never leads to fruit."

Ferret Girl paused while the children thought about this.

"This is just like people. The women have babies. The men never do. Scorpion Man guessed that these non-producing

flowers must be male flowers and their pollen must be the male seed."

"Scorpion Man eventually became very famous for always having the very best squash. His people were always prosperous because of his work. His squash became better and better for two reasons. First, he kept the best squash near each other so that they would produce the best new fruit. And second, he tore bad squash out of the ground before it could ruin much of the future seed."

Suddenly, the story began to make sense to Mouse Girl. This was how they were raised. The elders carefully chose mates for each person. And no matter how much people wanted to be paired with someone else, the elders never allowed a matching that they did not agree with.

"Our tribe's traditions come to us from squash plants?" Ocelot Girl asked.

The other children laughed.

"We ought to be called the Squash people instead of the Bird people," Squirrel Boy added.

"This is not the only important story," Ferret Girl said. "I think you remember the stories of our quest to rejoin the Spirit people. Our ideal is to live lightly on the land, more like birds than bears."

Squirrel Boy nodded, still smiling at his squash joke.

"Squash boy," Rat Boy said.

Jaguarundi nudged Badger, saying quietly, "I thought the cult leaders told the stories. Is this not the case in your tribe?"

Badger shook his head. "Not always. The cult leaders act out the stories for the tribe, and they do other things like prayers for healing. The mystics are the ones who know all the stories. It's their job to make sure all of the stories are remembered."

"But the final part of the story that we have been asked to ponder by the mystics is this," Ferret Girl said. "Since the time

of Scorpion Man, we have been on a great quest. When we begin our quest, we will complete the five hundredth generation."

"There have been five hundred generations of Bird people?" Mouse Girl asked, somewhat stunned by this number.

Ferret Girl nodded.

"Wait," Rat Boy said. "You mean just like you have ten pecans, and then you have ten groups of ten pecans, which makes a hundred?"

"Very good," Squirrel Boy said. "You can count pecans."

Ferret Girl nodded. "One hundred generations of people, five times over."

"And so there have been five hundred years of quests?" Rat Boy asked.

"No," Ferret shook her head. "Not five hundred years, but five hundred generations. We count a generation as twenty years."

"There have been twenty years of questing, five hundred times over?" Mouse Girl asked. "Is there a name for a number that big?"

Ferret Girl smiled. "The mystics have a name for it. But we can just say five hundred generations."

"Is that some kind of symbolic number?" Ocelot Girl asked. "With some mystical meaning behind it?"

Ferret Girl shook her head. "No," she said. "It's just a very big number. The mystics keep meticulous records. We are the twentieth and last quest of the five hundredth generation."

Ferret Girl paused. "And so maybe you are correct, Ocelot Girl. Maybe there is a mystical meaning to our year of questing."

All was silent for a moment.

“That’s a very long time,” Mouse Girl said. “Do the mystics say how long will it take for our people to finish our questing? How will we know when we are finished?”

Ferret Girl shrugged. “When our world rejoins the Spirit world, I think we’ll notice,” she said.

Mouse Girl wasn’t sure about this. There were so many secrets being kept from her that she imagined the return of the Spirits might be concealed from her as well.

Ferret Girl concluded. “Tend our world. Remember our story. Continue our people.”

The group sang the quiet response.

8 - Thirst

(In which Mouse Girl asks the elders to reconsider a decision, the quest is given its final instructions, and Mouse Girl is given a secret instruction. Frog Boy returns. The quest begins and water is very difficult to find, until coyotes lead the way.)

Ocelot Girl was summoned into Ocelot Grandmother's presence the next morning.

"In two days," Ocelot Grandmother said, "you will begin your quest. Tonight we will gather as a tribe and hear of your official destination and purpose. Tomorrow night at sunset, you will leave."

Ocelot Girl nodded in understanding.

"We are ready," she said.

"I trust you are, granddaughter," the old woman said.

As soon as Ocelot Girl was excused, Mouse Girl appeared.

"Grandmother," she said, "May I have a word with you?"

Ocelot Grandmother nodded.

"We now have a large quest, since the second quest has been taken in by the first," Mouse Girl began. "Every member of the quest is an excellent worker and has trained faithfully."

Ocelot Grandmother nodded again.

"I would like to request that we take one risky endeavor, one which the elders have advised against," Mouse Girl said.

"Mouse Girl, you have a reputation for questioning the advice of the elders," Ocelot Grandmother said.

"Yes, grandmother," Mouse Girl said. "And it is my hope that my inquisitive mind might be of service to the tribe. This is why I am coming to you for advice. I may be wrong, but I believe my request is important for the tribe."

"You are coming to me for advice?" Ocelot Grandmother asked.

Mouse Girl nodded.

"What is it you ask, granddaughter?" Ocelot Grandmother inquired.

"I have noticed that there is a dark mood growing among our people," Mouse Girl said. "You have told us that this land may soon become unsafe for us, and yet for three generations we have failed to find another home."

Ocelot Grandmother nodded.

"We have now been reduced to just one quest," Mouse Girl continued. "We have suffered deadly attacks, first from wild beasts and then from unfriendly tribes who may be facing difficult times like us. What I wonder is this: is it wise in times such as these to allow a child to become an adult without undergoing the quest?"

"You are speaking of Rat Boy?" Ocelot Grandmother asked. "You know that has already been decided."

"Yes, grandmother," Mouse Girl said. "But to have an adult of our tribe who has never searched for new land, and in a time when staying in this place could prove dangerous for the tribe, I think it is unsafe to allow this to happen."

"Unsafe?" Ocelot Grandmother asked. "For the tribe?"

"I don't believe we should allow such an adult to stay in our tribe," Mouse Girl said. "Such an adult would have a complacent mind. He would be untested by danger, unformed by the rigors of the quest. How could such an adult lead his people out of this canyon forever if he had never faced the outside world himself?"

"What are you suggesting?" Ocelot Grandmother asked.

"It may be true that it is best for Rat Boy's health to have him remain here and forsake the quest," Mouse Girl said. "If his life and his physical place in the tribe were the only consideration, I agree this would be the best choice. But I worry about his spiritual place among the tribe. We are the five hundredth generation. Such a generation must uphold the highest ideals of our people."

“How do you propose we do this? By sending an injured boy on a quest where he might become permanently lame, perhaps even die? He could endanger the entire quest by becoming a burden.” Ocelot Grandmother asked.

“I propose that it would be better for the tribe for him to die on the quest than it would be for him to live without going on the quest,” Mouse Girl said.

Ocelot Grandmother was somewhat taken aback by the directness of this reasoning. But she was also somewhat impressed.

“I will consider your proposal,” she said.

Mouse Girl bowed. “Thank you,” she said.

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The rest of the day was spent making the final preparations for the quest. Packs were filled with pinole and other dried food. Weapons were gathered and inspected. The day went by quickly. Mouse Girl was sad to see the sun setting. Her time as a child of the tribe was almost over. She wasn’t sure she was ready for whatever came next.

Dinner and a campfire were prepared and enjoyed. The nights were getting much cooler. Soon the bitter cold of winter would be upon the land. Mouse Girl shivered and wondered what it was going to be like facing winter without the shelter of a cave. In the midst of her worrying, the elders gathered.

“Children of the quest, come forward!” Deer Grandmother called out.

The quest gathered and kneeled before the elders.

“Tomorrow you leave us for one year,” Deer Grandmother said. “Ocelot Girl will lead you. You have chosen elders and cult leaders and guards. You have all trained and studied in preparation for this day. Your instructions are to travel in the direction of the setting sun. Our kinsmen who live downstream near the sea believe that upstream, beyond the

headwaters of the Green River, there is potential land in the hot and rugged highlands. You will seek out that land, and if you find some promising place, dwell there for the remainder of your quest. During that time you will assess food and water and security. One year from today, you will return and report to us what you have found."

The children nodded in agreement. They had been over this dozens of times, but this was their official warrant. And since the second quest had been abandoned, it was good to clarify what exactly was happening. Mouse Girl, in fact, was not paying much attention. She was still depressed about losing her quest. She doubted she would have much of interest to do on this quest, since she and her fellow second-questers were simply excess baggage.

"Do the mystics have anything additional to add?" Deer Mother asked.

The head mystic, Alligator Grandmother, who was so old she was rarely seen outside of her cave, nodded.

"I have a charge for Mouse Girl," Alligator Grandmother said.

Mouse Girl seemed as surprised about this as everyone else was.

Alligator Grandmother waved Mouse Girl over to her and the old woman whispered in her ear. Mouse Girl nodded. The old woman whispered more. Mouse Girl nodded again. Mouse Girl then returned to her place.

"I have told Mouse Girl the one final instruction I had for her quest," Alligator Grandmother explained. "Although her quest is no more, there is one task I would like to see accomplished."

Deer Grandmother nodded. Ocelot Grandmother looked annoyed at this final recognition of the second quest.

The ceremony ended and the tribe quickly began to disperse. Mouse Girl wandered back to her cave as soon as Ocelot Girl released them

"Sleep well," Ocelot Girl had said. "This will be your last night at home."

As if we needed reminding, Mouse Girl thought. A little way from the campfire, Mouse Girl was suddenly surrounded by her former quest members.

"What did the old woman tell you?" Squirrel Boy asked.

Mouse Girl shrugged. "I just don't understand adults," Mouse Girl said. "First they put us on the second quest. Then they take that away and trash all of our planning. And finally, when they have one last thing to say to us, it has nothing to do with us or any of our work."

"So, what was it?" Rat Boy asked.

Mouse Girl looked at Jaguarundi. "She said to make sure you made it back alive," she said to Jaguarundi.

"Me?" Jaguarundi asked, honestly clueless about why she would be specifically named.

"Yep," Mouse Girl said. "Evidently you're more important to our tribe than the rest of us combined."

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The tribe slowly dispersed and readied themselves for the night. Most of the families disappeared into their homes and the night guards climbed up to their posts. It was only a few moments after Mouse Girl closed her eyes to sleep that she heard the guards sound an alert. They used the call of an owl, which was the warning that there was a human threat. However, the owl calls quickly ceased and there were chaotic yells of excitement.

Mouse Girl quickly exited her cave with her bow at the ready. She knew where her defensive position was supposed to be, but no one else was where they were supposed to be.

People were gathered near the river and none of them had their weapons ready.

As she hurried to the group, she heard Frog Boy's name. Had they found his body? That was unlikely since coyotes rarely left any remains.

Mouse Girl pushed her way to the middle of the group and was startled to see Frog Boy being hugged by his mother. He was alive! Impossible!

Mouse and her former quest members surrounded Frog Boy and his mother and began asking questions. How did you survive the coyote attack? Where have you been? How did you make it back to our village on your own?

There was too much chaos for Frog Boy to give much of an answer. And then the mystics called for him to be brought to their cave. They wanted to record his story. As Frog Boy was gently separated from his mother, Mouse noticed he had some serious wounds and he was not walking very well. And his left arm was hanging in an odd way.

Mouse and her friends sat in a circle and excitedly discussed how Frog Boy might have survived. They were all beyond happy. Not only had their friend survived, but maybe now they would be given their own quest again.

After what seemed like half the night, Frog Boy was brought to the fire circle. He sat at the feet of Alligator Grandmother, who addressed the tribe.

"Frog Boy's journey has been difficult. He was badly wounded as the coyotes dragged him away. Wisely, he played dead. And when the opportunity arose, he ran for a juniper tree and remained there while the beasts howled beneath him.

"However, he was very weak. He wedged himself between branches of the tree so that he would not fall if he lost consciousness. And there he remained for almost a day, too weak to move much.

"The coyotes eventually lost interest in him and wandered away. But he had been dragged a long distance and had no idea where he was. On his own, he managed to bind his wounds with cedar bark. Then he left the tree in search of water. And then he wandered until he finally found our village again.

"But it has been a difficult journey. He suffered many other attacks and faced constant danger. I am astounded he has survived to return to us."

When Alligator Grandmother paused, Mouse Girl spoke up.

"Will he be able to join us on our quest?" she asked.

"No. He is still badly injured. And he has much more to tell us that may help us design new strategies for our defenses. He has learned much in a very short time. In my opinion, he has completed his quest. Facing all the dangers of the world alone and surviving is all that we could ask of him."

Alligator Grandmother would say no more and dismissed the tribe. Mouse Grandmother walked with Mouse Girl and put her hand on Mouse's shoulder.

"There is an odd look in Frog Boy's eyes," Mouse Grandmother said. "I have seen it before. He may not ever be the same person you knew."

"What do you mean, Grandmother?" Mouse asked.

"Some wounds never heal. Some wounds are invisible. It is best that you accept Alligator Grandmother's decision and allow Frog Boy to stay with the tribe and heal as best he can."

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Mouse Girl actually slept well that night. Regardless of her grandmother's warnings about Frog Boy, he was back home and alive! Her guilt was gone and her nervousness over the quest had disappeared. Tomorrow would be just another day.

After all, it was no longer her quest. She was actually glad to be leaving the tribe behind.

Fewer people to look down on me, she thought. *If I can avoid Ocelot Girl and her ego, maybe it will be simply a nice, long, camping trip. Who knows, now that I have no authority, maybe I can spend some time flirting with Beaver Boy*. She had heard adults quietly tell of some interesting and daring love affairs on these quests. Such things were forbidden, of course. But she had always liked Beaver.

And then, at the right time, maybe she would take Badger's advice and take her quest in its own direction. She was free now. Tomorrow evening she would be an adult, officially. She dreamed of going where no one had gone before, and doing it on her own authority, with no one to tell her she was a loser anymore.

She awoke to Rat Boy's prodding.

"What did you say to Ocelot Grandmother?" he asked.

"Why are you in my cave?" Mouse Girl asked. "It's still dark out."

"It's almost dawn," Rat Boy said. "I was summoned to Ocelot Grandmother's cave and she told me I was going on the quest. She said you had made a convincing appeal to let me go."

Mouse Girl looked at him. *Amazing*, she thought. *All I did was say that he might be better off dead than alive and that's all it took for Ocelot Grandmother to agree with me.*

"I told her you would be better off on the quest, in spite of the danger of your wound getting worse, than you would be sitting at home as a half-adult who never went on a quest," Mouse Girl said. That was pretty close to the truth.

Rat Boy dropped to his knees and hugged her.

"Thank you," he said.

"I did what I thought was best," Mouse Girl said, patting his back. "Now leave me alone. I have to get dressed."

Great, thought Mouse Girl. *Take a friend to his death and protect this strange girl for who-knows-what reason*. She decided to stop worrying about all this stuff and just get ready for an adventure.

The morning was chaos as the quest discovered a seemingly endless list of things they had yet to gather together. In the end, Mouse Girl found herself standing by the campfire with her regular gear plus a little pack with pinole in it. There wasn't much difference between what she normally carried and what she would carry on the quest, except now they had no room for error.

Mouse Girl had also tightly bound her ceremonial wings into a small bundle of sticks and fabric.

"Why are you bringing those?" Snake Girl asked.

"They may be useful," Mouse answered. "In our cult training we were told that it is a custom to take them on the quest."

She noticed that Deer Girl and Jaguarundi also had their wings ready for travel. Snake Girl looked at her like she was either crazy or stupid.

"You're the one who has to carry them," she said as she walked away.

Mouse Girl looked around the campfire ring at the faces of her friends. Badger Boy and Ferret Girl looked excited. That was a good thing. Rat Boy looked happy, too, and probably just because he was told he could go on the quest. Ringtail looked thoughtful. His eyes were staring off into the distance. Squirrel Boy was hard to read. Ever since his sister left, Mouse Girl realized that she didn't really know Squirrel Boy very well. She had known *them*, but now that *she* was gone, Squirrel was a bit of a stranger.

And finally, there was Jaguarundi girl. She sat close to the others, but she still looked entirely out of place. *How must this be for her*? Mouse Girl wondered. *No close friends, on a quest*

of losers that gets absorbed into another quest. But maybe the quest will help make her feel like she belongs.

A little closer to the elders sat all the excellent, high-achieving kids. Handsome Beaver. Mouse Girl's brother. Tough and strong Snake Girl. Beautiful Deer Girl. Otter Girl, who Mouse Girl actually liked a lot, even if she was on the first quest. And finally, the representative of the arrogant and seemingly perfect Ocelot family, Ocelot Girl herself.

Mouse Girl had complicated feelings about Ocelot Girl. She was hard-working. She was good at everything. She knew how to work with a team and she knew how to lead a team. But behind all of that perfection, what was there? Yes, she was an excellent quest leader, but Mouse Girl had absolutely no warm feelings about her as a person. Could she be a friend? Did she have any friends? Would she ever sit around the campfire with another woman and just talk and laugh? Mouse Girl could not picture that. Nevertheless, Mouse Girl was glad Ocelot was in charge. She was reliable and capable. There would be no surprises on Ocelot's quest… unless Mouse Girl initiated them.

While the elders and cult leaders droned on about duty and tradition, Mouse Girl moved in to sit by her brother. This was just an excuse to put her right next to Beaver. In the cold evening air, she could feel his warmth. She moved closer to him, and then put her arm around his shoulder.

"I'm a little cold," she said. Beaver did not seem to mind.

Towards the end of the speeches and ceremonies, Ocelot Girl was called forward.

"You face an exciting and dangerous future, Ocelot Girl," Ocelot Grandmother said. "Return with what we need."

Ocelot Grandmother looks kind of tired and not entirely optimistic, Mouse Girl thought. As the assembly was breaking up, Deer Grandmother sought out Ocelot Girl and took her by the hand. *This is interesting*, Mouse Girl thought. She moved

closer. Deer Grandmother was speaking low but with a lot of intensity.

"You've heard all the warnings, Ocelot Girl. Take them seriously. You have no way of knowing how dangerous the ghosts are. Stay away from them. No land can be of use to us once they appear in the area."

Ocelot Girl nodded.

"And you know you're traveling right into the middle of them," Deer Grandmother said. Ocelot Girl nodded again. "Be careful."

This was all Mouse Girl heard before Beaver came up and put his arm around her. Stupid boy. Flirting should not get in the way of more serious things like spying on the elders. But it was too late. Beaver wanted attention and Deer Grandmother was walking away with Ocelot Girl.

And then it happened. Ocelot Girl reappeared. With the subtlest of hand gestures she assembled the quest. Without speaking, they climbed the cliff out of the canyon. At the top, Mouse Girl breathed in the cool air and looked at the stars. She was now an adult.

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The quest walked in the direction of the setting sun long into the night. Occasionally they heard coyotes howling, far in the distance. Hearing them far away was a good sign. When you stopped hearing them, then you could be in trouble. Hours later they stopped at a dry stream crossing. Ocelot Girl examined the streambed.

"This is bad news," she said. "We were hoping for water from the White River tributaries for the first part of our journey. The drought seems to be worse than I expected."

"The Green River has plenty of water," Beaver said.

Ocelot shook her head. “We have too many reports of ghosts along the Green River. Even the Bear people fear to go there anymore.”

“I can find a spring, if there is one nearby,” Mouse Boy volunteered.

Ocelot Girl shook her head. “Not now. We have far to go before we rest. And this place is too dangerous for us to split up. We’ll try to find a spring when we have some light.”

They continued to walk in the moonlight. Mouse Girl felt her water pouch. She had plenty of water for the rest of the night’s journey. They climbed higher and higher onto the plateaus of the hill country. *We’re not going to find water up here*, Mouse Girl thought to herself.

As the horizon began to show slight signs of light, Ocelot called a halt. In the deep darkness of the pre-twilight hours, she could not discern any place that held the promise of water. This wasn’t looking like a good beginning to Mouse Girl. The land to which they were heading was higher in the arid plateaus. If they were having trouble finding water here, where rivers and streams were common, they were going to have a very difficult time out there.

Apparently guessing which direction to search, Ocelot led them in a direction slightly left of sunset. She was heading back in the direction of the White River. They crossed another ravine with no sign of water or even mud. The morning twilight was bringing more light. Beaver pointed to the far side of the ravine. There were a few clumps of tall bunchgrass that indicated spring flow. They crossed the ravine and climbed up to the grass. There was not much of it, but what was there was tall, almost twice Mouse Girl’s height.

Everyone searched the area for moisture. It was apparent where the spring usually flowed, but there was no water there now. Even Beaver digging down with a stick revealed no sign of moisture in the soil.

"I was depending on finding water somewhere today," Ocelot said. "Since we are finding no trace of it, we need to begin conserving it. Make whatever you have last. We'll make camp in those juniper trees, near the top of the hill."

"I'm out of water already," Rat said. Mouse had noticed earlier in the night that he had been drinking quite a bit. He seemed to be doing it as a way to distract himself from the obvious pain he was suffering as he walked.

"I have plenty," Mouse said. "I'll share mine with Rat."

Ferret came over to investigate Rat's situation. "Is your foot okay?" she asked softly, not wishing to draw attention to Rat's injury.

"It hurts, but I'm doing okay," he said. Mouse knew he was lying. He had been grimacing and breathing heavily for half the night. They were going to have to do something about his foot.

When they reached the cover of the junipers, she unwrapped his bandages. His foot was purple and swollen.

"Stay on the ground and keep your foot up," she said. She found an old log and dragged it over to him, then propped his foot up onto it. "Don't move for a while. I'll bring you some water."

"No water, thanks," Rat said. "I'll just rest."

Not having much water, they ate little as well. Ocelot sent out a couple of search parties during the daylight to find water, but there was none to be found. Mouse Girl was concerned about this. In the little bit of traveling she had done away from their canyon home, people had always been able to find at least a small amount of water. Being unable to find any at all was scary.

Fortunately the weather was cool and they weren't sweating as they rested all day. Mouse Girl slept most of the day, except for a brief time of sentry duty. When she was awake, she tried to make sure Rat wasn't doing anything to

make his foot worse. As the sun began to set, the foot was looking much better. Ocelot Girl had them up and ready for the night's journey as soon as the sun hit the horizon.

"Listen, everyone," Ocelot said before they began to hike. "With as little water as there is here, we have to be careful when we find some. Every animal in the area will be near it. "

Great, Mouse thought. *Not only are we in danger of running out of water, but when we do find it we'll be in more danger*.

They resumed their original direction. This took them uphill for most of the night. They heard coyotes and owls and crickets. The night was growing cold. They were now farther from home than Mouse had ever been. She looked around as they neared a hilltop. In the moonlight she could see nothing but rugged, grass-covered hills. A few trees. Lots and lots of rocks. They were having to scramble over boulders with some frequency. This was not good for Rat's foot.

Rat was beginning to walk more slowly. He was at the back of the group and he kept falling behind Squirrel who was supposed to be the rear security. Finally, Ocelot Girl had to stop the group.

"We can't allow Rat to separate from the group," she said. "We'll move more slowly. I want us to be careful. There's no reason for anyone to get hurt due to a lack of watchfulness. Just get used to maintaining your responsibilities no matter how fast we are going. That way, we'll stay safe."

Mouse Girl was watching and listening to see if Ocelot's speech was aimed at Mouse's quest members. *She'd better not be implying that we are lazy or undisciplined*, Mouse thought. She walked over to Squirrel.

"Don't let Rat fall behind you," she told him. "I don't want Ocelot to see any weakness in us."

Squirrel nodded. Ringtail walked over as Mouse Girl went back to her place in the formation.

"Mouse already yelled at me," Squirrel said. "I won't make any more mistakes for Ocelot to complain about."

Ringtail smiled. "Good," he said.

They walked on. Mouse Girl lost track of how many hills they climbed. They searched for water every time they came to a ravine. Every bit of ground was dusty and dry.

It was almost morning when the group stopped. Ocelot pointed to the left of the setting sun. Out on the horizon was an odd object. It looked like a star but it was brighter and redder than any star Mouse had ever seen.

"Ghosts," Ferret said.

"No way," Mouse said. "Are we in danger?"

Ferret shrugged. Everyone was staring at the tiny, distant light. It was like nothing anyone had seen before.

"Security!" Ocelot said. "We should be watching in all directions. That thing is too far away to bother us. We'll be traveling away from it as fast as we can."

"I can't believe they're real," Mouse said. "I thought they were just stories."

"They're real and they're deadly," Ferret said.

"We turn here, to the right of the setting sun," Ocelot said to the group. "Let's go! We won't be stopping until that thing is long gone from sight."

They headed down the hill. They worked their way through the underbrush and boulders, across another dusty arroyo, and began to climb the next hill. That was when Rat collapsed. Mouse ran over to him. His skin was hot and he was just barely conscious.

Ocelot ran back to him. "What's wrong?" Ocelot asked.

Mouse shrugged. "He's hot and his foot is swollen again."

"Can he drink water?" Ocelot asked.

"I ran out halfway through the night," Mouse said. "We've been using Squirrel's. But I can't remember the last time he asked for water."

Ocelot turned to the group. “Does anyone have water?”

Ringtail offered his, although when Ocelot felt his water pouch it was pretty light. Ocelot managed to get Rat to swallow a little.

“Okay, we’ll stop here. Daylight is coming soon anyway,” she said. “And someone needs to find water.”

At first light, Ocelot sent a search party to the top of the hill. They searched for any sign of a river or creek. As far as they could see, there was no sign of anything but hills and rocks and trees and grass. They returned discouraged.

“No one panic,” Ocelot said. “We will find water. All these plants live on something.”

“What if we don’t find anything? How long can we last?” Beaver asked.

Ocelot shrugged. “We have one person down already,” she answered. “We have a day, maybe two, before the whole group is in trouble.”

“We could make it back home,” Deer Girl said.

Ocelot Girl glared at her.

“I’m not saying we should go back,” Deer Girl said defensively. “But you’ve always told us to remember all our options.”

Ocelot’s face softened a little. “You’re right,” she said. “Keep in mind every possibility.”

“And, a day from now, even that possibility will be gone,” Beaver said.

“Okay,” Ocelot Girl said. “We’re not going back. We will find water. We’ll send out scouting parties to look for springs in every direction throughout the day. I want those parties to walk slowly and use as little strength as possible. Everyone else will rest in the shade all day. No exertion that is not absolutely necessary.”

That sounded like the most reasonable plan Mouse could imagine. She agreed with Ocelot that she would rather face death out here than return home after just two days.

They found shade and rested. Rat was not as hot anymore. He was resting. Jaguarundi, Ringtail, and Squirrel were sent out to search first.

"Go to the top of the hill and look for the direction that looks the greenest," Ocelot said. "Then go that direction slowly and search."

The search party left. Mouse crawled under a thick juniper and slept. She was beginning to get a headache. She was glad to be able to lose consciousness.

When she awoke, the search party was back and was talking in whispers to Ocelot. Mouse crawled over. Evidently they had found a deep ravine. It was dry, but it looked promising.

"Every creature around us is going to be looking for water. They're going to be desperate and unpredictable. Maybe too unpredictable for two or three people to be safe down in that ravine. I think the safest thing to do is to take the whole quest down there and search until we find something," Ocelot Girl said.

They woke up Rat and began the trek to the ravine. Everyone felt bad. Mouse had a horrible headache. She was super-irritable and she was sure everyone else was, too. She decided the safest thing to do was just be quiet and help Rat walk. It turned out to be a long walk. She felt sorry for Jaguarundi, Ringtail, and Squirrel who were now making this trip for the third time in the hot sun.

They finally reached the ravine and it looked as dry as every other one they had seen over the last two days. But they began the search for anything that looked green or moist, slowly working their way downhill. They traveled down the

rocky bottom, which made it difficult to help Rat, but it was shady and much cooler than being in the sun.

They came to an abrupt drop-off, which would have been a pretty waterfall had there been any water. Crooked, flood-bent trees shaded the entire area growing out of the rocky bottom of the ravine. As they clambered down the loose rocks, Ringtail cried out.

"Coyotes!" he yelled. "A whole pack!"

All eyes turned to Ocelot. She pointed up, the signal for taking to the trees. In an instant, the entire quest was in the branches of the nearby trees. Everyone except Rat, Mouse, and Ringtail. Ringtail had thought ahead fast enough to make it to Rat and Mouse to protect them as they tried to make it into a tree. The coyotes were closing in, and Ringtail was standing with his atlatl between them and his friends.

Mouse had managed to get Rat to the tree in which Otter had taken shelter. Otter reached down and pulled Rat up, demonstrating remarkable strength for such a small girl. As soon as Rat was off the ground, Mouse jumped into the branches. Ringtail's defiance had caused the coyotes to pause. And once Mouse gave the signal that she was safe, Ringtail calmly backed his way to her tree. Every member of the Bird tribe knew to never turn one's back to a coyote. And never run away. And never show teeth unless you mean to communicate dangerous aggression.

One aggressive coyote made a dash for Ringtail and for his trouble he received two arrows in the face, delivered from the bows of Otter and Beaver. He yelped and shook the arrows free. By then Ringtail was under Mouse's branch, and she helped him up.

The coyotes stayed in the area, but were wary of getting too close to the quest. They quickly learned how painful arrows were. The quest was not shooting to kill at this point.

They merely intended to convince the coyotes that the Bird people were not easy prey.

A little bit of time and a few more arrows convinced the coyotes to move on. Mouse's heart had stopped racing and she found herself terribly tired. The lack of water, the killer headache, and the threat of being ripped to pieces by coyotes had drained her of strength. She felt lightheaded.

Ocelot jumped down out of her tree and the rest of the quest followed. The guards remained watchful. Oddly, Ocelot Girl was smiling.

"Those coyotes were a good sign," she said. "They looked normal, like they've had water, not crazed like creatures dying of thirst. There is water somewhere near."

"But where?" Deer asked. Her natural beauty was disappearing behind dark, sunken eyes and a face that showed pain.

"We follow the coyotes," Ocelot said. "When Rat's foot was hurt, he started drinking lots of water. Those injured coyotes have been hit by a lot of arrows. They will be headed for their drinking hole."

The mere hope of water lifted Mouse's spirit. She and Rat trudged along together, bows ready for a fight. The coyotes had run downhill and stayed close to the ravine. The sun was sinking and the day was hot. Mouse was worried about losing so much water due to the amount of sweat they were shedding, but she told herself this made sense.

9 - Snake

(In which Snake Girl betrays the quest, Jaguarundi Girl is chosen as an elder, and the quest finally finds water.)

They found no water that night. The coyotes had left tracks everywhere, so they knew they were in the right area. Once the deep darkness of night set in, Ocelot decided it was too dangerous to keep searching. They climbed into the trees, strung their hammocks, and slept.

Sometime in the night, a cry was heard. Mouse Girl awoke and heard Otter screaming with anger. By the time she climbed out of her hammock and dropped to the ground, there was chaos. Ocelot Girl was on the ground with her knife to Snake's throat. Beaver was trying to keep Otter from attacking Snake.

"What's going on?" Mouse demanded.

"That bitch stabbed me!" Otter Girl yelled, with a scary kind of edge in her voice.

Mouse looked at Snake, who was silent but staring at Otter with hatred in her eyes.

"Why would she do that?" Mouse asked.

"She had water," Otter said. "She was hoarding it. I noticed yesterday morning that she was the only one who wasn't sharing her water with Rat. She was keeping it to herself."

"And you were trying to steal it," Snake said. "Don't accuse me of selfishness. You were trying to take it for yourself!"

Ocelot Girl pressed her knife harder against Snake's throat.

"Is this true?" Ocelot demanded. "Were you keeping water from the rest of us?"

Snake nodded. Ocelot released her and stood up.

"Tell me what happened, Otter Girl." Ocelot said.

"I saw her trying to hide her water. When she looked like she was asleep, I climbed over to her to see how much she had. I wasn't trying to steal it. I just wanted everyone else to know that she had a flask full of water while everyone else was going thirsty."

Otter Girl's arm was bleeding from what looked like a knife wound. The cut was long but it didn't appear to be too deep.

"Did you cut her arm, Snake Girl?"

Snake nodded.

"Let me see your water pouch," Ocelot said.

Snake looked around at the group. Everyone looked angry. Reluctantly, she pulled her pouch from beneath her tunic. It was full of water. Beaver held up his empty pouch and turned it upside down to show it was empty. Mouse Boy and Squirrel Boy did the same.

The rest of the quest stared at Snake in disbelief. This was only the third day of their quest and already one of them had betrayed the quest.

Ocelot Girl said nothing. She stared with anger at Snake for quite some time. They had been close friends all of their lives. Now, Ocelot was not sure if, in a time of danger, Snake could be trusted.

"Elders, come with me," Ocelot said. "Guards, watch for coyotes. The rest of you, share whatever water Snake has. You can share with her or not. Whatever you decide. I don't care."

Mouse Boy joined Ocelot. Ocelot looked around. "Where is the elder from the second quest?" she asked. "An elder is still an elder, even if the quest is dissolved."

"Our elder was Squirrel Girl," Mouse said. "We never had time to choose another."

"Do you wish to choose one now?" Ocelot Girl asked. "I could use some more wisdom."

Mouse thought. Squirrel Boy was not nearly as level-headed as his sister was. Badger was a great archer, but not great dealing with people. Rat was a possibility, but he was pretty immature at times. Ferret and Ringtail already held official positions that precluded them from being an elder.

Mouse looked at Jaguarundi. Jaguarundi looked terrified. *What do I know about this girl?* Mouse wondered. *Almost nothing. Since she has been with us she's been quiet and polite and as helpful as possible. But I know so little about her. Still, to be wise enough to be quiet and helpful in a group of new people is a pretty good sign, isn't it?*

"Jaguarundi will be the elder for the second quest," Mouse said. This surprised everyone, especially Jaguarundi, but nobody seemed to disagree.

Ocelot and the two elders found a quiet place to discuss Snake's fate. It wasn't long before they came back and Ocelot called everyone together. Snake was sitting beneath a tree by herself.

"Snake has used deceit to benefit herself at the expense of the rest of the quest," Ocelot began. "She has betrayed herself during this sacred time, and she has done so after very little time. We are disappointed in her, especially those of us who have known her all of her life. We don't believe this offense is serious enough to execute her."

Execute her? Mouse thought. Ocelot must be crazy to even mention that kind of punishment this early in the quest!

Ocelot continued. "That leaves two choices. We can abandon her here and banish her from the tribe. Or she can become a servant to us, to serve us as a slave until such time as we believe she has redeemed her place in the tribe."

Everyone looked at Snake, but she kept her eyes to the ground.

"Does anyone have anything to add?" Ocelot asked.

"I do," Beaver said. "We already have an injured person to carry. We know there are dangerous animals all around. We can't handle an unwilling servant in our condition. That's my opinion as a guardian."

"What do you suggest then?" Ocelot asked.

"Let's let Snake decide," Beaver suggested. "If she will be our willing servant, she can stay. If not, she is banished."

Ocelot looked around. "Anyone else?" she asked. No one had anything to add. The elders looked like they agreed with this idea.

"I agree with Beaver, then," Ocelot said. She turned to Snake.

"Snake. What is your choice? Banishment or servitude?"

Snake looked up with anger. She stood and looked around at the quest. Then she bent down, scooped up a handful of dirt and pebbles and threw them at Ocelot. Without saying a word, she turned and headed into the night, alone.

Mouse now felt sick to her stomach. In all likelihood, Snake was going to die. Either from thirst or hunger or a coyote attack, she would probably die. And she was going to die alone in the wilderness. But why did she do what she did in the first place? What was she thinking? So what if she had one last drink of water? How much would that have helped as her friends began to die?

"Everyone back into the trees," Ocelot said. "When morning twilight comes, we'll start the search for water again."

Each member of the quest returned to their own hammocks, pondering betrayal and fear and death.

Mouse Girl hardly slept at all. At first light, the quest was up and ready to look for water. Everyone felt weak and achy. No one had any appetite at all. Ocelot was wise enough to not insist that anyone eat. Food would just use up more of their bodies' water.

They wandered down the dry ravine looking for anything that might promise moisture. The sun rose. The cold night air began to give way to another hot, dry day. The feeling of the warm sun made Mouse's stomach queasy. She felt like the warmth was stealing away the last bit of life she had.

The morning passed away and the air lost all trace of coolness. Rat was beginning to get dizzy. His skin was warm and dry. That was a bad sign.

They wandered downstream most of the afternoon, trying to stay in the shade. Mouse Girl saw that they were all suffering. No one spoke. The guards at the front and rear looked like they were sleep walking. The whole quest looked vulnerable to any kind of attack. Mouse wondered how much longer they could continue like this. It was not going to be long before someone collapsed.

And then they came to another little precipice, and at the bottom of the little cliff was a perfectly clear pool of water.

Ocelot Girl signaled for everyone to stay back. The guards kept watch while Beaver investigated the water. It was little more than an inch deep. It flowed from a small crack in the rocks, just above the flat rock on which it pooled, down into rocks and mud. Just a few feet away from the little puddle the trickle of water disappeared.

"There's a spring here at the base of these rocks," Beaver said. "It's flowing and it looks clean. Should I taste it?"

Ocelot Girl nodded. Beaver took a handful, sipped it, swished it around in his mouth, then spit it out.

"It tastes good," he said.

"Okay," Ocelot said. "Everyone drink a little. Not much. And don't get the water muddy. If it doesn't make us sick, then we're safe for a while."

Everyone took turns gathering some water. Then they headed up into the trees to rest and wait. No one had any ill effects, so they filled their water pouches.

“What about Snake?” Otter asked. “Should we try to find her and tell her we found water?”

Ocelot nodded. “Otter and Jaguarundi, take a guard and search for her. But be careful.”

The girls took Ringtail and left. They made a large circle around the pool. They called out for Snake and told her they had found water, but they received no reply. When they returned, Ocelot called everyone together.

“We’ll stay here for a day or two to drink and recover our strength. Beware of animals, but make sure we allow them to drink. We don’t need an animal fighting us to get to the water.

“Once we have all recovered, we’ll use this as our temporary camp. We’ll go out from here but only until we find water somewhere else. From now on, we don’t leave a known water supply behind until we find a new one. It will make us move slowly, but we’re in no hurry. We have a whole year.”

The quest stayed up in the trees unless they were gathering water. It was amazing to watch all the animals that came to the pool. Mouse had never seen so many different types of animal all in one day in her entire life. Deer, coyotes, a snake, raccoons, birds of all kinds, wasps and butterflies… they all came in broad daylight and none showed any fear.

In the days that followed they carried out Ocelot’s plan. They would venture out in the direction of their intended quest for a day or two and then come back to the pool if they didn’t find water. Three times they did this before they finally found another running spring. The new spring was muddier, but it got them farther from home and closer to their goal.

They never saw Snake Girl come to get water, but Mouse was hoping that she did. She hoped that Snake was still alive and out there somewhere. Maybe if she overcame her anger, there might be some way to reconcile with her.

Once or twice a guardian thought they saw something that might have been Snake Girl following them from a distance.

Whether this was real or whether it was wishful thinking, no one could say.

In spite of the loss of Snake, Mouse Girl was starting to enjoy the quest now. Everyone had a sense of camaraderie and they were no longer scared of dying. Even Rat Boy began to improve. His foot was swelling less and he seemed to be more alert to the outside world. He and Ferret were spending lots of time together.

One night, after finding a field of sunflower tubers, they even built a campfire to roast their harvest. The sunflowers had been a fortunate discovery. They were noticing that the plants they hoped to depend on for food had suffered due to the summer drought. They were going through their food supplies faster than Ocelot had hoped they would.

That evening, as the fire was burning low and the quest was returning to their tree beds, Mouse and Jaguarundi were on guard duty. Mouse was up on a low tree branch watching the starry horizon. Jaguarundi climbed up next to her.

"Notice anything?" Jaguarundi asked.

Mouse Girl shook her head. "Ocelot said she expects to be coming near another river soon. And where there is a flowing river, we can expect ghosts. She said that they would be unavoidable on this river, but we will have to make the crossing anyway."

"Have you ever seen one?" Jaguarundi asked.

Mouse Girl shook her head. "Never. Have you?"

"No. We had to pass through their lands as we traveled to your canyon, but our adults were very skillful in avoiding them and their trails," Jaguarundi explained. "But passing through their land is treacherous. Wild dogs and cats seem to swarm around them."

Mouse didn't like the sound of that. But it was so peaceful and beautiful out here in the starlight that it was easy to forget such fears for the time being.

"Can I ask you a question?" Jaguarundi asked.

"Yes," Mouse Girl said. "Remember, you don't have to treat me like a quest leader anymore. I'm just a regular kid, like you."

"Why did you choose me as an elder?" Jaguarundi asked. "I'm a total stranger. You don't know what kind of strange customs my tribe might have had."

"I didn't think of that," Mouse said. "But I've watched you closely the whole time you've been with us. You are hard-working and humble and generally helpful. Plus, our elders have a high enough regard for you that I was given special instructions to keep you safe."

Jaguarundi was quiet for a little while. "The instructions to keep me safe have nothing to do with how good a person I am. My tribe has knowledge that some of your elders and cult leaders want to explore. So, I wasn't even chosen as a good mate."

"I wondered about your mating possibilities, because you and your people seem a little large. No offense, but our elders like small and agile mates."

Jaguarundi made no reply. *She's a very quiet person*, Mouse thought.

"But it's interesting that you have some useful knowledge," Mouse Girl said. "What kind of knowledge?"

Jaguarundi shrugged. "They didn't tell me exactly what it was they were interested in. But evidently we have cult stories that your cult leaders want to learn. Whatever it is, they were pretty sure I have it."

"You'll have to tell us some of your stories sometime," Mouse said.

Jaguarundi nodded. "You might find them a little shocking. My tribe hunts much more than yours does. There's a lot of killing in our stories."

"How horrible," Mouse said. "No offense, though."

“You haven’t seen much of the world, have you?” Jaguarundi asked.

Mouse thought about this. She had never thought of the world as something to see. She had her people, her land, and her duty. What more could she want?

“I see the world every day,” Mouse answered.

Jaguarundi smiled. “Good answer,” she said. “By the way, thank you for choosing me as an elder. As an outsider, that meant a lot to me.”

“You can thank me by being a great elder,” Mouse said. “It’s a tough job.”

“No kidding,” Jaguarundi answered. “My first duty was to expel a tribal member.”

“You didn’t do that,” Mouse said. “She chose her own way. I hope she can find her way back.”

“Do you think it’s possible?” Jaguarundi asked.

“Of course,” Mouse said. “Be reliable. Work hard. Do what you’re told. It’s very easy.”

“Do you always do what you’re told?” Jaguarundi asked.

Mouse smiled. “Almost always.”

10 - Hunger

(In which the story of Scorpion and Goat is told, Snake reappears, and a river is crossed even as demons attack the quest.)

Over the following days, they slowly moved in the direction of the setting sun. Sometimes it would take them several days to find water, but they were getting better at it. Ferret was the one who began to recognize the exact plants to look for that would almost always indicate a water source. She could be high up above an arroyo and scan the entire dry bed to tell whether there was water or not without ever having to climb down. If the right plants were there, it was worth climbing down to investigate, even if the plants were sparse and dry. If the plants weren't there, it was wiser to keep searching elsewhere.

After some time, Ocelot had the quest begin to move slightly to the right of the setting sun in their search for water. On the first night of travel in this new direction, they did not find water but they saw another red light on the horizon. This time it was right in the direction they were traveling.

"How far away is that thing?" Beaver asked.

"I'm told they are not even in our world," Ferret said. "They cannot be reached."

A winter wind had blown in the previous afternoon. The air was now bitterly cold. It felt great to walk in, but Mouse Girl knew it was going to be uncomfortable to sleep that night. Hammocks in the trees were likely to be too exposed to the cold wind. The quest was going to have to sleep on the ground where there were more dangers.

As the sun rose, they began to search for a stream or a spring. Ocelot also had them looking for caves or even just large crevices. They were going to need all the shelter they could find now that winter had set in.

They were searching in a promising area when Ringtail froze and pointed up. It was a white-headed eagle.

"Amazing," Mouse Girl said.

"Are those things dangerous?" Jaguarundi asked.

"I don't think so," Mouse said. "They're much bigger than brush hawks, but they don't bother people."

"It looks big enough to carry a person away," Otter said. Otter was the smallest of the group.

A moment later it was gone.

"Think how much easier our quest would be if we could fly like that," Mouse said. Everyone gazed up for a while in wonder.

"Do you think anything preys on eagles?" Otter asked.

Mouse shrugged. "It would be hard. They're big and they're all talons and beak."

"Where do they live?" Jaguarundi asked.

"High up in trees," Mouse said. "We had a nesting pair raise a family near our canyon once. It was fun to watch. They're good parents. They care for their young, teach them to fly, and then send them off into the world."

"Just like me," Jaguarundi said.

Mouse and Otter laughed. "And now, just like all of us," Mouse said. "Who knows how many of us will ever return home? We might find the perfect land and stay there."

"That would be nice," Jaguarundi said. "To make our own land. But… there aren't enough boys on this quest to go around."

“We’ll have to find more,” Otter said.

“Who would you choose for a husband?” Jaguarundi asked Otter.

“Choose?” Otter said. “Ferret will tell me who to marry.”

“You know, I hadn’t thought of that,” Mouse said. “If we were to find a new land, and if we were to be the first generation of adults, Ferret and you would be in charge of pairing people together. Ferret could make Rat Boy marry her.”

Otter shook her head. “That’s not the way it works. No one gets to decide for themselves. Not even mystics.”

“How exactly does that work?” Mouse asked.

“Those are mysteries that only us mystics know,” Otter said mysteriously. “We determine the best mates, and then we recommend them to the cult, and then the elders must approve.”

“Right,” Mouse said. “But what’s your part in it? How do you make the determination of who will mate with whom?”

“Like I said, the mystics have their ways,” Otter said.

The other two girls stared at her, waiting for more information.

“Honestly, Ferret and I have only had a week or two to begin learning the process. I don’t know that much yet,” Otter admitted. “And seriously, even if we find a new land, we’ll have to send for some older adults to help us get started. There’s no way Ferret and I know enough to make it work.”

“You’re hiding something,” Mouse said. “I can tell.”

“Of course, I’m hiding something,” Otter said. “I’m a mystic. That’s our job. We do the things that no one else gets to see.”

“But why?” Mouse said. She really wanted to know what went on in those caves when the mystics were all alone. How would they determine with whom she should spend the rest of her life?

Otter Girl rolled her eyes. “You have to trust your mystics. We’re totally on your side.”

“Just like on the quest, we all totally have to trust our quest leader,” Mouse said. “Do you trust Ocelot?”

Otter Girl looked surprised at this question. “Of course,” she answered. “Don’t you?”

Mouse Girl looked thoughtful for a moment. “I really do. Even though I really wanted to lead my own quest, I’ve never doubted for a moment that Ocelot would be a great quest leader.”

“But what about Snake?” Jaguarundi asked. “Do you think Ocelot handled that situation well?”

Mouse Girl shook her head. The sick feeling in her stomach came back. “Snake saved my life. She attacked a coyote that would have killed me. She put herself in danger for me. And then she went and did something so childish like hoarding water? I just don’t get it.”

“How would your tribe have handled Snake?” Otter asked Jaguarundi.

“They would not have been as kind as you guys,” Jaguarundi said. “I assumed Ocelot was going to order her to be beaten and then exiled.”

“Beaten?” Mouse asked incredulously.

“As much as I miss my family, I really like your tribe,” Jaguarundi said. “I feel much safer here.”

That morning they found an actual stream. And on one side of the stream was a rocky cliff. The cliffs here were made

of red granite rock that crumbled into sharp pebbles. They were very unlike the limestone cliffs Mouse had grown up around. But they would offer shelter and protection just the same.

"This looks like a beautiful place to camp," Beaver said.

"It reminds me a little of home," Mouse added.

That night they had a campfire, snuggled up against the cliffs. The food was definitely running out far faster than planned. Ocelot had given orders for everyone to begin seriously conserving food. Instead of eating, they asked Ferret to tell a story.

"Tell us another one about Scorpion Man," Mouse asked.

Ferret Girl took a big drink of water. They were now drinking lots of water to make up for the shortage of food. It helped a little, but not much.

"Scorpion Man became famous for his sweet and tasty squash. Over the years, he was able to create yellow squash, green squash, orange squash, spotted squash, and striped squash. He became a master of plant breeding.

"But as he grew old, an enemy appeared. Goat Man visited the village of Scorpion Man. He was impressed by the food and the happy, healthy people. Many years of hard work had made Scorpion Man very prosperous. Goat Man brought goods to trade with Scorpion Man, but Goat Man came from a simple, desert land and he had very little to trade. In the end, Scorpion Man gave him many excellent squash seeds that grew well in arid climates and invited him to come back any time to enjoy Scorpion Man's hospitality again.

"Goat Man was a stupid and envious person. Instead of graciously accepting Scorpion's hospitality, he grew angry that Scorpion had accepted none of his items of trade. Goat

Man returned home and planted Scorpion's seeds. But he was too proud to follow all of Scorpion's directions. He was too lazy to go around and pull up all the wild squash. And so, when his squash grew, it was good for the first year. But by the second year it was all bitter and useless.

"Now, Goat Man had a daughter. Goat Girl was very pretty, but her heart had been infected with her father's anger and his stupid ideas. She had greatly enjoyed the good squash that Goat Man had brought back from Scorpion, but she was enraged when she tasted the squash of the second year. She assumed this was some sort of trick Scorpion was playing on them.

"Goat Man knew it was his own fault, but it didn't matter. He was still angry and jealous of Scorpion. And so in the spring of the next year he traveled back to Scorpion's village with a bag full of wild squash pollen and his beautiful daughter. By now, Scorpion was a very old man. Every day, Goat enjoyed the good food of Scorpion, and every night he snuck around among Scorpion's squash plants and ruined them with wild pollen. And while he was ruining Scorpion's squash, his beautiful daughter was flirting with the young men of Scorpion's village.

"Finally, after taking his fill of Scorpion's hospitality, Goat Man left one night without taking leave of his host. And with him, he took several young men and women who were foolish enough to believe that all the young people of Goat's home were as beautiful as Goat Girl. This angered Scorpion, but he was too old and feeble to pursue Goat Man. And besides, he thought, maybe it was a good thing to get rid of the foolish children of his village. Maybe the remaining people would be wiser and stronger.

“Scorpion Man died the next spring, still enjoying the wonderful squash he had made. But the next year, almost all of the squash was bitter again. The people of Scorpion’s village realized this must have been the work of Goat Man, and so they decided to be very careful in the future about whom they welcomed into their village and how many of their secrets they shared with their neighbors.

“They destroyed all the bitter squash plants and the next year they planted using old seeds they had saved for unexpected events such as this.

“Over the years, Scorpion’s people remained healthy and happy due to their hard work, but they also remained humble and quiet. They did not close themselves off from the rest of the world, but they had learned to be careful.”

Ferret Girl concluded her story by taking another big drink of water.

“So, just out of curiosity,” Beaver asked, “just before Jaguarundi and her people showed up as part of a peaceful delegation, we had that visit from the spies who were planning a raid on our village. How do we tell friends from enemies?”

“The elders seemed pretty sure the spies had bad intentions,” Ferret Girl answered. “They had the whole village on guard for days before the attack. On the other hand, Jaguarundi’s people seemed to be a serious trade delegation.”

“But what if Jaguarundi is some kind of spy also?” Beaver asked. “I don’t mean that in a bad way. But what if she was sent to change the course of our generations?”

Jaguarundi didn’t seem offended by this question. She seemed to be pondering it.

“In a way, that’s what a trade delegation is all about when it comes to trading children,” Ferret said. “But both sides do

it openly. We have a future in mind for our people and they do for theirs. We hope our trades will help us both."

Mouse and Beaver were on duty again that morning. The quest was nestled out of sight in the rocky cliffside. Beaver was hidden in the shadows, looking out over a large open plain. He nudged Mouse, who was watching in another direction. He pointed to the cliffs to his right. There was definite movement. It was something sizeable, but definitely not a coyote. Coyotes didn't climb.

Beaver went over to quietly investigate. Mouse watched in every other direction in case this was an ambush. Beaver was silently working his way up the wall and around a rocky outcropping. Suddenly, there was a yell and two bodies fell from the wall onto the rocks below. The sounds of struggle ensued. Mouse Girl leapt down and came face to face with Snake. Beaver was flat on his back on the ground. Mouse Girl tackled Snake. Snake was bigger and stronger than Mouse, but she was taken by surprise.

By the time Snake regained the advantage over Mouse, Beaver was back on his feet.

"Snake! Calm down! It's us!" he whispered in an urgent voice. "Your friends."

"I don't have any friends anymore," Snake said, letting go of Mouse. Mouse got out from underneath Snake and brushed herself off.

"We're still your friends," Mouse said. "We just had one bad time. That's all."

"One bad time? Lion piss!" Snake said. "I was thrown out of the tribe!"

"You're welcome back anytime," Mouse said.

"As a slave," Snake said. "As someone who stole from her friends when they were dying of thirst."

"We can get beyond that," Mouse said.

"That's true," Beaver added, trying to be encouraging. "Friendship is more important than anything you did in the past."

"No, you don't understand," Snake said. "I'm a coward and a thief. Years from now, everyone on the quest will remember that. And my children will be marked by my decisions."

She turned and walked away.

"Wait," Mouse said. Snake paused and looked back over her shoulder.

"You fought a coyote for me," Mouse said. "We'll remember that too."

Snake kept walking. Mouse and Beaver sat in silence for quite some time.

"At least we know she's staying near us," Beaver said.

Mouse nodded. "Yes. But she's alone and we're about to cross through the ghost lands. Can we keep her safe through that?"

Beaver shrugged.

That evening, as the entire quest awoke and prepared for the night's journey, Mouse and Beaver told Ocelot about their encounter with Snake. Ocelot made no comment, but simply took in their information.

Finally, she said, "Today's journey is going to be dangerous. We could use her courage and strength."

They began to hike, and Ocelot was moving fast. She seemed very nervous. It wasn't long before they came to the first ghost trail. Ocelot had told them they would be crossing

many of them tonight. They watched for any movement, they set up security, and they crossed. It was quick and efficient.

Several more ghost lights appeared on the horizon. This time they were mostly white, although two were red.

"The white ones are closer to our world," Ferret explained. "Try not to look at them. Keep your eyes and your mind on the quest. They can get inside you and draw you away."

That was all Mouse needed to hear to make her terror complete. And then, they heard the ghost dogs barking. Mouse had never heard a sound like that before. These were definitely not coyotes or wolves. They sounded totally different.

"They're demon dogs," Ocelot said. "And the cats as well. They live here in unnatural numbers. And they are always hungry."

"Coyote crap!" muttered Mouse. She was almost ready to throw up. Her heart was racing and every sound drew her instant attention. They crossed two more ghost trails and then they could finally hear the river.

They broke through a stand of underbrush and saw the river. Mouse was unbelievably happy to be halfway through this hellish journey. Once they crossed the river, they would be moving away from the ghosts. Beaver went to the riverbank to look for a good place to ford the river when the demon dogs appeared. There was an entire pack of them and they were horrible to behold. They were misshapen and mis-colored. Every one of them was different in a horrible way. And they all looked hungry!

Ringtail stepped forward with his atlatl, but the large lead demon dog did not seem the slightest bit intimidated. It looked like it was twice the size of a coyote, but it was fat and

brown. Mouse had never seen a bear, but she imagined it might look like that. As the dog stepped toward Ringtail, arrows flew. Two arrows struck the dog in the face. It yelped and retreated, but other dogs continued to move forward. They were hunting as a pack, and so Mouse and several others were watching their backs, waiting for the inevitable ambush.

Beaver had found an easy crossing. He actually walked across the river and, due to the drought, never even got his chest wet. The quest began to move into the river. The dogs were being held at bay.

It was then that Mouse heard a scream. It was behind them. In the dark, she heard a struggle and saw two dogs attacking something. Thinking of Snake, Mouse Girl ran in that direction. She grabbed Badger by the arm and pulled him along.

Ocelot Girl looked back and saw Mouse leaving her tactical position.

"Mouse!" Ocelot yelled. "Get back in position! Now!"

Mouse knew she was leaving a gap in the quest's defense. She signaled to Deer that she was leaving the group. Deer adjusted her position but that left her facing more dogs than she was comfortable with.

Mouse and Badger ran into the darkness. The demon dogs were dragging something away.

"Shoot them!" Mouse yelled. She drew her bow and aimed for the one demon's body, trying not to hit whatever it was dragging. Before she could notch a second arrow, Badger had released two perfectly aimed shafts. The demons panicked and abandoned their prey.

Mouse ran forward and found Snake lying on the ground. Her limbs and face were badly injured and Mouse had no idea

if she were alive. Mouse grabbed her by one wrist and dragged. Badger looked for demons in every direction. It seemed to take forever to get back in sight of the river, but when they arrived Ocelot and the rest of the quest were there, still holding their positions.

Ocelot said nothing, but her anger seemed to fade a little when she saw what Mouse was dragging. Without saying a word, Mouse walked into the river, dragging Snake's body behind her. Deer grabbed Snake's feet and together they floated her across the river.

The journey from the river back out of the ghost lands was less eventful. There were still several ghost trails to cross, and they heard many demon dogs barking, but they were not attacked again. They took turns carrying Snake, who still showed signs of life. It was almost morning before Ocelot felt safe enough to stop and give Snake a thorough examination.

She was bitten and bruised in many places. The dogs had tried, but failed, to tear open her throat. It looked likely that she would survive. Water was plentiful this close to the river, and they easily found a deep, granite ravine in which to take shelter. Even more welcome was the presence of a number of pecan trees in the area. Keeping careful guard, they gathered as many pecans as they could in the daylight.

That first day, Snake remained unconscious. The second day, she woke up and trouble started. She tried to get up and leave. Fortunately, she couldn't stand due to the seriousness of her injuries and her loss of blood. She passed out instead. The next time she woke up, Mouse was watching her.

"Why did you save me?" Snake asked. "You should have let me die."

“Shut up,” Mouse said. “We decided letting you go was too little punishment. Making you stay as part of the quest and face your failure will be much more painful for you.”

Snake stared at her with hatred in her eyes.

“So, unless you want to bring dishonor upon your entire family, you have no choice but to get better and see this quest through to its completion,” Mouse said. “And if you really feel like you must die, then you can die by protecting the rest of us.”

The logic of this punishment slowly made its way into Snake’s angry mind. She decided to accept it. She hated what they were asking her to do, but she hated herself for betraying the quest, and so this all made sense. Plus, it was a way to keep her dishonor from affecting her family. Snake went back to sleep, at peace for the first time in many days.

11 - The Sleeping Death

(In which an abandoned village is found, including a cave with mystic knowledge.)

Ocelot Girl had them spend several days caring for Snake and collecting food. No one felt comfortable in this place. They could hear the demon dogs bark in the distance and the ghost lights were still in view. But the granite cliffs were very steep and nothing bothered them.

Ferret and Mouse worked hard to clean Snake's wounds. They were very deep and everyone feared they would become infected. Ferret made a strong smelling poultice of baldcypress cones and kept this against all of Snake's injuries. It made Snake smell like a pine forest, but it also kept her from moving around much since she had bulky bandages tied all over her body. She spoke to no one. Even during the painful process of changing bandages and cleaning her wounds, she said nothing, silently enduring the pain.

It felt like deep winter now, but Ocelot would not allow a fire this close to the ghost lands. The quest became anxious to move on. The long, cold, winter nights seemed to go on without end, and the quest slept huddled together. Even the night guards often stayed pressed against the rest of the group for warmth while they watched for approaching enemies.

As soon as Ocelot was confident Snake could walk, they left. The food stores had been somewhat replenished with pecans, walnuts, and deep roots that had not yet been touched by the cold. They crossed a few more ghost trails and saw more of the white lights, but they saw and heard fewer signs of the ghosts. The land continued to rise slowly and the hills became

steeper. Water became more scarce, but they were fortunate to find some every day.

The land was now completely different from that to which they were accustomed. The crumbling granite rocks of the area covered every streambed with red and pink gravel. The water seemed clearer and cleaner here. They discovered a type of nut tree they had never seen before, similar to a pecan or walnut, but different. Unfortunately, it was late enough in the winter that most of the nuts were either rotten or already cracked and eaten by some animal. However, the land was filled with cactus and some of its fruit was still available.

They climbed the granite hills and found caves everywhere. These were not the narrow and deep caves of their home; these were formed by giant granite slabs falling over each other. They were roomier than the ones back home. Unfortunately, this was not a good thing in the winter. The cold wind blew through the caves without mercy. The quest huddled as far back in the caves as they could.

One day after following a little stream, they came upon a cave opening much like all the others they had seen in the area. It had been a long night of traveling, so the quest quickly moved in, established security, and began to fall asleep. However, an odd, mildewy smell lingered in the air. It bothered Otter enough that she moved from the innermost, and therefore warmest, position in the group of huddled questers to the outermost and windiest position. No one was sleeping well.

Eventually Ocelot decided to search the cave to find the source of the unpleasant smell. As the sun rose higher in the sky, there was light shining through various openings in the ceiling of the cave. Ocelot and Beaver crawled farther and

farther in. They found a small opening that led deeper into the earth. Ocelot squeezed in and found herself in a deep darkness. She felt around to see how deep the cave went when her hand rested upon something odd. She pulled her hand back and quickly exited the little cave opening.

"What's wrong?" Beaver asked.

"There's something in there," Ocelot said. "I think it's a dead body."

"A person?" Beaver asked.

"Yes," Ocelot answered as she backed away from the opening. She looked around and realized this cave had signs of human activity. They were in someone's home. Or, what had been someone's home.

They rejoined the group and explained what Ocelot had found. Some of the group wanted to leave immediately. Others thought if someone had lived here, maybe it was a safe place.

"How safe can it be if there's a dead person here?" Badger asked.

"Can we explore the cave with torches?" Ferret asked.

"No," Ocelot said. "This place may be dangerous. We're getting away from here as soon as the sun sets. And everybody be careful with the water we collected from this stream. Drink as little as possible."

"What about a fire?" Otter asked. "A fire sounds good."

"Okay. We'll do a fire, especially if that means we can stay out near the edge of the cave," Ocelot agreed.

Badger quickly got the fire going. While some of the quest was sent out to gather firewood, Ferret managed to catch Ocelot while she was separated from the rest. They were in a low part of the cave so Ferret had to crawl to get to Ocelot. In

the firelight, and at such close quarters, Ferret's face was more disturbing than usual.

"I'd like to explore the cave while we're here," Ferret said.

"I said no," Ocelot said angrily. "There could be some horrible disease back there."

"Someone ought to see if this was simply a small, temporary shelter or if it was a village," Ferret answered. "We might learn something."

"What does it matter?" Ocelot asked.

"The mystics record their knowledge in caves," Ferret explained. "This may be a lost village. And if there is disease back there, I'm the one to send. I've got nothing much left to lose."

Ocelot thought about this. "Okay, but take Otter with you. Keep her back as far as possible. Anything dangerous is for you to face. This is your idea."

Ferret smiled.

A few minutes later, she and an incredulous Otter were crawling back to find the body.

"Why are we doing this?" Otter asked. "I don't want to see dead people."

"You're a mystic," Ferret answered. "This is your job."

Ferret reached the narrow cave entrance and thrust her torch in. Sure enough, there was the dead body of a Bird person laying there. It was an old, dry body. Ferret could not tell if it was male or female. She tried to see beyond the body, but the torchlight was blinding her to the dark cave beyond.

"I'm going to go in," Ferret said. "You stay here."

She squeezed in, trying to avoid the body as much as possible. Once inside, she realized she was in a deep and long cave. She could not stand, but she could walk if she hunched

over enough. As her eyes adjusted to the dim torchlight, she saw what looked like a typical home. Including two other bodies.

"There are more dead people in here," Ferret called out to Otter.

"Disgusting," Otter answered.

"I'm going to try to see if I can tell why they died," Ocelot said.

She bent down to examine one of the bodies. The body at the entrance of the cave was a rather large Bird person. The one she was now observing looked like a child, maybe. There were no wounds or signs of violence. The face looked awful, but maybe that's the way dry and dead bodies always looked. All three faces looked the same. The bodies were all lying down as if asleep. Strange, Ferret thought.

Then she saw something important.

"Hey, Otter," she called back. "One of these people has a rock pouch. And there's a rock in it. Like ours."

Otter poked her head in the cave entrance. "You're kidding," she said.

Ferret lifted up a pouch from one of the adult bodies and pulled out a hand-sized, triangular rock.

"That one was a mystic," Otter said.

"We have to explore this cave," Ferret said.

Otter was already inside. The two young women began searching the walls of the cave until they found a very narrow crack in one side wall.

"This is it!" Ferret said.

"Are you going in?" Otter asked.

"How can we not go in?" Ferret replied.

She dropped to her stomach and then had to turn on her side to squeeze up and into the crack. Her arms were ahead of her, feeling the way. She had to arch her body backward to move deeper into the crack, but her arms began to detect more room ahead of her. She wriggled her way deeper into the darkness. Finally, she reached another chamber.

"Hand me a torch," she called back to Otter. Otter reached in as far as she could with a torch. Ferret grabbed it and turned to the walls of the chamber.

"This is amazing!" she said.

"What is it?" Otter asked.

"You've got to see this," Ferret said. "Get in here!"

Otter threw her torch in the crack and wriggled her way in. When she reached Ferret, she stood up and looked where Ferret was looking. There were lines etched on the walls.

"Family records!" Otter said.

"And there's lots of them," Ferret answered. "This was a bigger and older village than ours."

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As the sun set, Ocelot began to worry about Ferret and Otter. They had been gone for a long time.

"Do we send someone back to find them?" Beaver asked.

"Are you crazy?" Badger said. "If something bad has happened to them, why would we want to go and get killed too?"

Ocelot rolled her eyes. "Mouse told me you were a competent warrior, Badger. Why are you so afraid?"

"I'm a warrior. I'll face hawks and demon dogs, but that cave is just plain scary. You can't fight stuff like that."

"Like what?" Ocelot asked.

“I don’t know. A curse maybe. Some horrible disease. Something killed somebody back there and I don’t want to find out what it was,” Badger explained.

“Okay then, you stay here and guard the cave from demon dogs,” Ocelot said. “Beaver and I are going to find Ferret.”

Beaver looked nervous but he followed Ocelot. Ocelot was also afraid of this place, but as quest leader she could not let her fear stop her from doing her job. If there was a curse or a demon or a disease back here, she was going to face it.

Ocelot and Beaver made their way into the cave that held the three bodies. They also recognized this cave as a home.

“The girls aren’t in here,” Beaver said.

Ocelot looked around. “They’re mystics,” she said. “They’re here. We just can’t see them.”

Ocelot yelled out, “Ferret! Otter!”

There was no reply.

Ocelot yelled louder. “Ferret!” She moved around the cave. “Ferret!”

Finally, there was a small sound. “We’re here!”

Ocelot ran to the wall where the sound came from. She found the crack in the wall. “Are you there?”

“Yes!” said Otter.

“What did you find?” Ocelot asked.

“History! Lots of it!” Otter said.

“Like stories and family lines?” Ocelot asked.

“Lots and lots,” Otter answered.

“I’m happy to hear that, but I want you out of there as soon as possible,” Ocelot said.

“Why?” Otter asked.

“These people died in their sleep,” Ocelot answered. “We’re not sleeping here.”

“I think Ferret is going to want to stay,” Otter said.

“No. We are leaving now.”

There was silence. After a moment or two, Ferret’s voice came through the crack.

“We’re coming out,” she said.

Once they were all together again by the fire, Ocelot gave her orders.

“I don’t want to be here whenever whatever killed those people comes back,” she said. “If we find water tonight, dump out all of this water. Dust off your clothes. Bring nothing with you from this place.”

This speech only served to increase Badger’s terror. He was packed and ready to go. As everyone else was packing, Ferret approached Ocelot again.

“I have to come back here,” she said.

“We’ll remember this spot,” Ocelot said. “Someday, when the quest is safely somewhere else, we’ll talk about sending you back.”

Ferret nodded. That was enough to satisfy her for now.

The quest headed out of that little valley in total darkness. After a few hours of walking, they found another stream. They dumped their water downstream and refilled their pouches.

“What did you find in there?” Mouse Girl asked.

“A history many times longer than the history of our village,” Ferret said. “These were an ancient people. An ancient family. And I don’t think they were closely related to us.”

“How long ago did they die?” Mouse asked.

“Not long ago,” Ferret said. “I was trying to work that out when Ocelot called me back. They had been here for hundreds of generations.”

“Someday you’ll have to tell me how you figure that stuff out,” Mouse said.

“It’s not that hard,” Ferret said. “I only know a little. There’s much more for me to learn. And when I do, I want to go back to that cave.”

Mouse nodded.

“And Mouse, if I die on this quest, tell the mystics about that cave,” Ferret said. “I think it’s important.”

“I will,” Mouse said.

It must have been the rush to leave the caves and the fear of so many of the quest members that led them to make a crucial mistake. They came upon a camp of Bear people before they realized what they were doing. And these Bear people had demon dogs.

The dogs started barking. Ocelot looked around and realized they were traveling in a stream bed and had only one way to exit, and that was the obvious path downstream. She ordered the quest to run. The demon dogs were fast, but the quest managed to make it away from the stream and up into the trees. However, they were trapped by the demon dogs, who kept barking up the trees they were in. The demons were going crazy.

Mouse knew they were safe from the demon dogs. They simply had to wait until they got bored and went away. But then the Bear people came to investigate what the dogs were barking at. The quest climbed as high as they could into the trees.

Two giant men appeared and yelled at the dogs.

“Stupid animals!” one man said. “Why did you wake us up?”

“They have something up in the trees,” the other man said.

The men stared up in the trees. The quest remained perfectly still.

“Do you see anything?” one man asked.

“No,” said the other.

But the demon dogs kept up their excited barking. The men kept searching the trees.

“Hold on,” one man said. “I see something, I think.”

The second man joined him. They stared into the dark tree where Badger was.

“Up there,” one man said. “There’s something on that limb. Maybe a raccoon.”

“Sounds like dinner,” the other man said. “Let’s bring some light and see if we can shoot it down.”

The men ran away. The dogs hesitated and then followed. The second the dogs ran, Ocelot dropped from the tree. The rest of the quest followed. They ran as fast as they could. They knew the dogs would not be far behind them.

Ocelot pointed to a large grove of trees just over a small rise in the land. They ran to the trees. The fastest of them had just leapt into the branches when they heard the demon dogs barking again. The demons had found their trail.

But Ocelot knew that demon dogs could not follow a trail that went from tree to tree. She had run to this grove because she knew they could travel in the canopy and never be found by the demons. Quickly and silently, the quest climbed as high as they could and nimbly jumped from the branches of one tree to another. They traveled from branch to branch and were deep into the grove when the Bear men finally found their dogs.

The Bear men and demon dogs searched for quite some time but never found another trace of the Bird people.

12 - Wildfire

(In which the quest survives a wildfire and discovers an almost abandoned village in which one boy remains.)

By morning, the quest had stealthily moved as far away from their encounter with the Bear men as they could. Ocelot felt terrible. She had let fear and hurry affect her decisions. She could have gotten her people killed. The feeling of failure was not something Ocelot was accustomed to. She didn't like the fear and doubt trying to take root in her mind. She didn't like the physical sensation of weakness that was lingering in her body. But she also would not let this failure conquer her. They had survived.

The cold wind felt good on Mouse's face. The feeling of being outdoors was wonderful after that horrible cave. Even running from the demon dogs had been better than sitting in that cave, breathing in death. *What was it that Ferret found that was so interesting?* Mouse thought. Everyone else was traumatized by that cave, but Ferret was the exact opposite. She and Otter had been talking together constantly ever since they came out of there.

Then, one morning, as everyone was going to sleep, it wasn't just Ferret and Otter talking excitedly, Jaguarundi had joined them. Mouse was on guard duty, but she found it hard to focus on maintaining her watchfulness of the outside world because the three girls were talking and waving their hands and, for some reason, playing with sticks. Mouse was too far away to hear the conversation, but it looked interesting. By the time Mouse's watch was over, the girls had finally settled down and were asleep.

Mouse was awakened by Ocelot the next morning. She followed Ocelot to where Beaver was on watch. The sun was setting and the wind was blowing hard. As they looked out over the rolling hills, the grass was taller than they were and it was being whipped about violently by the wind. In the distance, dark storm clouds loomed.

"Look over there," Ocelot said, pointing. She was looking directly into the wind. Far, far away was a small plume of smoke. Mouse's stomach sank. Wildfire! And they were in its path. Mouse looked around at the campsite. They were not in a deep ravine, as they usually preferred to be. Instead, they were in a long gulley surrounded by prairie grass. They would not survive a fire here.

"Where do we go?" Mouse asked.

"Downstream," Ocelot said. As the quest assembled, she spoke to them all.

"We have plenty of time to find a safer place. But we don't want to run into Bear people or coyotes unexpectedly. Every other animal is going to be panicking soon. We need to remain calm."

Quietly and swiftly they made their way downstream. Occasionally, Ocelot would send a scout to higher ground to watch the progress of the fire. As it came closer, they realized it was huge. There was no way they could outmaneuver it. They kept up their stealthy but quick movement. Each time they came to a slightly deeper ravine, they would search for a cave or even a cliff that might give them some shelter. But they were in a very flat area and there was no shelter to be found.

The fire drew closer. They saw a herd of deer running the same direction they were going. The air soon became clouded with smoke. Mouse was ready to panic, but Ocelot was doing

a good job of keeping the entire quest focused on their task of moving quickly, maintaining security, and searching for shelter.

It was then that Mouse spotted the coyotes. They were running wildly. The coyotes noticed the quest just as Ocelot ordered everyone to stop and remain still. Two of the beasts seemed to take an interest in these little people out in the open. They circled and drew closer. The quest formed a defensive position. And then a huge gust of smoky wind swept over them and the coyotes fled.

The smoke lingered over them. The scouts could no longer see where the fire was due to the smoke. Finally, the ravine was growing deeper and steeper. There was little water in it, though. Ocelot finally allowed the group to begin running. She could not imagine any creature that could be more dangerous than the fire was right now.

The sunlight faded and the smoke grew thicker. Mouse ran down the ravine, trying to see ahead of her. Suddenly, there was no ground beneath her feet. She had run over a small precipice. She screamed and, a moment later, hit the ground hard. She tumbled and her quiver and bow clattered away from her. She was flat on her face in a shallow pool of water, just a finger's width deep.

Her scream had been enough warning to keep the rest of the quest from making the same mistake she did. Mouse tried to get up, but her left ankle was hurt. She crawled back to the bottom of the steep drop-off. The rest of the quest was already climbing down. Ocelot examined the area and decided this was the best place for them to try to avoid the fire. A small spring made a little waterfall that trickled downstream.

Ferret checked Mouse for any serious injuries. She decided that, other than the ankle and two sore wrists and some major scrapes on her legs, Mouse was fine.

"Can you get my quiver and bow?" Mouse said.

Ferret nodded and searched the streambed, but due to the smoke, she found nothing. The rest of the quest searched for any shelter better than the waterfall itself. With the smoke clouding the entire area, they also found nothing. Satisfied that they would probably survive here, Ocelot arranged the group at the base of the little waterfall in the driest place they could find. There they sat and waited.

The air grew thicker. The smoke began to burn Mouse's eyes and throat. Soon she could no longer see the entire quest. But since they were all within reach of one another, there was no fear of anyone getting lost. Time seemed to pass very slowly. As the air became harder and harder to breathe, Mouse wondered if they might die here, poisoned by the smoke.

She tried to stay calm and breathe in only shallow breaths. She put her head between her knees and concentrated on relaxing. She imagined being back home with her family. She tried to remember the details of the little path that ran from their cave down to the stream. In her mind she pictured the path and imagined all the little plants growing alongside it. She named the plants as each one came to mind. She imagined picking each edible plant, then smelling and tasting it.

When she arrived at the stream, in her imagination, she sat on the bank and watched the clear water flow by. She watched the water plants waving in the flowing water and an occasional fish darting by. Finally she was calm. Her breathing was shallow and slow. She fell into a sleep-like

trance. She had no idea whether she would live or die, but she was at peace.

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Hours passed. After what seemed like an entire day, the air began to grow clearer. Beaver nudged Mouse on the shoulder and told her to wake up. She had a horrible headache. Ocelot had them search the area again. The sun was low, indicating it was late afternoon. Mouse gently got up and found she could walk on her sore ankle. She found her bow, but the wood had split.

"Coyote crap!" she said. Badger came over and looked at the ruined weapon.

"We'll have to make you a new one," he said.

Mouse began to gather her arrows. As she was reaching out for the last and most distant arrow, she looked up and saw a coyote staring back at her. Her heart skipped a beat. The animal was curled up and seemed to be taking shelter just as the quest had been. The coyote looked at her and sniffed. It then stood up and trotted away into the hazy air.

"Did you see that?" Mouse called back to Badger.

"What?" Badger asked.

"A coyote was resting here," Mouse said. "It ran away."

They returned to warn the group of the coyote's proximity.

Ocelot nodded. "Let's hope it's too scared of the smoke to care about hunting just now," she said.

Just then, Otter called out.

"Over here!" she yelled. "There's a cave."

There was indeed a cave. And it was an inhabited one, or it had been until very recently. The firepit outside the cave

entrance still had warm coals. Ocelot called in, but received no reply.

Going in someone else's cave was considered impolite, so they waited outside, assuming the inhabitants had left due to the fire and would soon return. It was a nice camp, Mouse thought. Smaller than their own home canyon, but pretty and reasonably well-sheltered.

Sentries were set out and their water supplies were replenished. The sun set but no one had returned. Ocelot was torn between continuing their journey or staying to meet this tribe. They might have useful information for them. In any event, this tribe was much closer to the quest's destination than Ocelot's tribe. They were sure to know more about the land to which the quest was traveling.

By the time night had completely set in, Ocelot was ready to leave. They had no guarantee that these people were coming back. However, at the urging of Ferret and Otter she agreed to let one person go into the cave and see what mysteries it might hold. Otter went in.

Moments later, Otter was back at the entrance. "There's a boy in here," she said. "He's very sick."

Ferret went in and helped Otter examine the boy. The boy was shivering, but could not be roused. This discovery convinced Ocelot they had to stay. Surely someone was coming back for the boy.

The quest continued to wait outside and periodically sent someone in to check on the sick boy. The night passed without incident. By morning, the boy was unchanged. In fact, it was three days before the boy showed any improvement. He opened his eyes and looked at Otter, but said nothing.

As the days passed, the quest gradually searched more and more of the cave. The winter food and medicine stores of these people were full. All that was missing were the people themselves and the possessions they probably would have carried for a short trip.

"Is it possible they tried to flee the fire and were killed?" Mouse asked Ocelot.

Ocelot shrugged. "Why would they leave this place, which looks pretty safe from fire, and go out onto the plains in the path of the fire?"

"Maybe they knew a safer place?" Mouse suggested.

In any event, no one had come back for the boy. Finally, Otter came out of the cave and reported that she had gotten the boy to talk.

"He wants to know where his parents are," Otter said.

"Tell him we don't know," Ocelot said.

"I've already told him that. He says he was sick and his mother was caring for him, and that's the last thing he remembers," Otter said.

Ocelot went back into the cave with Otter.

"What's your name, boy?" Ocelot asked.

"Zarigueya," the boy said in a weak voice.

Ocelot turned to Otter. "Isn't Zarigueya a demon?" she asked.

Otter nodded. "In some stories," she said. "In other stories it's just an opossum."

"How long have you lived here?" Ocelot asked the boy.

The boy shrugged.

"Have you lived here all your life or did you come here recently?" Ocelot asked.

"Always," the boy said.

Ocelot turned to Otter again. “What do you think? Have people lived here long?”

Otter nodded. “Ferret and I have looked around. People have been here for many seasons. We haven’t found any evidence of mystics, so we can’t say how long exactly, but there are rock chips several inches deep in the place where they made arrowheads.”

The boy continued to get better, but he had no more information for them. They guessed he was about five years old. The boy's stories indicated that there had been a village of people here, not just his mother and father.

“How long do we wait for his parents to come back?” Beaver asked Ocelot.

Ocelot shrugged. Two days later, they were still waiting. Everyone was restless. But they didn’t want to kidnap this boy from his family if they were coming back. And he was too young to leave behind. That’s when Otter became ill.

13 - The Sickness

(In which the quest is struck by a debilitating illness and the second quest is reformed.)

Otter's illness began with a fever and general body aches. Soon, she was bed bound and her fever grew more intense. Ferret was the next to get sick. She had the fever and aches, plus vomiting. Ocelot ordered everyone to keep their distance from the girls, but it was too late. Rat was the next to fall ill.

Ocelot was frustrated and fearful that everyone was going to get sick. And since only Zarigueya had recovered so far she was unsure how likely it was that all of her quest would survive this sickness. Mouse was the one who came up with a solution to this problem. She found Ocelot when they could speak privately.

"You should take the people who are not sick and continue the quest," Mouse said. "The sick ones can stay here and care for Zarigueya. Spring is coming soon and you should be in the land we are seeking as soon as new plants sprout. Otherwise, we won't know what kind of harvest to anticipate."

"Abandon the sick ones here?" Ocelot asked.

"Not abandon," Mouse said. "Let them heal and care for the boy. You can come back for them once you have found the camp you want. And this way, if the boy's people come back, we'll have someone here to learn from them."

Ocelot thought about this. "I don't like to divide up the quest," she said. "It has been dangerous out here. We've needed every bow we have."

“But we’re not accomplishing anything sitting here,” Mouse said.

Ocelot nodded. “Who should stay?”

“Ferret, of course,” Mouse said. “She’s still very sick. I think Otter is actually getting better. Rat will stay. And I need to stay.”

“Why you?” Ocelot asked.

“The fever started in me this morning,” Mouse said. “I’ll probably be useless by tomorrow.”

“So, just you three?” Ocelot asked.

“I’d like to have Badger,” Mouse said. “He can guard us. And staying here will give him the chance to make me a new bow. I’d prefer that you take Snake. She still seems dangerously unpredictable to me. Having her sit around doing nothing can’t be a good idea. She needs to get moving.”

Ocelot agreed. She called together the quest and explained Mouse’s plan. Ringtail shook his head.

“That won’t work,” he said. “You’re leaving behind too few people to set up security. Plus, one of them is already sick. You’d be leaving them here defenseless. I’m a guard. I should stay, too.”

“And I have been told to stay with Mouse,” Jaguarundi said. “You remember that.”

Ocelot thought for a moment. “Is it just a coincidence that almost the entire second quest has now requested to stay behind?”

Ocelot looked at Squirrel Boy. He was the only member of the second quest who had not yet asked to stay. Unfortunately, he couldn’t think of a good reason to make such a request.

“I think you are correct,” Ocelot said. “Both quests have trained to work as a unit. If we divide up, we should divide up in that way.”

Mouse Girl couldn’t believe her ears. She was being given her quest back! The only problem was that she was feeling dizzy and nauseated. She could not wait to be able to sit down and rest.

The first quest quickly got ready to leave. Even Otter, as sick as she still was, was ready to go. They planned to leave that evening..

“How much farther do you think it will be until you are there?” Mouse asked, as Ocelot gave her final instructions.

“This land of granite is supposed to be the midpoint of the journey,” Ocelot said. “I expect the granite to end and then we’ll travel in the direction of sunset to find the river valley of the rainbow shells. The boy here says he’s never heard of such a place. But we will find it if it’s out there.”

Mouse hoped they would find it. And she hoped she would live to hear about it. Right then she felt like she might not. The illness lingered with her for two weeks. Squirrel and Badger got it, too. No one died, but it was the worst thing Mouse had ever experienced. Without her friends bringing her water and making her drink thin pinole soup, she might not have survived.

By the third week, everyone had almost recovered. Little Zarigueya was working like part of the quest. He wavered between extreme sadness from being separated from his family to enjoying having a new group of friends.

Jaguarundi never got ill. That gave her and Ferret days and days to sit together and work on their plans. It wasn’t until Mouse was feeling good enough to walk that she saw what they

were working on. When she saw it, she still had no idea what they were doing. They were attaching sticks together with rope, but they were doing it in a complicated way that allowed the sticks to move freely.

“Is that a new weapon?” Mouse asked. “Like an atlatl or bow?”

‘No,” Ferret said, “It’s more like an arm. We’re trying to make it work like an elbow.”

Mouse was still too sick and tired to ask any more questions. Why they wanted to make an arm was beyond her brain’s current foggy abilities. That night, Mouse felt good enough to eat solid food. She was sick of the pinole soup. While she was slowly eating, Badger sat down next to her.

“Once you’re better, we can go on our quest, right?” he asked, very excited about this prospect.

Mouse Girl had been thinking about this herself. “I don’t know,” she said. “Ocelot never mentioned that. And the elders certainly didn’t want us to do that.”

Badger looked disappointed. “You’re kidding, right? We’ve been left here while the first quest goes to complete their mission. What else are we going to do?”

“Ocelot said she would send for us after they found the valley of rainbow shells,” Mouse said. “She expects us to be here.”

“We have a chance to explore an entirely new area for our tribe, and you want to just sit here?” Badger asked.

“What was the quest?” Jaguarundi asked.

“We were to go towards the sunset with the first quest, but when we got beyond the granite hills, we were to turn left, while they continued on,” Mouse explained.

“And what was your goal, then?” Jaguarundi asked.

“There was a land of yellow dirt and wide canyons,” Mouse said. “We were to explore it.”

“You guys really are losers,” Jaguarundi said. “The first quest gets rainbow shells and you get yellow dirt.”

This insight was all Mouse needed to get mad again about her unfair treatment. She decided they were going. And, she figured, it wouldn’t take Ocelot much time to realize where they had gone.

The very next day they were ready to go. Badger had made a serviceable bow for Mouse. It wasn’t beautiful, but it was strong. Little Zarigueya was excited about this adventure. They decided to leave the food stored in the caves untouched. After experiencing so much sickness, they didn't want to expose themselves to anything else from this village if they could avoid it.

As the sun set, they climbed out of the ravine and onto the burnt ground of the grassland. Everything was black as far as they could see, with the exception of an occasional cactus or persimmon tree. The grasses would return with the rains in spring, but for now, there was no cover at all under which the Bird people could hide. On this open plain, they felt vulnerable and exposed. Nevertheless, Mouse decided they would travel across this burnt landscape tonight. It would allow them to move quickly. And, she was hoping, with no food or shelter on the plain, there should be few animals here and, therefore, few predators.

This plan worked well for three nights. On the third night, clouds appeared on the horizon of the clear, cold sky. As the line of clouds moved closer, Mouse saw lightning flashes within them. A strong, moist wind began to blow. There was something about the wind and the oncoming storm that made

Mouse feel elated. She also knew they were probably going to have to find cover.

"Should we hope to find some kind of shelter as we go forward, or should we turn back to that last ravine?" Squirrel asked.

"Let's head back," Mouse said. "I'd like a fire going before this cold rain hits."

The quest turned back. The wind blew harder and the storm clouds grew dramatically in the sky. Their hearts were racing, and they began to run. The rain was beginning to fall as they reached the partial shelter of the ravine. Thunder occasionally shook the ground. Badger and Squirrel quickly gathered whatever dry wood they could find and began to get the fire going. And then the storm moved over them.

The thunder was so loud it was deafening. Each unpredictable thunder blast resulted in an uncontrollable response of terror in Mouse. And she was handling it better than little Zari. After two or three of the loudest strikes, he was now huddled in a small heap on the ground.

The cold rain drenched them and quenched the fire. The thunder had everyone paralyzed with fear. Rationally, Mouse knew there was little to fear. But her body was terrified anyway. It was a long, cold storm. It seemed to go on forever. And then, it was over.

Shivering with cold, Badger and Squirrel went back to work on the fire. Zari snuggled against Ferret and Mouse, trying to get warm. Rat, Jaguarundi, and Ringtail set up security. They were cold and wet, but very glad the thunder was gone.

Before long the fire was going and those not on guard huddled around it.

“Tell us a story,” Mouse said to Ferret.

“I know one that concerns thunder,” Ferret said. “It’s about Scorpion Daughter.

“Scorpion Daughter was sent out by her father to deliver squash one day. The journey was long, and on the way home, Scorpion Daughter was caught in a thunderstorm. The rain and wind were uncomfortable, but what really bothered Scorpion Daughter was the thunder. There was no reason for it. Rain gave water to the earth. Wind carried seeds all over the land. But what good was thunder?

“The thunder continued and it made Scorpion Daughter run for cover underneath some large rocks. But even in the shelter of the rocks, the thunder was terrifying as it shook the land. Finally, Scorpion Daughter grew angry. She did not want to be afraid anymore. She wanted the thunder to stop.

“She looked out from under the rocks and saw the thunderclouds high above the cliffs of the canyon she was in. And so, Scorpion Daughter decided to climb the cliffs to get up to where the thunder was coming from.

“She climbed and climbed as the thunder clapped and boomed. Finally, at the top of the cliff she saw a pack of coyotes. They were running wildly, terrified of the thunder. Scorpion Daughter continued to walk toward the clouds. She was going to tell the thunder exactly how angry she was. But then, she stopped and wondered. If the coyotes were running away, maybe the purpose of the thunder was to hide something. Maybe there was a great treasure and the thunder was scaring creatures away when they got too close.

“As if to convince her even more of this thought, Scorpion Daughter came across a wolf lying in a ditch with its paws over

its face. It was so scared of the thunder that it took no notice at all of Scorpion Daughter.

"Scorpion Daughter continued to walk toward the clouds. She walked and walked until the storm went away. But for all of her searching, she found no treasure. Tired of searching, she continued home. Once home, she told Scorpion Man of her adventure, how terrifying and annoying the thunder was, how all the animals cowered from it, and of her idea that the thunder might be guarding treasure.

"You found no treasure?" Scorpion Man asked.

Scorpion Daughter shook her head.

"And yet while the wolves ran and the coyotes cowered, you were not afraid?" Scorpion Man asked.

"Oh, no. I was very much afraid. I wanted to fall to the ground and cry I was so afraid,' Scorpion Daughter said.

"But you kept walking?" Scorpion father asked.

"Yes," Scorpion Daughter answered.

"Then you did find the treasure," Scorpion Man said. "Inside of you is something more courageous than any wolf and more curious than any coyote. That is the treasure you will always carry with you."

The group sat in silence for a while. Zari reached up and touched Ferret's cheek.

"What happened to your face?" he asked.

"I had a sickness when I was a child," Ferret answered.

"But I had a sickness, too, and my face didn't do that," Zari said.

"There are different types of sickness. I had a skin ailment. The sickness you had was inside," Ferret said.

Zari continued to stroke her cheek.

“I’ve never seen skin like this before,” he said. “It’s interesting.”

Ferret smiled. Being thought interesting was better than being viewed with horror.

The fire slowly warmed them and they managed to dry out most of their gear. By nightfall, they were ready to hike again. Less than an hour into their journey, Ferret stopped and picked up a handful of dirt.

“Look!” she said. “This isn’t granite dust anymore. It’s silty dirt.”

Mouse inspected the ground. “You’re right,” she said. “So, now we change directions. To the left of sunset.”

This new landscape was flatter than the granite hills. On the second night, they came to a huge canyon, larger than any Mouse had ever seen.

“There’s got to be water down there,” Badger said.

The cliffs were high and mostly composed of soft, light-colored dirt and crumbling limestone. Climbing was difficult due to the crumbly surface. At the bottom of the canyon wall, they found a valley floor covered in grass taller than they were. They moved carefully through this sea of grass. Eventually, near sunrise, the grass began to thin out and the ground became rocky.

“We must be near the riverbed,” Mouse said.

They continued and, sure enough, found water. As the light of the morning increased, they could see it was a large, slow, muddy river.

Suddenly, Zari yelled. Mouse looked in his direction, expecting danger. Instead, Zari was jumping up and down with excitement.

Mouse and Ferret tried to quiet him down. He was holding what looked like a flat rock.

“Look!” Zari said, holding up what turned out to be a large white shell.

“That’s a big mussel shell,” Mouse observed.

Then, Zari turned it over. The inside of the shell was smooth and shiny. And as the sunlight struck the surface, it glowed with all the colors of the rainbow.

"Can I hold that?" Mouse said.

The shell was like nothing she'd ever seen. The smooth gray surface glowed with color in the sunlight.

"Amazing," she said. "It's so beautiful."

"This is what Ocelot and her quest are searching for," Badger said.

"I know," Mouse said. "So I wonder where they are. Even if they went in the wrong direction, I know she'll find it, somehow. Ocelot doesn't fail."

"Then we should search the valley," Badger said. "Who knows how long this river is. But if they followed the plan, they'd be upstream."

Mouse nodded. "Right. Let's find a safe camp and then begin to search."

Ferret joined them by the stream. She found another shell and examined it.

"So, we are here. Our journey is over," she said.

"But now the hard part begins," Mouse said. "Now, we're not free to move anymore. We can't run. This is where we stay."

Ferret looked around. This was their new home. And it was a totally unfamiliar place. They found a good shelter on

the cliffs. They saw no caves, but Mouse was sure there should be some in the area.

Mouse had them begin searching upstream. They had much work to do. They had to find food and water, both for now and for the following seasons. They had to survey any other possible resources. They needed to find as many possible places suitable for human habitation as possible. And they had to find Ocelot. Mouse really wanted to find Ocelot before Ocelot found Mouse.

For two days, they traveled upstream. Oaks and mesquite were plentiful. They would provide plenty of winter food. Grass seed should never run short. There were some pecan trees, though not many.

Mouse was most pleased to find no ghost trails. She had been told that there were few water sources that the ghosts had not yet found. Could this be a river they hadn't found yet? And if so, how long would it be before they found it and claimed it for their own?

The most important part of their quest, once they found a place suitable for habitation, was to find the nearest ghost trails in every direction. That would also be the most dangerous part of their quest. But if the trails were far enough away, the Bird people could live here.

They were now traveling by day so they would not miss seeing anything important. It felt strange to Mouse to travel in sunlight. She had become accustomed to the shelter of darkness. Daylight made her feel exposed.

It was just after midday, as the quest paused to eat near some towering cliffs, that Ferret grew excited. She saw something farther upstream along the cliffs. She and Ringtail

went to investigate. Not long afterward, they came running back.

"This is amazing!" she said. "You won't believe this!"

The rest of the quest followed Ferret, trying to keep up and maintain security. And then they saw what had so amazed Ferret. On a smooth section of the giant cliffs there were paintings of people. But these were huge paintings. Mouse estimated that just one leg of these giants was more than twice her height.

"Are there really people that big?" Rat asked.

Ferret shrugged. "I hope not," she replied.

Besides giant people, there were various animals and many other things Mouse could not even guess at their identity.

"Who made these?" Mouse asked. "And why?"

Ferret shrugged again.

Jaguarundi spoke up. "The Bear people made these. Long, long ago. We have these near the place I was born."

"You said long ago?" Mouse asked. "There's no chance the Bear people who made these are still here?"

Jaguarundi moved closer to the paintings. She examined a foot closely.

"Look how the pigment is faded and chipping away," she said.

Mouse saw that she was right.

"Okay. They were made long ago. But people could still be here."

"True," Jaguarundi admitted.

"Do you know what these pictures mean?" Mouse asked.

"No," Jaguarundi said. "But our mystics know a little. They say it just proves the Bear people are crazy."

"Mystics!" Mouse repeated. "Ferret! Tell me what you know. Is there any danger here?"

Ferret looked a little uncomfortable, and maybe even a little guilty, Mouse thought.

"Really, I don't know much," she said. "These are stories. Mainly about killing animals. Sometimes about killing people. There's a lot about death, I'm told. But they were made by the Bear people. So, of course, they're crazy."

Mouse could definitely see the images of killing. Most of the creatures on the wall had arrows sticking out of them.

"Let's just hope these people aren't here anymore," Mouse said.

They kept searching upstream, only now they were being much more careful. Mouse had never even seen an arrow of the Bear people, but they must be huge, like spears. She wondered how far they could shoot such an arrow.

"Those drawings are like nightmares," Rat said to Jaguarundi. "Only, instead of being imaginary and in your head, someone has put them out in the real world."

Jaguarundi shrugged. "You get used to them," she said.

That night, Rat was still not used to them. They had a very small fire burning. Mouse grudgingly allowed this fire due to the cold weather, but she reminded everyone that fires burning at night are much harder to hide than fire burning by day. Everyone knew this, but their yearning for warmth was more powerful than their fear of being found by Bear people. As they ate, Ferret talked about the Bear people.

"You can see from those paintings how violent the Bear people can be. And they are not even ashamed of their violence. They paint it on walls for generations of people to see."

"Where did they go?" Squirrel asked.

“We live in different worlds that rarely overlap anymore,” Ferret said. “They chose their world and we chose ours. We rarely see them and so we don’t know much about them anymore.”

“But that was a good question, Squirrel,” Mouse said. “Where did these Bear people go? They were once so powerful they painted huge walls with their stories of death. If they were that powerful, where are they now?”

Mouse looked at Ferret.

“Do you know?” she asked.

“It’s like the story we learned before the quest of Bird Brother and Sister. Bird Brother was fascinated by the wealth and power of others. It was the same for the Bear people. They could not stay away from the ghosts.”

“The ghosts aren’t powerful,” Badger said. “All they do is kill things.”

“Some people might consider death the most powerful thing of all in this world,” Ferret said. “Everything must die.”

“And so the Bear people were attracted to the power of death?” Mouse Girl asked.

“Look around,” Ferret said. “These great warriors are long gone.”

14 - Bear

(In which ghosts are encountered, the story of Lone Eagle is told, and Ferret devises a way to attack the ghosts.)

Over the next several days, they explored the river valley. There were innumerable caves and deep limestone overhangs. And even now, in the last days of winter, there were plenty of signs that food would be plentiful. This land looked promising.

As they grew more comfortable they settled into a routine of ending their work each day in the late afternoon. They would then make a campfire, mainly for comfort and warmth, but then extinguish the fire before sunset. Cooking was not necessary, for they had little food to eat and what they did have they usually ate uncooked. Finally, they would huddle together in the warmest place they could find.

It was at the campfire one evening that Squirrel said what everyone else had been thinking.

"This place looks pretty good, so far," he said. "Do you think we may have found a new land?"

Mouse shook her head. "It's way too early for that kind of thinking. A new land means new and unexpected dangers. We can't even guess what might go wrong. And we haven't yet searched for ghost trails nearby. We have months of work before we can start being hopeful."

"But, so far, it looks good, right?" Squirrel asked.

Mouse smiled but did not answer. She had given the official answer and she knew it was true. To get too hopeful now was like asking for disappointment.

Mouse looked around at all the faces looking at her. To find a new home would make them legends in their own tribe. They would have accomplished what their parents, grandparents, and great grandparents had failed to accomplish. And for the second quest to accomplish this, that would be amazing! She looked at Rat and Squirrel and Badger. They had always been the clumsy, below-average members of the tribe. Although Badger was developing somewhat of a reputation as an archer, so he might possibly escape loser status someday.

And then, even lower on the tribe's informal social ladder, there were Ringtail and Ferret. Although their physical imperfections were not hereditary, the Bird people were still very intolerant of anyone who looked different. Ringtail, with his limp, and Ferret, with her facial skin so badly scarred, would always be viewed as less than ideal.

And finally, she looked at the two newcomers, Jaguarundi and Zarigueya. Jaguarundi fell in the category of Rat, Squirrel, and Badger. She was reliable and faithful, but too tall and too slow to be highly regarded in the Bird people's society. Zari was still too young to assess, but his biggest problem was that he had no known parents to help the elders assess his promise as a mate. Without knowing anything about his bloodline, Zari would be unlikely to be considered as a prime mating candidate.

And so, that's us, Mouse thought*, the losers of the tribe. And yet here we are on the most promising quest in generations.* Of course, her quest was excited. They had a chance to be elevated in the tribe that had rejected them all of their lives. Mouse decided that whatever happened on the rest of the quest, she would hold on to this moment. At this

moment, all of these young people were something the tribe could forever hold up with pride and admiration. It might all fall apart tomorrow, but for now, they were doing good and important work.

"Squirrel is right," Mouse said. "This does look very promising. The future of our tribe may be in our hands right now."

Everyone smiled and looked excited. But Mouse's warm congratulatory tone turned more stern.

"But that is why we need to be extra cautious and extra observant," Mouse said. "The future of our people is in our hands."

The quest understood this. They were ready to keep up their discipline and see this through, no matter how it ended. Feeling pretty good about themselves, they put out the fire and began to arrange their blankets in a deep crevice under a limestone overhang.

This was the part of the journey in which romances were likely to develop. They had time on their hands, they were looking for a home in which to raise a new generation, and they were in the perfect time of life for lust. As a quest leader, Mouse had clear guidelines to follow in this regard. No romance was tolerated.

Of course, she herself had spent time flirting with and fantasizing about Beaver when they had been together. But she knew that had shown any obvious sign of an attachment to Beaver, Ocelot would have separated them without hesitation. Night sentries knew that part of their job was to keep the young people separated.

These were the unbendable traditions of the Bird people when it came to teen romance. Knowing all this, Mouse could

not fail to notice that Ferret and Rat were always next to each other in the big group huddle every winter night. And, as much as she was hoping that their romance would someday be validated by the elders of the tribe, Mouse also knew that these two young lovers could easily be separated for life without hesitation or remorse by the elders. And if there were any lingering bad feelings about their separation, it would be Mouse's fault for allowing them to get too close. She knew she would have to talk to them about their relationship.

The next morning, as the quest awoke, they heard geese shrieking. Mouse hated geese. They were big and noisy and aggressive. Something was bothering them. Mouse sent Badger and Jaguarundi to investigate.

When Badger and Jaguarundi came back their eyes were wide. Badger looked like he was in shock.

"Ghosts," Jaguarundi said in answer to Mouse's quizzical look.

Mouse took the two aside and demanded, "Tell me what you saw. And tell me quietly."

"We saw Bear people coming down the deer paths by the river," Badger said. "Sometimes Bear people follow those paths. But then, as they got closer, we saw that only one among them was Bear. The others… I didn't know what they were, but they weren't Bear."

Mouse looked to Jaguarundi. Jaguarundi continued the story.

"I've seen ghosts before. On my trip to your land, we came across them. The pale skin. The elaborate clothing."

"How many of them?" Mouse asked.

"Four," Jaguarundi said, "plus the one Bear."

"And there were no ghost trails near?" Mouse asked.

Jaguarundi shook her head. “It looked like the Bear was leading them on the trails he was familiar with.”

Mouse was silent for a while. “Let’s talk to Ferret about this. She might know things we don’t know.”

They went to find Ferret, and she seemed to be expecting them. Ferret had already gathered the rest of the quest around. “What did you find?” Ferret asked.

She nodded when they told her about the ghosts. “Sit down and I’ll tell you what you need to know.”

They gathered around Ferret, in the deepest, darkest corner of the cliff they could find.

“We don’t know where ghosts came from,” Ferret explained, “but they seem to be another tribe. They are giants, like the Bear people. But their ways are far more terrible. We have had dealings with the Bear people. They are treacherous and greedy, but they can be dealt with. The ghosts are death in bodily form. No one negotiates with them and lives. And they have powers of seduction that have overwhelmed even the wisest and bravest of our people. Any contact with the ghosts is completely forbidden, and anyone who has ever had dealings with them will be exiled from any Bird tribe.”

“We know all this,” Mouse said. “Tell us what we need to know now that they are here.”

“I’m getting to that,” Ferret said. “It is said that they will not stray from their ghost trails for any length of time. If this is true, we can expect them to be out of this area soon. However, once they find an area to their liking, they may make ghost trails to that area. Therefore, according to our lore, this river valley has not yet been lost to the ghosts; it is not yet off limits to us. However, this may be the beginning of that end.”

“Coyote crap!” Mouse hissed. “We found a perfect place and now we’re about to lose it.”

Ferret shook her head. “You need to listen to the rest of the story. Ghosts only build roads into areas that interest them. But what interests us is not what attracts them. They do not care about the pecan trees or the fields of grass or the cactus. They are not interested in living things. They like dead things.”

“Why?” Badger asked.

“The answer to that is the story of Lone Eagle,” Ferret said. “Lone Eagle was the chief of the greatest of the tribes of the Bird people. The Eagle tribe ruled over all of the Bird people. They were strong and wise and they ruled, not just one, but many lands. The Eagle tribe united all of the Bird people in the ancient days.”

“Why haven’t we ever heard of this tribe?” Mouse asked.

“This story isn’t told to young people. You cannot hear it until your quest begins,” Ferret replied. “Plus, it’s a pretty sad and tragic story. It’s only told as a warning for those who are questing.”

“But if it’s something dangerous, wouldn’t it be better for us to know about it and prepare for it before we start our quest?” Mouse asked.

Ferret shook her head. “Our tradition is to never speak of the ghosts in our villages, if it can be avoided. And this story concerns ghosts.”

Mouse looked unsatisfied with this answer. “Go ahead and tell us the story,” she said.

Ferret continued. “In the ancient times, the best children of every tribe were accepted for marriage into the Eagle tribe, but only the very best. In those days, dealings with the Bear

people were still common. The Eagle tribe was powerful enough to have no fear of the Bears. But then, one day, the first of the ghosts arrived in Eagle land. They looked a little like Bear people, but only a little. But because they resembled the Bears, Lone Eagle treated them like the Bears.

"And then the curses began. The Eagle people and the Bear people began to die of terrible diseases. Those who did not die of disease were killed by the magical weapons of the ghosts."

"Magical weapons?" Badger said. "There are ghosts out there right now, and you're telling us they have magical weapons?"

Ferret nodded. "And the ghosts were even more treacherous than the Bears. They did not keep agreements even among themselves. Every Bird tribe that tried to negotiate with them was betrayed. And those who were not killed by disease or in battle or by treachery, faced even worse horrors."

Mouse was listening closely, wondering what could be worse than disease, battle, and treachery.

"Lone Eagle's people were being destroyed by the ghosts. Land after land was falling to them. And so, in one last desperate attempt to change his destiny, Lone Eagle planned to send spies into the ghost lands to learn about them, and then use this knowledge against them. He chose his wisest and bravest warriors. Most of them, including his own son, never returned. They died in the land of ghosts and their stories were lost to our people. But two warriors did return.

"Mockingbird and Hawk returned to the Eagle people after more than a year among the ghosts. They said they had visited the lands of the dead. The ghosts had entire cities in

which nothing lived. Every living thing had been killed. And the goal of the ghosts was to destroy all of life. Their cities of the dead grew larger and they cut down trees, killed grasslands, and poisoned rivers. Animals were slaughtered by the hundreds.

"'Is there any way to defeat them?' Lone Eagle asked. But Mockingbird and Hawk said no. The only thing the ghosts feared was life itself. And so the only way to avoid their deadly attack was to stay hidden in the deepest forests or the thickest grasslands. The ghosts feared to go wherever life existed.

"Shortly after returning to give this report Mockingbird killed himself. The memories of the land of the dead were too horrible for him to bear. Hawk lived among his people for a while longer, but a dark spirit had grown over him. He never married or had children. And when Lone Eagle and his tribe were destroyed, he died with them.

"This is how Lone Eagle met his end. After hearing the report of Mockingbird and Hawk, Lone Eagle told all of his people to do as they had recommended. He ordered every tribe to retreat as far away from the ghosts as they could.

"But the ghost warriors were already coming to destroy the land on which the Bird people lived. The Bird people could not retreat fast enough. They had not gathered enough food to survive the winter. They did not have warm clothes to retreat into colder climates.

"And so, to gain them more time, Lone Eagle and his Eagle tribe decided to stay in place and fight the ghosts. They hoped this would give the other tribes time to retreat. The Eagle tribe moved into the villages closest to the ghosts. The rest of the Bird people began to prepare for the retreat. Lone Eagle

commanded that no one except his chosen warriors would remain in the Eagle villages. Everyone else was to leave.

"And so the Bird people left their villages. They ran far into the forests and far across the open fields. And they waited. No word ever came from the Eagle villages. The rest of the tribes remained where they were and we have lived as a scattered people ever since.

"Since that time, no family has ever taken the name of a bird for itself. That honor was reserved in memory of the lost warriors that followed Lone Eagle."

Ferret closed her eyes and bowed her head, signaling the end of the tale.

"What a horrible story," Squirrel said. Mouse silently agreed.

"It gets worse," Ferret said. "From that day on, it has been the sacred duty of any member of any of the Bird tribes to have no contact with the ghosts. If any of us is ever in danger of being captured by the ghosts, it is our duty to kill ourselves. They have the power to poison both our bodies and our minds, and once the poison is in one of us, it may spread to others."

Mouse looked around the group. She made eye contact with every person.

"Listen," Mouse said. "I know we are a bunch of rebellious losers. Every one of us knows how to break the rules of our tribe. In fact, we are here now because we decided to finish our quest even after we were ordered to do otherwise."

Everyone nodded.

"But I will not have a member of my quest be responsible for poisoning our people."

Everyone nodded again.

“So, let’s stick together and nobody do anything stupid. Maybe the ghosts will go away,” Mouse said.

“But, tell me,” Ferret said, “if any one of you comes in contact with the ghosts, are you prepared to kill yourself.”

Mouse looked around at each one. Badger nodded. Rat and Ferret were holding hands and they nodded together. Jaguarundi already had her knife out to show how ready she was to comply. Squirrel nodded. Ringtail stared back at Mouse in his super-serious way. He didn’t even have to nod for Mouse to know he would do his duty. Finally, Mouse looked at little Zari. He nodded in agreement, although his eyes were wide with fear.

“Good,” Mouse said. “Now, tell us, Ferret, how do we defeat these ghosts in spite of the fact that no one has ever done so before?”

Ferret smiled. “I’ve been thinking about that,” she said. “From these stories, we know they have weaknesses. I have no idea what they are seeking, but we do know they avoid life. So, let’s give them all the life we can gather.”

Mouse had no idea what this meant. “Such as…?” she said.

“We could scatter food in their campsite to attract mice and raccoons. Maybe we could even attract coyotes into their camp,” Ferret said.

Mouse nodded in understanding.

“Or flies!” Badger added. “If we could gather some fresh animal droppings, we could attract lots of flies to their campsite.”

“That’s really disgusting,” Mouse said, “but I see your point.”

“And what about fleas?” Jaguarundi said. “When my tribe hunts, the freshly killed animals are often covered with fleas.

And as the body cools, the fleas jump off to search for other warm bodies."

"That is really disgusting," Mouse said, "But I like the way you all are getting into this idea. Let's make a plan."

They spent the rest of the day devising the most horrible ways they could imagine to torment the ghosts. By nightfall, they were ready. Badger, Squirrel Boy, and Jaguarundi took turns invading the campsite of the ghosts. They avoided the ghosts themselves, but by midnight there was food and animal droppings strategically planted in hidden locations all over the ghost campsite.

Raccoons were the first to invade. They ripped into the supplies of the ghosts. By daybreak, the flies were gathering. Even from a distance, the discomfort of the ghosts was visible. But they packed up their gear and continued to move downstream that day.

The quest did not give up. The next night, they continued their assault. And this time, the coyotes came. The quest hid as far up in the cliffs as they could get and watched the coyotes circle the camp. To Mouse's surprise, even the coyotes were afraid of the ghosts. If the camp had been inhabited by Bird people, the coyotes would have killed everyone in it. As it was, the coyotes tore things apart and dragged things away, but when the ghosts awoke, the coyotes retreated.

Still, it left an impression on the ghosts. The next morning they were talking angrily among themselves. They appeared, from a distance, to be agitated. They seemed to be having an argument about whether to continue or not.

And then, it happened. In all of Mouse's life, she had never seen a real bear. But there it was on the edge of the ghost

camp. It was big and black and hungry. The ghosts fled in terror.

Mouse watched as the bear made its way through the gear of the ghosts. The ghosts were hiding far away from the camp and watching the bear. After taking its time and eating whatever it wanted, the bear crossed the river and disappeared into the high grass. Very quickly, the ghosts gathered up their gear and began the hike back up the river.

"We did it!" Badger whispered excitedly to Mouse. "We've won!"

Mouse shook her head. "Not yet," she said. "They're retreating, but we need to make sure they never come back. This valley is useless to us if they return, or if there is a Bear tribe village nearby. Now, we must track them and make sure they are terrified of this valley."

Over the next three nights, the quest continued tormenting the ghosts. Finally, on the fourth night, the ghosts did not even stop to make camp. They continued to hike through the night. Just before dawn they reached their ghost trail and were gone. All the ghosts and the Bear man were gone!

15 - The Bear People

(In which the Bear people take a prisoner, and Mouse and Ocelot are reunited.)

"Are you satisfied now?" Badger asked Mouse. Mouse and Ferret had been consulting together.

"Four days' travel is a good distance to keep the ghosts away from our camp," Mouse admitted, "but why were they coming down the river in the first place?"

Ferret shrugged.

"If they came down once, might they do it again?" Mouse asked.

"I don't know," Ferret said.

"But we know how to get rid of them," Badger said.

Mouse nodded. "True. But the Bear people will not be so easy to fool," Mouse said. "Why was the Bear man with the ghosts?"

"That is troubling," Ferret said.

"Aren't you guys ever satisfied?" Squirrel asked. "We've just run ghosts out of our territory."

Mouse smiled. "Yes, that was amazing. But we have many months of work to do before we know if we are safe."

Mouse had the quest return to their original camp. They began the long task of surveying the territory. They searched in every direction for every possible resource and every possible threat. And they constantly kept watch upstream for any sign of the ghosts or the Bear people.

As they did this work, the weather gradually became warmer. With the warm weather came rain, and the land began to green. The quest could not have been happier.

Whether they failed or succeeded in the long run, Mouse was quite happy to be where she was for the time being. This was what she had waited for her entire life. She was in a new land, and she was leading her people's exploration of the world.

All of the quest members were similarly happy. They did their work seriously and thoroughly. Even Rat and Ferret were keeping their hands off each other, now that the nights were warmer. Plus, they had noticed Mouse watching them, and so they obediently imposed some distance between themselves. Mouse had not had to say a single word to them.

There did not seem to be any other romance issues among the quest. Badger and Squirrel occasionally stared at Jaguarundi for a little too long, but that was just the way boys were. Mouse did not foresee any problems there.

Their work continued uninterrupted for many weeks. Then, one day, Squirrel came back from a scouting mission. "The Bear people are back," he reported. "Upstream. On this side of the ghost trail."

Squirrel looked pale again.

"Are there more ghosts?" Mouse asked.

"No," Squirrel said. "But they have Otter Girl with them. She seems to be their prisoner."

Mouse didn't know how to respond to this. She had never heard of the Bear people kidnapping Bird people.

"What else did you find? Is there a Bear village in that direction?" Mouse asked.

"We didn't see one, but since this is the second time we've seen Bear people on this river, there must be," Squirrel said.

"How long would it take us to get back to them?" Mouse asked.

"We could get to their camp before sunrise," Squirrel said.

Mouse called the quest together. Squirrel described what he and Badger had seen. It was a temporary Bear camp. He had seen four men. Otter had her hands tied, but otherwise looked healthy.

"How are we going to rescue Otter from four giant men?" Ferret asked.

"They are big, but we are faster and smarter," Mouse said.

"They'll be expecting a rescue attempt," Badger said.

"And where is Ocelot and her quest?" Ringtail asked. "They certainly wouldn't abandon her."

"We won't know that until we talk to Otter," Mouse said. "But if they haven't rescued her, there's something wrong."

They stashed all of their excess gear and prepared for a raid on the Bear camp. It took several hours to make it to the camp. The Bear men seemed to be asleep in their tents. There was snoring coming from at least one tent. Otter was nowhere to be seen.

Jaguarundi was sent to investigate. She checked the first tent. She gave the hand signal that meant everything was as expected. She moved stealthily to the next tent. She paused there for a few moments. She did not send the "okay" signal this time. She went to a third tent. Once again, she sent back no positive signal. She paused and then sent the "trouble" signal.

The quest readied their weapons and began scanning the area for movement. Sure enough, they detected movement in the brush to the left of camp. There was a Bear man hiding there. This was beginning to look like an ambush.

Mouse Girl whistled the retreat signal. Jaguarundi immediately froze. Mouse wasn't sure if the Bears had even seen Jaguarundi yet. The Bears were dumb like that. They

could be looking directly at a Bird person and never see them, especially in the dark. It looked like the Bear men waiting in the bushes had not detected anything, but a large hand reached out from a tent and grabbed Jaguarundi from behind.

Jaguarundi twisted and broke free, but she left half of her shirt behind. Before the Bear man could get out of his tent, she was gone. The Bear men waiting in the bushes finally realized something was going on and they clumsily and loudly stumbled back into the camp. They checked to make sure their prisoner was still secure.

Mouse Girl and her quest regrouped far from the Bear camp.

"Coyote crap!" Mouse Girl said. "They were waiting for us."

"But we got away," Badger said.

"Without Otter," Mouse Girl said. "And now they know we're here. It's going to be harder to get her free."

Mouse looked at Jaguarundi. She was standing awkwardly. Her right shoulder looked odd. "Jaguarundi, are you alright?" she asked.

Jaguarundi shook her head. "He hurt my shoulder pretty badly. I can't move my arm."

Mouse shook her head. She looked angry and frustrated. Ferret examined Jag's arm and shoulder. The slightest movement of her arm made Jaguarundi flinch.

"Okay, that obviously didn't work," Mouse said. "But we're going to stay here and see what happens next. Sometimes in the middle of the excitement of success, people make mistakes. Maybe the Bears will now."

The quest understood and quickly set up a watchful, defensive posture.

“Ringtail and Otter,” Mouse said very quietly, “Get a count of the number of Bears out there and make sure you know where each one is.”

The Bear men gathered together and talked a bit. They looked out into the bushes around them, but did not attempt any kind of search. They apparently thought they were safe and their prisoner was secure. But they didn’t go back to sleep. They checked the ropes that were binding Otter and they all stayed awake and kept talking. Mouse could see no chance of helping Otter.

The night dragged on. Clouds covered the moon and it became more difficult for Mouse to see much of anything in the Bear camp. The Bears were still sitting around. They were talking less, but they were still awake.

And then Mouse noticed something move in the Bear camp. It looked like Ocelot! Mouse moved to get a better view of the camp, but Ocelot was gone. Mouse crawled over to Ringtail and whispered in his ear.

“Did you see that?” Mouse asked.

“That was awesome,” Ringtail answered.

“What was it?” Mouse asked.

Ringtail shrugged. “It was a clean rescue. Someone released Otter and got her out of the Bear camp. The Bears don’t even know she’s gone. It happened so fast I’m not sure who it was.”

Just then, they heard some noise from the direction that Ferret was guarding. Mouse ran in that direction and saw Ferret sitting on top of Deer Girl. Mouse’s heart fell in her chest. Of course, it was Ocelot’s quest who had just saved Otter. And Ocelot had known Mouse’s quest was here the whole time. And Mouse had simply been in the way.

“She was trying to sneak up on us,” Ferret said, getting off Deer Girl. Deer Girl put up no struggle.

“Ocelot sent me to get you,” Deer said. “Otter is safe and we’re ready to get away from the Bear men.”

Mouse nodded. She gathered her quest and explained what she guessed must have happened.

“It looks like we interfered with Ocelot’s plan to save Otter,” Mouse explained. “They seem to have had the entire situation under control. Our interference may have endangered Otter’s life and Ocelot’s plan. We’re going to meet with them now and I expect Ocelot is going to be angry. Or at the very least annoyed.”

“But we had no way of knowing what they were doing,” Ringtail said. “We were trying to help Otter. That was our duty.”

Mouse nodded in agreement. “You are right. You all did the right thing. If Ocelot is angry, then she can take it out on me. I was the one who made the mistake of thinking that Ocelot’s quest might have needed help with something. I should have known from experience that they don’t ever fail.”

They followed Deer to where Ocelot’s quest had gathered.

The two groups silently joined together. Ocelot signaled for her quest to stay where they were as she and Mouse walked away by themselves. Ocelot looked angry.

“What happened to staying where I left you and waiting for us to report back to you?” Ocelot asked.

“We couldn’t just wait around while someone else finished our quest for us,” Mouse explained. “I reasoned that we had a better chance of succeeding in our quest if we had two teams searching. Besides, after a day or two of travel, we discovered that you had set off in the wrong direction.”

Ocelot let a little smile escape. “That’s true. But it looks like we found the right spot independently of each other.”

“And so, technically, I didn’t violate the elders’ command to remain as one quest,” Mouse said, thinking out loud.

“No, no,” Ocelot corrected. “You intended to violate their command, but you got lucky because we ended up in the same place. What if someone had gotten seriously injured and we had sent someone back to you to request help? You would not have been able to help because you abandoned your post.”

Mouse knew this was true. She had indeed willfully left Ocelot without support if an emergency had occurred.

“You are right,” Mouse admitted. “My decision did leave you without backup. However, I believed that it was more important to find land for our people than it was to wait around to help a quest that we knew was misdirected.”

“A tough decision,” Ocelot said. “And if the elders ever hear of it, they may come to a different conclusion. But in the meantime, that’s not the only reason why I’m mad at you. We had Otter in that Bear camp as a spy. We could have taken her out at any time if we thought she was in danger. But she was there to learn as much as possible about the location of the Bear people.”

“Did she learn anything important?” Mouse asked.

“We know where those men are from,” Ocelot answered, “but we could have learned a lot more if you hadn’t interfered.”

Mouse nodded.

Ocelot avoided looking into Mouse’s eyes. Ocelot was not trying to make Mouse feel any remorse. Instead, as always, she was trying to find a better solution to the challenges before them.

“To tell you the truth,” Ocelot continued, “the plan we made had a number of flaws, the greatest of which was that we had no way of communicating once we left you behind. There was no way for either of us to adjust to new information.”

Mouse nodded. Ocelot looked her in the eyes.

“And I should not have left you behind. Even though you were sick. I know I would have been tempted to go out on my own if I had been in your place. We could have waited for you to recover. A few days would not have mattered all that much.”

Mouse nodded again. This was the nicest Ocelot had ever been to her. She wondered why.

“Thank you for understanding,” Mouse said.

“Let’s gather the quest together and talk about our next step,” Ocelot said.

16 - Flood

(In which the quest is reunited, a flood covers the newly discovered land, and the story of Scorpion Woman and the beginning of the mystics is told. Mouse and Ocelot agree that the new land is suitable for habitation, so they agree to send messengers back to the tribe.)

The entire quest was relieved to be back together again. Even Snake seemed a little less angry. Ocelot sat them down and told them what Otter had discovered.

"The Bears' permanent camp is many days from here. They came here only at the request of a certain ghost who was interested in the mussels that make the rainbow shells," Ocelot explained.

"Why do the ghosts care about the shells?" Ferret asked.

Ocelot looked to Otter Girl. Otter Girl shrugged.

"I don't know," she said. "The Bears thought he was crazy. But he had much to trade for their willingness to guide him."

"The ghosts always have much to trade," Ferret observed. "But they always make people regret doing business with them."

Mouse looked at Ferret and wondered how she knew this. Was this part of another story? Or was it some other mystic secret?

"The Bears were not happy to be here, because it is so far from their home," Otter said.

"And so we expect them to leave and not come back?" Mouse asked.

"They do not like this valley," Otter explained.

Mouse Girl told Ocelot of their harassment of the Bears and ghosts. Ocelot was amused and pleased.

"You may have saved this land for our people," Ocelot said.

Again, Mouse was shocked by Ocelot's positive attitude towards her. Something unusual was going on and that worried her. She preferred to be looked down upon by Ocelot. At least then she knew what to expect.

"Did the ghosts find anything they liked in the valley?" Mouse asked.

Otter shrugged. "I don't know. The Bears were hoping they would be interested in me. They didn't have any other plan that I know of."

The idea of being bound and handed over to ghosts sent a shiver down Mouse's spine. The Bears were worse than just clumsy and stupid, she realized. To trade in people they had to be very evil indeed.

"From what I have seen, I think we can send back the message that we have found a new land. This valley is much farther from Bears and ghosts than our home is. If we can just be sure these Bears are leaving," Ocelot said. "We must watch them closely."

"They won't stay long," Beaver said. "There's a big storm coming in."

Mouse could feel a change in the weather now that Beaver had mentioned it.

"Should we look for shelter?" Zari asked.

Ocelot nodded. "Ringtail and Zari, find us a dry place. The rest of us will watch the Bears."

The storm did come. The wind came first, then darkness, and finally the warm springtime rain. Ocelot and the quest sat

in the dense brush, dripping with rain, but happily watching the Bears pack up their camp and leave as quickly as possible. Once the Bears were gone, Beaver Boy was sent to search their campsite. They had left nothing behind.

"There's no sign that they intend to return," Beaver said when he reported back to Ocelot.

"Good," Ocelot said. "So, now we have an entire river valley to ourselves. We should travel downstream for a day or two and look for the most isolated location we can find."

"There are plenty of cliffs in every part of the valley we've searched," Badger added, helpfully. "That means lots of safe cave homes."

The quest was ecstatic. This was a beautiful land and they were the new generation that had found it.

The rain continued for the rest of the day, pouring down for a few hours, then slowing, then starting up again. Small streamlets began to run down from the rugged cliffs that bordered the valley and into the river. Ocelot and the quest trudged through the soggy land in the general direction that Ocelot had sent Ringtail and Zari to search for shelter. Before too long, they saw little Zari waiving at them in the distance. He led them to a large cliff. They climbed up and over several levels of overhanging rock, and then, high above the river, they reached a giant rock overhang that Ringtail had found. It was open to the sky, but back against the wall of the cliff there was a large, sheltered area. This place was dry and large enough to fit almost the entire village from back home, Mouse thought. Ringtail had already gathered dry wood for a fire.

"What a great place!" Mouse said.

Ocelot nodded and walked around the entire ledge.

“This is far too high for Bear men or their dogs to climb,” she said. “And it is not visible from the trail below.”

“It has a beautiful view of the river,” Ferret observed. She walked closer to the edge of the limestone ledge. Then she froze. Ocelot noticed her abrupt stop. Ferret pointed to the ground along the edge of the cliff.

“Lion scat.” Ocelot said.

She walked to where the animal’s droppings were.

“We’re in a lion’s territory,” Ocelot observed. “We’ll need to be watchful.”

Other than the lion scat, the area looked perfect for a temporary camp and possibly for a home someday. Guards were posted and the quest built a small fire circle. The fire was far back on the ledge and could not be seen by anyone on this side of the river. Beaver pointed out that if they built a rock wall, the fire would not be visible from any position on the ground. Ocelot liked that idea, but decided they could work on that later.

Right now, Ocelot wanted to talk about how and when they might send news of their discovery back home.

“How can we be sure this place is safe?” Ocelot asked the quest gathered around her. “I want to hear all of your ideas.”

“We still have many months of our quest,” Ringtail said. “We have plenty of time to live here and observe the area. We have time to send scouting parties out in every direction.”

Ocelot nodded. “Good,” she said. “Patient observation is a good thing.”

“Spring is coming,” Otter said. “We have time to see what foods grow here.”

Spring is coming, Mouse thought. That means it is time to watch Ferret and Rat even more closely. The nesting instinct was bound to be growing stronger.

"This is a great spot," Beaver said. "But I think we want to be farther down the river. We can put a few more days' travel between us and the Bear men. We know they live upstream from here. As far as we can tell, there is no sign of them or anyone else downstream. This is a big, empty land."

They continued to talk late into the night. The rain continued to fall. They fell asleep to its gentle sound.

Mouse helped ensure that the boys and girls slept in separate areas. She did this in a manner that was obvious enough for Ferret to realize Mouse was watching her. Mouse believed people always behaved better when they knew they were being watched.

In the morning, as they awoke, rain was still falling. Ringtail walked to the end of the rock ledge and noted that the river was expanding over its banks. He returned to the group to advise Ocelot. Ocelot did not seem overly concerned. In fact, she was happy to be able to observe the valley in a flood. Knowing where water would go when it rises would be important. She was glad Ringtail and Zari had found a campsite so high above the river plain.

The quest made a little fire and ate some of their quickly disappearing rations. Very soon they would be able to collect springtime foods, but so far there was very little available. They had managed to find some edible greens, but those were not very filling.

The rain continued to pour all morning. Ocelot led the quest down the river. The hiking was muddy and a little too cool to be comfortable, but there was little danger from air or

ground predators. By noon, they came to a narrowing of the river valley. The water had risen so high it was not possible to continue along the river plain. They were going to have to climb up and out of the valley.

Ferret approached Ocelot. “That water is rising very fast,” she said. “It must be raining more upstream than it is here.”

Ocelot looked at the river pouring through the narrow valley. She looked back and saw that the trail they had walked to get here was being covered by water.

“We’re turning back,” she said. “We can wait this out back on the limestone ledge.” She called to Mouse. “Mouse! We’re turning back. We’ll try to hike back on the trail we came on, but I want you to be ready to get us up and out of this valley. Keep your eyes open for pathways out.”

Mouse nodded. They turned around and walked quickly upstream. Ringtail and Beaver, the guards, were worried about how fast and clumsily they were traveling. The rain was cutting off their vision and hearing of almost everything happening around them. And the mud made it difficult to move with any degree of stealth or grace. They complained to Ocelot, but she didn’t slow. They kept their weapons ready and tried to stay aware of anything that might suddenly appear out of the rain.

After what seemed like a very long hike, Mouse indicated that they were near the limestone ledge. The rain was falling so hard and the trail was so flooded Ocelot had not recognized the area. They carefully climbed up to the ledge. The rain and mud made the climb difficult, especially for Ringtail with his bad leg. But they finally reached their dry overhang. Little rivulets of water ran through what had been their dry campsite, but at least they were not being rained on.

Ocelot ordered Ringtail to start a fire. Whether he could actually start one with wet wood in this weather was a question, but he began to work on it. He asked Zari to find the driest wood he could find.

"Snake Girl!" Ocelot said. "Help them find wood."

Snake silently obeyed. Mouse noted that Ocelot was now treating Snake like a servant. *I wonder how long that will last before Snake leaves again,* she thought.

The temperature was dropping and the entire quest was soaked. Ocelot was worried about hypothermia.

Mouse managed to get everyone to huddle together. She noticed that Ferret and Rat ended up together again. She didn't intervene this time. It was daylight and everyone was together. She was about to join the huddle when Ocelot called her aside.

Ocelot sat in a dry spot far from the quest.

"We're going to be here for a while," Ocelot said.

Mouse nodded.

"That gives us some time to think about things," Ocelot continued.

Mouse was not sure where this conversation was going. But it seemed that Ocelot was waiting for Mouse to jump into the conversation.

"What things are you thinking of?" she asked, hoping to get some idea of what Ocelot was talking about.

"If this is truly a new land for our people, this will be a historic quest. We've had three generations of failed quests," Ocelot explained. "Right before we left, Ocelot Grandmother told me that our old home is in imminent danger. At any time, the elders are ready to move us out. Right now, if we lose that

land, we'll be forced to join another tribe, most likely Jaguarundi's tribe."

"The child-beating tribe?" Mouse asked.

"Child-beating is not their only odd custom," Ocelot said. "I would not want to live with them."

"So, it's a very good thing we found this valley," Mouse said.

"Maybe," Ocelot said. "There is so much fear and nervousness among our adults, I'm afraid they will not be able to honestly assess this new land."

Mouse nodded. She understood what Ocelot was saying.

"So, we need to make sure that this is a safe place, because nobody else will," Mouse said.

Ocelot nodded. They silently stared out into the river valley. The silence went on for quite some time before Ocelot spoke again.

"This is much more responsibility than we were trained for," she said. "In the past, many quests have reported good lands that were later rejected by the elders. This time we must be right."

Mouse nodded.

Ocelot took a deep breath. "And so... I'm asking for your help."

This surprised Mouse. In the past, her opinion had meant nothing to Ocelot.

Ocelot continued. "I need you to be more than a quest member. I need you to think like the quest leader you were trained to be."

"Of course, I'll do all that I can," Mouse replied.

Ocelot shook her head. "I know you think differently than I do. That's why we don't get along so well."

Mouse raised her eyebrows at this moment of self-revelation on Ocelot's part.

"I don't think you can do as good of a job as long as you're part of my quest," Ocelot said. "So, I'm giving you back your quest."

"You can't do that," Mouse said. "We have to do what the elders told us to do."

Ocelot shook her head. "No. The whole point of this quest is to make us into adults. We need to start thinking for ourselves. What our tribe needs is a new land that we are absolutely sure is safe. We have to do everything we can to make sure that happens. There isn't anyone else here to help us."

Mouse considered this. It made sense. And so, when Ocelot was asking her to break the rules, it wasn't in rebellion against the elders. It was a way of acting on the elders' behalf.

"If we separate into two quests, what will we do?" Mouse asked.

"We'll explore different parts of the river valley. Two separate quests will be in place to notice twice as much," Ocelot said.

"Then I agree," Mouse said. "When do we begin?"

"As soon as we can," Ocelot said.

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They returned to the quest and explained their plan. Everyone was so wet and cold there was very little reaction. Snake seemed a little agitated and annoyed, but that wasn't unusual.

"Tell us a story, Ferret," Beaver said.

"I think it's Otter's turn to tell a story," Ferret replied.

Otter looked a little embarrassed, but it was her job as a mystic. She had been quite happy to let Ferret do all the talking thus far on the quest. Ferret seemed to have learned all this mystic stuff much faster than Otter had. But Otter took a deep breath and began a story she had been rehearsing in her mind over the last few days.

"The second part of Scorpion Man's story should be told," Otter began. "In the first part, we were told how Scorpion Man learned to breed better vegetables and how his enemies tried to sabotage his efforts. But it was Scorpion's grandson who discovered more of the wisdom of plant lore. Scorpion Man's people learned to guard their crops carefully. They planted them scattered all over their territory. They shared their secrets with no one, having already been betrayed once.

"For an entire generation after Scorpion Man died, his people were healthy and very well known for their excellent and abundant crops. They became quite satisfied and proud. Their children increased and their land increased. They had no trouble at all finding the best mates from other tribes. Every family wanted to marry into the Scorpion tribe.

"Scorpion Man's daughter, who became known as Scorpion Woman, was a beautiful and wise leader. She was a good elder for her people. But she had one enemy. One older woman, who had been a friend of Scorpion Man, began to criticize Scorpion Woman. Her name was Beetle Woman.

"Beetle Woman did not like the number of people that were now a part of their tribe. There were too many people for the tribe to keep its secrets. They had married young men and women from so many tribes everything the Scorpion tribe knew was now shared with every other tribe. And their squash plants were no longer hidden, because there were so many

visitors surely outsiders had seen every part of their land. And strangers had smuggled the best squash out of their land, and so other tribes were now growing squash just as good as the Scorpion tribe's squash.

"Beetle Woman complained to Scorpion Woman. 'All of our secrets have been shared. We have worked so hard to protect ourselves, but everything has been lost to other tribes,' she said. 'Do not worry,' said the good and gracious Scorpion Woman. 'We have no enemies because we have been so generous. All of the tribes are doing well because we have helped them become stronger. That is a reason to celebrate, not complain.'

"But Beetle Woman was not convinced. She was sure they would someday be betrayed by a new enemy. And so, she began to grow her own squash. She shared her seeds with no one else. And she shared her squash with no one else. She had a plot of land that was isolated from the rest of the tribe's land and she worked alone on that land for many years.

"In those years, the reign of Scorpion Woman remained successful and prosperous. Scorpion Woman gave birth to a strong son who grew up in the happiest times our people have ever known. But one day, a quest returned from a distant land. This quest had lost several members to disease and violence. They looked and acted strange upon their return. The elders never shared the whole story of what happened to them, but it was assumed to have been very bad indeed.

"Soon after their return, the tribe's squash was struck by a terrible disease. The Scorpion tribe found themselves unable to store up enough food for winter so they had little to trade. They had to trade away many of their children, and still they could not see how they were going to survive the winter.

Finally, in desperation, they begged the tribes who had given them mates to take back their children and the children's families. Some tribes agreed to do so, but others would only take back their own children. Many families were broken apart that year. When the winter came, there was great suffering. Many people died of hunger and disease. Beetle Woman was one of the ones who died.

"Although there was still animosity between them, Scorpion Woman visited Beetle Woman many times during the illness that finally took her life. Since Beetle Woman had no living family, Scorpion Woman treated her like her own family. She and her son cared for Beetle Woman until the day she died.

"By the time spring arrived, more than half the tribe was gone. The people were weak and downhearted as they searched for the first greens of spring. They learned that the same disease that had killed their squash had spread to many other villages. Many tribes were hungry and soon raiding parties began attacking the Scorpion tribe, hoping to steal anything they could find.

"These were very dark days for our people. Scorpion Woman gathered her tribe into one small corner of their land. They lived in that corner, as people under attack, for many seasons. By this time, Scorpion Boy was a young man, and as his people grew weaker and weaker, he seemed to grow stronger and stronger. His mother grew old and tired very quickly under this time of duress. All of her wisdom seemed unable to help her people.

"Finally, when it was time for Scorpion Boy to become a man, he was not sent on a quest, for there were too few children in the tribe and they were surrounded by too many

enemies. But he was stronger and healthier than ever, even as his mother grew thinner and weaker. Her beauty had long since faded away under her misfortunes.

"But one night, Scorpion Woman had a dream. Her father appeared to her and asked her why she thought Scorpion Boy was so strong while the rest of the tribe was so weak. When she awoke she called Scorpion Boy to her. 'My son,' she said, 'My father appeared to me in a dream and told me you hold a secret.' Scorpion Boy nodded. 'It is true, mother,' he said. 'Why do you keep secrets from your own mother?' Scorpion Woman asked. 'This is a secret you yourself have commanded to be kept silent,' Scorpion Boy said. This surprised Scorpion Woman very much. 'And when did I command you to keep a secret?' she demanded to know. 'You did not command me to keep this secret,' Scorpion Boy explained. 'You commanded Beetle Woman to keep it.'

"Finally, Scorpion Woman lost all patience. She insisted that Scorpion Boy tell her what he knew. 'When Beetle Woman tried to share her wisdom with you, you became annoyed with her and ordered her to be silent. And so, she did keep her wisdom to herself. She never told you all that Scorpion Man, your father, had taught her. But in her final days, she passed on this knowledge to me, so that our people might not lose Scorpion Man's wisdom.'

"Beetle Woman continued to create new types of squash. None were as large and sweet as your squash, but Scorpion Man told her to keep trying to make new things. As she grew these new varieties, she kept them separate and hidden. When the sickness came and killed all of your squash, most of Beetle Woman's squash survived. I have been harvesting it and

secretly mixing it in with the food stores of the tribe. It has helped a little to keep us from starving, but not much.'

"Scorpion Woman was amazed at this. Just when she had lost all hope, she understood that her father's wisdom still had power to help them. And she realized how foolish she was to silence the wise Beetle Woman, who was trying to help her. It was for this reason that Scorpion Woman created the mystics, people who were charged with preserving all the knowledge of the tribe, and who could never be silenced. Scorpion Boy became the first of the mystics. In the years that followed, both Scorpion Woman and her tribe became healthy and strong again. And her people loved her in her later years even more than they had before."

Mouse had forgotten how cold she was as she listened to the story. In the silence that followed, the chill began to return.

"Good story," Ocelot said, breaking the silence that followed the story. "It is interesting to hear that we have always had people like Mouse Girl, stubborn and headstrong, who do whatever comes into their head no matter what the elders say."

She said this in a gentle enough way that even Mouse Girl heard it as a compliment and not as a criticism. There was a little laughter, and Mouse noticed that as the members of Ocelot's quest made eye contact with her, they seemed to look at her with a little bit of admiration, instead of scorn. Was this all in her mind, or were people's attitudes towards her really changing? In any event, she still found it annoying that people seemed to respect her, not because of her own actions, but because Ocelot had decided she deserved respect. Even when Ocelot is on my side, she bothers me, Mouse thought.

The next few days were uneventful. The two quests lived together on the limestone ledge and watched the brown, swollen river fill the valley below. Mouse didn't worry much about Ferret and Rat because there was nothing they could do that would not be seen by everyone. Besides, most of her attention was given to Beaver, who spent every moment he could near Mouse.

Finally, as the river began to recede, Mouse gathered her quest together. She was anxious to get away from the crowded campsite. On a drizzly morning, they climbed down into the muddy valley and began their investigation of the valley.

Two weeks went by, and Mouse saw no indication of any human activity. As far as they could travel up and down the valley, it was empty. They met up with Ocelot's quest and made a plan for searching for humans outside the valley. Ocelot searched in the direction of the morning sun, back towards their home valley, and Mouse searched in the direction of the evening sun. Mouse and her quest traveled for six nights before finding the first ghost road. That was a very long way! Mouse thought.

When they gathered again on the limestone ledge and shared all of their findings, Ocelot and Mouse both agreed that this place looked as safe as anyplace could be. There was always a possibility of Bear men or ghosts coming into the valley, but this was definitely not a place they came to often. And the high, limestone walls of the valley gave the Bird people many places to hide from the Bear men and their dogs, if they did ever come.

"It is time, then, to send word to our tribe. We have found a possible home," Ocelot said to Mouse Girl as they sat by the fire one evening. "You and I must decide, Mouse, who carries

this message back to our people and who stays here in the valley."

Mouse was amazed that Ocelot was seeking her input in this decision. But she knew her preference. She wanted to stay in the valley and away from the ghost roads. Besides, she knew the elders would listen to news from Ocelot more seriously than any message Mouse would ever bring.

"I'd like to stay and learn more about the valley as the spring plants grow," Mouse said. "And I'll be glad to keep Zari with us. The trip is dangerous and he'll be safer here."

Ocelot nodded. "I've also been thinking of leaving Snake behind. She's too unpredictable. She could cause trouble on the journey."

Mouse knew she would have to accept this, but she didn't really want the hassle of dealing with a slave. Snake was always so angry and uncooperative. Everything took longer with her around. And Mouse had noticed of herself that she spent so much time watching Snake's attitude, she wasn't being watchful of the rest of the world.

"With just the five of us on the journey, I think we can make it in seven or eight days," Ocelot said.

Mouse did the calculations in her head and that sounded impossible, but with Ocelot, maybe it could happen.

"And then we'll send back two messengers to let you know the tribe's reaction," Ocelot concluded.

"We'll scout out possible family sites and look for springs as the river recedes back into its banks," Mouse said.

Ocelot and her small group left at sunset. Ocelot had now made her elite group even smaller. And Mouse was stuck with the problems. What should they do with Zari? Were his parents dead? If they were alive, were they ever coming back?

And had Ocelot had any conversation with Snake about how she might undo the wrongs she had done? Did Mouse have the authority to work with Snake, or was she expected to simply treat her as a slave until someone else dealt with her?

"So, we are waiting around for Ocelot to return," Ringtail said as they sat around the fire. "What do we do in that time? We've searched this whole river valley."

"We've searched it for signs of danger," Mouse said. "Now we need to know where our assets are. Pecan trees, walnut trees, springs, shelters… All that stuff."

"And we mainly went upstream," Badger added. "Ocelot searched downstream, so we haven't even seen what's down there."

"I'll divide us up into two search parties in the morning and we'll start exploring," Mouse said. She looked up at the clear night sky. "Tell us a story about the stars, Ferret."

"The stars are a mystery," Ferret said. "It is said the sky is the sea in which the spirits live. The stars are adrift in that sea. It is said that we are drops of water in search of the sea."

"Have you guys ever seen the sea?" Jaguarundi asked. "I mean, the big, salty sea where my people are from?"

Everyone shook their heads. They had heard stories of water so wide that no one had ever seen the other side, but no one in their generation had ever seen it.

"It is beautiful," Jaguarundi said. "And terrifying. It is so big and so wild. My people make boats and gather fish sometimes. But the water is very dangerous. The waves alone are treacherous, and there are creatures in the water that are even more so."

"Like what kind of creatures?" Badger asked.

“There are fish large enough to eat us whole,” Jag said. “And horrible things with stinging tentacles…”

“Wait,” Mouse interrupted. “I don’t want to hear about scary creatures tonight. We have enough to worry about here. Sometime, when we have more of the tribe gathered and we know this land a little better, we’ll have time to hear about monsters from another land. For now, I want to hear more about the spirits. If they are our destiny, how do we get to them from here? Can we possibly get to that sea in the sky?”

Ferret nodded. “The eagles and buzzards fly there every day. And owls and bats do the same by night.”

“But wait,” Rat said. “All those animals fly in the sky close to us. The stars seem like they’re a lot farther away.”

Ferret shrugged. “We’ll find out if we ever get there.”

“If we ever get where?” Mouse asked.

Ferret looked up. She gestured with her hand, making a long arc across the sky. “Up there. We are going up there.”

“Who is going up there? That’s not possible,” Mouse protested.

Ferret laughed. “You are the one who is carrying the wings of the cult,” she said.

“These wings slow down our fall when we dive from the cliffs,” Mouse said. “And half the time, they don’t even do that. Have you guys noticed how many cult members have broken legs and missing eyes?”

Everyone nodded.

“You and Deer Girl are going to have to face those dangers,” Ferret said. “And you’re going to be asked to go farther than the older generations have ever gone.” She looked around. “The cliffs in this place are much higher than the ones back home.”

Mouse also looked at the cliffs. And she noted that this giant canyon lacked a deep pool of water to fall into when wings failed. Deer Girl and I could die here, she thought.

"And, as you said, our tribe's wings only let us drift down," Ferret said. "I believe there may be wings that can let us fly up."

Ferret said this while looking straight at Mouse. Mouse nodded. Ferret had been describing wings like that to Mouse whenever they had a spare moment. Ferret was pretty sure the cave drawings she saw in the cave of the sleeping death showed details of such wings. But Ferret had never mentioned using the wings to explore the sky; she had only talked of using them to help the cult members stay aloft longer and to fly farther.

In the evenings Ferret and Jaguarundi had been making Mouse try out the new wings they were designing. Mouse had been able to catch a strong breeze a few times and float a few feet above the ground. She could even waive the wings like a flapping bird and stay up another moment or two. But when Mouse thought about flying up even higher than the cliffs, she shuddered with fear.

Mouse was happy to let this conversation end. After they talked a while longer, she divided the boys from the girls so they could sleep. And she reminded them about the lion tracks they had seen. "Don't go anywhere alone," she warned.

In the morning, they ate a small amount of dry pinole.

"I'd be glad to find a few old, dried up pecans," Badger said.

Mouse nodded. "Gather up whatever you find. And the same goes for any greens. I've seen plenty of dandelions."

Mouse looked out over the canyon. “Ringtail, you take Rat, Jaguarundi, and Zari, and search upstream. We saw some promising caves in that direction. I want to go downstream to see what Ocelot saw. I’ll take Badger, Ferret, and Snake.”

They began to gather their gear, and Snake approached Mouse.

“You haven’t given me any instructions about my duties,” Snake said. “Ocelot made me carry her pack.”

“Snake, you’re Ocelot’s slave, not mine,” Mouse said. “When you’re with me, your duties are to be an excellent quest member. That’s all.”

Snake stared at her. “You can’t pretend that I’m not a slave,” Snake said. “I’ve betrayed our people. I don’t deserve to be treated as an equal.”

Mouse nodded and took a deep breath. “You’re right. But right now, slave girl, I need your eyes and your mind. I need to know everything about this valley. I can carry my own pack.”

She turned away. “Let’s go. We’ll meet back here after sunset. Stay on guard. We’ve seen some big hawks. Have your bows ready. And watch out for Bear men.”

She began the climb down the cliffside. Halfway down, she heard shouts from above.

“Ocelot is back!” Badger yelled. “Someone is hurt!”

17- Treachery

(In which the quest is attacked, Mouse is poisoned, and Beaver is killed. A girl named Cactus Thorn is taken prisoner.)

Ocelot returned with a wounded Mouse Boy. He had been bitten by a snake as they tried to cross a flooded valley.

"He was swimming across the river to scout out the other side, when it bit him," Ocelot said. "There's definitely some venom in his hand. It's already swelling."

Mouse felt sick to her stomach as she watched her brother carried into the camp and placed on a mat. He looked calm, but she knew he was scared.

"How does your hand feel?" Mouse Girl asked.

"It hurts," Mouse Boy answered. "A lot."

"We've given him two nightshade leaves to chew to keep him calm," Deer Girl said.

"That's a lot," Mouse Girl commented. "We can't give him much more than that."

Deer Girl shook her head. "It's going to keep hurting a lot. The best thing we can do is keep him lying down, but make sure he keeps breathing."

Mouse examined the bite on her brother's hand. There were two red holes at the base of his thumb. Mouse knew he was likely to lose that hand if he were lucky enough to live. And it was on his dominant hand.

"We can hope the snake didn't put much venom in," Deer Girl said. "We'll have to wait and see."

“Until then, I think you can have someone watch him while the rest of you scout the valley,” Ocelot said. “We will continue back home.”

Mouse Girl nodded, although it made her angry how quickly Ocelot changed the subject from Mouse Boy’s injury. Would it kill her to show a little compassion?

“We will be fine,” Mouse said, “but can you safely travel with only four people? Your security will be very thin.”

Ocelot nodded. It was true, they would have only one set of eyes watching each direction. Anyone who slacked off on their job just a little could easily get them killed.

“We will make it back,” Ocelot said. “This news is too important to delay. But I want you to maintain maximum security while we’re gone. I sensed something wrong out there.”

“Like what?” Mouse asked.

“I don’t know,” Ocelot answered. “But I got the feeling we were being watched. Whoever it was was too stealthy to be bears or ghosts. If there is someone out there, it is someone like us.”

“But who could it be?” Mouse asked.

Ocelot shrugged. “Just be on guard.”

Ocelot’s four-person quest drank some water and ate a little food. Each of them said a few words to Mouse Boy. Then they climbed up and over the cliff. And they were gone.

Mouse Girl had the fire put out and made sure it was not smoking. She told Rat and Snake to stay with Mouse Boy and gave them instructions for his care.

“But stay out of sight,” Mouse Girl said. “Ocelot thinks there may be Bird people watching us.”

Rat and Snake were obviously unhappy to be excluded from the surveying of the valley, but the threat of danger took their minds off being left behind. They strung their bows and moved everything in the camp into the shadows.

Mouse would have liked to stay hidden until evening, but a survey of the valley had to be done in daylight. And if Ocelot was going to travel by day, surely she could as well. She organized everyone else into one team and decided to travel downstream, in the configuration of a war party. Ringtail and Jaguarundi were sent to the top of the cliffs to travel above Mouse Girl. The rest climbed down into the valley and stayed near the foot of the cliffs.

They had not traveled far when Mouse heard Ringtail's warning whistle. They froze where they were. A few moments later Ringtail gave the whistle to rendezvous, so Mouse quickly climbed the valley wall. Ringtail was waiting.

"Someone is running around out there," Ringtail said. "No other noise than that, but whoever it is, they sound hurried or scared."

Mouse, Ringtail, and Jaguarundi readied their bows and moved forward away from the cliffs. The brush-covered landscape was silent as they wove in and out of the high, thorny vegetation. There were no bird sounds.

Suddenly, far to their right, they saw someone break out of the cover of the brush and just as quickly disappear again.

"That looked like Beaver," Mouse said. They walked quickly in the direction he was running, their arrows notched on their bowstrings.

They heard a yell, and they began to run. Mouse was the fastest. She ducked around a huisache tree and saw Beaver on the ground, an arrow in his chest. She looked around and saw

someone through the brush as an arrow grazed her shirt. Not taking time to move towards cover, Mouse quickly returned an arrow toward the attacker.

Mouse's arrow struck the attacker, a small female, in the thigh. Mouse was amazed that the assailant continued to notch her arrow and take aim in spite of the arrow in her thigh. Mouse knew this was not the time to back down. This was a dangerous opponent, and one of Mouse's fellow tribe members was already hurt. Mouse grabbed another arrow from her quiver and began to notch it even as her opponent's arrow flew toward her with deadly accuracy. Mouse notched her arrow even as she moved ever so slightly to allow her opponent's arrow to pass by her. Mouse aimed and let her arrow fly. Her opponent sidestepped the arrow as easily as Mouse had.

Although the girl was fast and good with a bow, Mouse noticed something odd about her face. She seemed to be able to see with only one eye.

It was then that another arrow flew from behind Mouse. Jaguarundi had arrived. Ringtail would not be far behind. Mouse's opponent turned and disappeared into the brush.

"Cactus Thorn!" Jaguarundi said.

Mouse knelt beside Beaver to examine his wounds. "What does that mean?" Mouse asked as she moved Beaver's shirt aside and saw that the arrow had gone deep into his chest. Beaver was unconscious.

"I know that girl," Jaguarundi said. "She's from my old tribe."

"Why is she attacking us?" Mouse said, not sure what to do for Beaver, and keenly aware that they were still in danger of attack.

Ringtail arrived, breathing hard. “Ocelot is right behind me,” he said.

Ocelot appeared. She saw Beaver and a look of horror crossed her face.

“Who are these evil people and why are they attacking us?” she asked. The rage in her voice indicated she was on the verge of losing control of her emotions.

“Jaguarundi says that one of them is from her tribe,” Mouse said. “How many are there?”

“Five, at least,” Ocelot answered. She looked angrily at Jaguarundi. “From your tribe? Why?”

Mouse realized that Jaguarundi might be in danger. Ocelot had always suspected her of being a spy of some kind. Jaguarundi looked scared and nervous. She looked at Mouse, as Deer and Otter appeared behind Ocelot, bows drawn.

“I’ve told you how my tribe is not like your tribe,” Jaguarundi said. “They are much more violent and warlike. If I had to guess, I would say they may be trying to make sure our quest fails.”

“Why would they do that?” Ocelot asked.

“If we don’t find a new land for our people, we would most likely be forced to go and join my old tribe,” Jaguarundi said.

“Why would they want that?” Ocelot said.

“We wouldn’t be welcomed as equals,” Jaguarundi said. “They would make us pay. Some of us would become slaves. The others, they would divide up into marriages of their own choosing. Often men will take more than one wife, if there are too many people.”

Ocelot and Mouse began to understand.

“This could be a war party sent to kill us all,” Mouse said, “so that we never report back to our tribe.”

“And then they can take the rest of our tribe captive,” Ocelot said. She looked around. “Okay, there are five of us here. Where are the rest?”

“Down in the valley,” Mouse answered.

“That’s too far away to be of help right now,” Ocelot said. “We have to counterattack now. Our numbers are about even.”

“And I’ve wounded one of them,” Mouse said.

“I don’t think so,” Jaguarundi answered. “If this is a war party, they’re wearing armor. Your arrow probably didn’t hurt her much.”

“Okay, this is worse than I thought,” Ocelot said. “We’re facing armored enemies who are prepared for battle. We still counter-attack. We can’t show weakness.”

Ocelot looked at Ringtail.

“Ringtail, put away your bow and get your atlatl ready,” she said. “That’s something their armor won’t stop. We’re going to have to draw them into an ambush.”

“That should be easy,” Mouse agreed. “They know they’ve caught us by surprise and they’re thinking it will be likely that we panic and run.”

A plan began to formulate in Ocelot’s mind. She looked at Jaguarundi and Mouse. “You two will be the bait.”

Ocelot quickly outlined her strategy. They would have to leave Beaver alone here. They would only be able to help him if they survived. Mouse and Jaguarundi were to get the attention of the enemies and act as if they were running. When the enemy pursued them, Ocelot would attack from their unprotected flank. This attack would include Ringtail and his atlatl. If they turned to attack Ocelot, as they most likely would, Mouse and Jaguarundi would be ready to counter-attack, again from the flank. It was a classic ambush scenario

that Mouse and Ocelot had rehearsed hundreds of times with their quests.

Ocelot grabbed Jaguarundi by the arm and took her aside. Her voice was angry and urgent, but Mouse could not make out what she was saying. Jaguarundi simply nodded obediently. Ocelot pushed her away. “Now, go!” Ocelot said.

Jaguarundi gestured for Mouse to follow her.

“What did she say?” Mouse asked, as Jaguarundi led her in the direction Ocelot had indicated.

“This is a dangerous plan,” Jaguarundi said. She placed her hand on Mouse’s shoulder and smiled. “We may die today. But I’m happy that I might die with you, Mouse. I am honored to be your sister.”

Mouse didn’t like the formal and fatalistic tone of Jaguarundi’s voice. “No one can hit me with an arrow, if I’m ready for it,” Mouse said. “I have no plan to die today.”

Jaguarundi’s smile got bigger. “I’m not worried about arrows,” she said. She adjusted Mouse’s quiver and placed her hand on Mouse’s pack. “This is what might kill us.”

Mouse realized Jaguarundi had her hand on Mouse’s folded wings. Jaguarundi pulled the wings out of Mouse’s pack, rolled them out of their cloth wrapping and began to prepare them for unfurling. Mouse’s eyes grew wide.

“Wait!” she said. “I’ve only had a lesson or two with those. And only off of very low places.”

“Today, we are going to fly off of these big, beautiful cliffs,” Jaguarundi said.

The girls prepared both pair of wings for flight. Mouse was impressed how deftly Jag worked with her wings. She seemed to have had a lot of practice doing this.

The key to Ocelot's plan was to let Cactus Thorn's band think they had isolated Mouse and Jaguarundi and that they were backing them against the cliffs. They could then attack their enemies from two sides. Mouse and Jag could escape by gliding off the cliffs with their wings, if necessary, while Ocelot continued the attack. But first Mouse and Jaguarundi had to find their enemies and then stealthily get between them and the cliffs.

Sneaking around Bird people was almost impossible. Fortunately, Mouse and Jaguarundi were in the top of their form. Silently, they moved through the brush. They got close enough to see that Cactus Thorn was obviously not the leader. They counted six, not five, warriors and they seemed to be planning for an attack.

As they navigated around the enemy band, Mouse stopped and asked Jaguarundi if she knew all their opponents. Jaguarundi nodded.

"You know that Ocelot means to kill them all," Mouse said.

Jaguarundi nodded again.

"That doesn't bother you?" Mouse asked, "To see people you know get killed?"

"I've been afraid of those people my whole life," Jaguarundi explained. "They are cruel and violent. Dying in a battle that they started will be a fitting end for them."

"Even the girl, Cactus Thorn?" Mouse asked. "She doesn't look much older than us."

"She is a twisted woman," Jaguarundi explained. "It's probably not her fault she turned out that way, but you don't ever want to be caught by her. She loves hurting people."

Mouse decided not to ask how Jaguarundi knew this. She was satisfied that Jaguarundi would not hinder Ocelot's counterattack. Mouse waited until she saw Ocelot hiding in the distance before she moved again. They took off towards the cliffs, and Mouse made some clumsy noise.

It wasn't long before they heard someone following them. Mouse exposed herself slightly from behind a large boulder. She heard an arrow fly and barely moved to one side. She hadn't seen the attacker. She and Jaguarundi ran away from whomever sent that arrow. Mouse saw another figure to her left, a woman. The woman let an arrow fly towards Jaguarundi, but Jaguarundi easily avoided it. They heard whistles and cries from their hunters. Mouse turned directly toward the cliffs. Their attackers followed, but stopped shooting arrows. They knew the cliffs would stop their prey's escape. But they also exposed themselves to Ocelot's attack.

Mouse heard cries. She took cover and looked back long enough to see that two of their enemies had fallen. One clearly had an atlatl dart in his side. Their enemies instinctively took shelter from Ocelot's attack, which completely exposed them to Mouse and Jaguarundi's arrows. The girls did not hesitate. Anticipating armor, Mouse aimed for faces and throats. Another woman fell due to Mouse's arrow.

Mouse was feeling good about this strategy. Three of the enemy were immobilized. But then, they resumed their attack on Mouse and the thrill of victory was gone. They were angry and desperate now, and Mouse knew they wanted to hurt her.

Mouse and Jaguarundi ran as fast as they could. The fury of their enemies seemed to have given them strength. Mouse knew she needed time to put on her wings, but she was beginning to believe there would be no time.

She hoped Ocelot's flank attack would help somehow, but now that their enemies knew Ocelot was there, they were able to avoid exposure from that direction. Mouse and Jaguarundi were facing three infuriated killers. And the cliffs were coming up quickly.

There was no way they were going to be able to glide away; there simply was not time. Therefore, Mouse did the only thing she could. She stopped and turned to face her enemy. She let arrows fly at them, but they were too quick at dodging. Mouse heard Jaguarundi throw her wings on the ground and begin to spread them. *How long will it take her to get ready?* Mouse wondered. *Will I live long enough to keep them away?*

Two of the enemy stopped and took cover behind boulders, with their arrows notched and aimed at Mouse. The third, a large male, walked confidently toward Mouse. Their arrows were pointed at each other and Mouse knew they would soon be too close to make dodging possible. Plus she knew two other archers were ready to shoot her at any vulnerable moment.

Her attacker seemed to enjoy seeing the worry in her eyes. Mouse decided her bow was not a helpful asset at this point so she dropped it and dove behind a boulder. The big man laughed. An arrow flew near him from Ocelot's direction, but Ocelot's people seemed to be too far away to help as quickly as Mouse needed help.

Mouse stayed as still as possible behind the boulder and tried to imagine how close the man was. She had her stone axe in her hand. Hearing a slight sound that might have been his footstep, Mouse rolled to her feet and, with all of her might, threw her axe at the man. It was a perfectly aimed and powerful throw. It managed to fly past his attempt to knock it

away. But it hit him squarely on the leather armor that covered his chest. He laughed as the axe remained stuck in his armor. He had a perfect shot at Mouse as he lifted his bow. She had nowhere to take cover. Suddenly an arrow flew over Mouse's shoulder and lodged in his neck.

Mouse was so engrossed by this wonderfully timed aid from Jaguarundi, that she barely saw Cactus Thorn's arrow. She jerked away from it, but it caught her squarely in her right arm, near her shoulder. She fell to the ground and rolled to cover.

She looked behind her to see if she could tell where Jaguarundi was, but Jaguarundi had lowered herself over the crumbling cliff edge. If she were smart, Mouse thought, she was putting on her wings and counting on Ocelot to come to Mouse's rescue. Mouse knew Ocelot had to be close at hand. She pulled the arrow from her arm, and quickly realized this was a mistake. An alarming amount of blood spurted out.

And then, over the boulder, flew Cactus Thorn, knife drawn. Mouse managed to catch Cactus Thorn's knife hand with her uninjured arm, but she knew there was little hope of winning this fight without her right arm. Cactus Thorn was on top of Mouse, and she punched Mouse in the head. Mouse held onto Cactus Thorn's knife hand as Cactus Thorn struck her again and again. Mouse was losing consciousness, but she focused all of her remaining awareness on that knife.

And then, Mouse saw two figures arise from behind Cactus Thorn. They grabbed the girl and carried her away. Mouse watched as they carried her to the cliff. Cactus Thorn screamed as they prepared to fling her over the side of the cliff. Mouse felt a deep satisfaction as she thought of Cactus Thorn being thrown to her death upon the rocks below.

But then another figure arose from below the ledge of the cliff. It was Jaguarundi, and she stood between Cactus Thorn and the cliff.

"No," Jaguarundi said. "She doesn't deserve to die. She can't hurt us anymore."

It was Ringtail and Otter who were holding Cactus Thorn. They stopped and held her firmly. Cactus Thorn struggled and cursed, but could not break free. Ocelot approached and took note of the situation. She walked to Cactus Thorn and grabbed her by the hair. Cactus Thorn stared at Ocelot with her one good eye.

"All of your murderous friends are dead," Ocelot said.

Cactus Thorn fell silent.

"What do you think we should do to you?" Ocelot asked Cactus Thorn.

Cactus Thorn growled. "If our places were reversed, I would split you open from your chin to your belly and let you die slowly as food for the vultures."

Ocelot pulled out her knife. She struck Cactus Thorn on the head hard enough to knock her unconscious, maybe even hard enough to kill her. Cactus Thorn collapsed.

Ringtail let her fall to the ground. "What a horrible person," he said.

Mouse laughed and then lost consciousness.

When she awoke, she was on a mat with a blanket over her. She could hear and smell a fire, but it was nighttime and she could see nothing. It took her a moment to realize that it didn't make sense that she could see nothing if there was, in fact, a fire. She tried to waive her right hand in front of her eyes, but a horrible pain reminded her of the arrow wound in

that arm. She waived the left hand in front of her eyes, but saw nothing.

She heard someone approach.

"Mouse, you're awake!" the voice said. It was Ferret's voice.

"Yes, but I can't see anything," Mouse said.

"I know," Ferret said. "You've been coming in and out of consciousness for a few days now. I don't know why you can't see, but I suspect the arrow that struck you was poisoned. That would also explain why you have been down for so long."

Mouse did indeed feel very weak. "How long have I been here?" she asked.

"Ten days," Ferret said.

"Ten days!" Mouse said, trying to sit up, but finding herself unable to do so. "How is my brother?"

"His arm is swollen and it looks bad, but it could be worse," Ferret said. "He'll definitely live. His arm still might survive; we still can't tell."

This slightly hopeful news helped Mouse relax.

"Ten days," Mouse said again, "what's happened in all that time?"

"After the attack, we buried the dead, including Beaver," Ferret said.

This news took Mouse's breath away. She had known many people who had died young, but never anyone as close to her as Beaver. She had hoped maybe he would be the one she married.

Ferret held Mouse's hand and said nothing. Mouse felt tears forming in her eyes, but did nothing to stop them. Grief swept over her and she convulsed, sobbing. Ferret leaned over

her and held her in an embrace as she cried. After a minute or two, Mouse regained her composure.

"We all loved him," Ferret said.

"What happened to the evil girl?" Mouse asked.

"Cactus Thorn," Ferret said. "Ocelot let her live, although she keeps her tied up. Ocelot left seven days ago to our home village, and ordered that Cactus Thorn be kept bound the entire time she was gone. She wants the tribal elders to deal with her."

"She's here?" Mouse said. "What if she escapes? She'll kill us all."

"No," Ferret said. "You haven't seen how completely bound she is. Ocelot gave very thorough instructions for her safe-keeping. She won't get loose. The bindings might kill her, but she won't get away."

"Who is here with us?" Mouse asked.

"Your brother," Ferret answered. "And Ringtail, Jaguarundi, Badger, and Rat. Plus Snake and Zari."

"How is Snake doing?" Mouse asked.

"Much better now that Ocelot is gone," Ferret said. "I told her that if she kept us safe until the elders arrive, I would personally request that she be forgiven."

"Thank you for that," Mouse said. "Ocelot doesn't seem to be very good at forgiveness. As far as I know she hasn't given Snake any way to redeem herself. A person can't live like that for very long."

Ferret nodded in agreement, and then remembered that Mouse could not see her.

"I think you're right," Ferret said.

That night, Mouse was able to sit up and eat dinner with the rest of the group. She didn't eat much and she felt

extremely weak, but she felt a need to be up. She made Ferret lead her around the camp. She wanted to know where the ledge ended, and she wanted to know where the easiest path up the cliff was, in case of emergency.

"I don't think you'll need to know that," Ferret said, but she showed her anyway.

The only thing Mouse did not want to go near was Cactus Thorn. She didn't want Cactus Thorn to see her blinded. In fact, she ordered that no information about herself be given to Cactus Thorn at all.

After dinner, Jaguarundi came to Mouse's mat to sit and talk.

"You know," Jaguarundi said, "I think we're lucky we didn't have to jump off those cliffs. I had forgotten that my tribe does much more wing work than your tribe. You could have hurt yourself badly."

"I guess I won't be doing anymore wing work, now that I can't see," Mouse said, matter-of-factly.

"I doubt this blindness will last," Jaguarundi said. "You look too healthy. I'm sure it's just a temporary problem."

Mouse didn't argue, but she wasn't convinced.

"Look," Jaguarundi said, "I'll show you the improvements I've made on my wings. If it works like I hope it will, we can try it with yours."

Mouse tried to protest, but Jaguarundi had already gotten up and left to get her wings. She was soon back.

"Look how much more movable the joints of my wings are," Jaguarundi said, guiding Mouse's hands over the wings. "Your wings are stiff and they don't flex at all. That makes them very hard to control, and it makes it hard to change direction."

“They’re bouncy,” Mouse said.

“They are, and when they fill with wind, they keep their shape very well, but I can bend them enough to turn left and right in flight,” Jaguarundi explained.

Mouse’s experience with her own wings was that once the wings caught the wind, you were pretty much forced to curve to the ground wherever the wind took you.

“But Ferret and I have been working on some improved joints,” Jaguarundi continued. “Ferret found some drawings in that cave that seem to show a much more complicated system of joints. I’ve been trying to see if I can make them work. I think I’ll need to make an entirely new set of wings to really try it, but so far, I’ve made some of my joints much more responsive.

“And,” Jaguarundi’s voice sounded very enthusiastic as she said this, “we saw a system of joints that seems to lock in place in such a way that your hands would be free to do something else while you continued to maneuver. And then, with just the right twist, your hands could take control again!”

Mouse realized that Jaguarundi was indeed very excited about this. She tried to stay interested in all the details, but she was tired and she couldn’t see what Jaguarundi was talking about anyway.

Mouse yawned. “And what if these new wings really work?” Mouse asked. “What difference will it make?”

Jaguarundi paused. “What do you mean?”

“We spend all this time learning to glide a little bit farther, and a little bit farther still,” Mouse said. “What good does gliding do for us?”

“I don’t want to glide,” Jaguarundi said. “I want to fly. An old man in my former tribe thinks it’s possible.”

“Fly?” Mouse asked. “Like a bird?”

“He says we’ll probably never fly like a sparrow or a red bird,” Jaguarundi said. “Flying like a hawk is easier, he thinks, but too dangerous. We’re not ready to fly high. However, flying like a guajolote, that we can do!”

“A turkey?” Mouse said. “Your goal is to fly like a turkey?”

“Yes,” Jaguarundi said. “Right now, all we can do is glide down. Turkeys can actually fly up. I think I can make the wings that will do that. But it will take someone very strong. And someone small, like you.”

“You’re pretty strong yourself,” Mouse said.

“I’m strong, but I’m too big,” Jaguarundi said. “You are a natural flier. You’ll do much better at it than I ever will.”

This crazy new thought kept Mouse thinking. Even as she fell asleep, she dreamed of being the first person in the tribe to truly fly. Turkey Girl, they’d call her.

18 - The New Land

(In which the elders of the Bird tribe begin to arrive and Cactus Thorn escapes.)

The days were long and quiet. Mouse began to teach herself to gather information by sound and smell. She tried to keep track of where everyone was by listening to their footsteps and any other small noises. She tried walking around the camp alone. Ferret gave her a stick to feel around for obstacles and to feel where the cliff walls were and where the ledge dropped off. Mouse stayed away from the ledge.

Six days had passed when Mouse heard activity above their camp. Someone was climbing down the cliff.

"Ferret!" Mouse called out. "Someone is coming."

"I see them," Ferret replied. "It's Otter Girl and a male."

"It's my brother," Badger said. "They made it back home!"

Sure enough, it was Badger's older brother. According to custom, he was called First Badger.

Everyone gathered to greet Otter and First Badger.

"This is an amazing place you've found," First Badger said. "This is like a miracle, finding a land this big. You guys are amazing!"

Mouse felt wonderful hearing an older tribe member speak so highly of the work they had done.

"Deer Mother and Badger Father are leading the group to explore this new valley," Otter Girl said. "Because of all the trouble we've had, they are only sending adults for now. Once they are sure everything is safe, they're hoping to move everybody."

"How long until they get here?" Mouse asked.

"They should only be a day or two behind us," First Badger said. "They're carrying extra provisions, since Ocelot said you are running short. But until then, you are in charge, Mouse."

"I'm in charge?" Mouse said in wonder. "I'm blind. I can't do anything."

"We need to organize an entire village," First Badger said. "You are the best one to do that. You know the area and you know your people. Frog has told us much about the training you gave him."

"Frog is doing well?" Mouse asked.

"Very well. He's been matched with a wife – a new woman who came to us from the sunset tribes. Frog says he owes his survival to you."

It made Mouse very happy to know that Frog thought well of her after the coyote attack. She still blamed herself for that. Mouse drew in a deep breath. *I can do this*, she thought. *Unfortunately, we are few in number, injured, and encumbered with a dangerous prisoner and an angry slave.*

"Okay, then, Ringtail, let's talk security. Ferret, where are we likely to find the herbs we need? Let's gather by the campfire and make a plan."

Mouse was ready to take charge. Ferret subtly helped guide Mouse to the campfire, to make sure she didn't stumble along the way. Mouse appreciated the help.

They spent the rest of the day discussing the best home sites they had found. Ferret liked the low areas for plant availability, but those were the areas that flooded first. Ringtail took First Badger out to see some of the home sites and to have two minds thinking about defensibility. By the time the sun set, they thought they had a plan for at least a dozen families. First Badger was impressed by their work. He

sat beside Mouse at the campfire and asked seemingly endless questions about their quest.

As they prepared for bed, Ferret came to join Mouse on her mat. Mouse Girl was combing out her hair. The Bird people kept their hair braided almost all the time to keep it out of the way of their bows and arrows. Mouse could no longer use her bow, but she was not ready to stop the habit of braiding her hair each morning.

"How's the prisoner?" Mouse asked.

"She's secure," Ferret said. "Snake has made it her goal to see that she stays that way. And Snake has made it clear to her that every one of us is ready to kill her if she makes any trouble at all."

"Excellent," Mouse said. "This may be what Snake needs. A mission to help redeem her within the tribe."

"I noticed you didn't mention anything about Snake's betrayal and punishment to First Badger," Ferret said.

"Maybe we can put that behind us before the tribe gets here," Mouse said.

"I don't know what Ocelot will say about that," Ferret said, "but it would be nice to have Snake back to normal. I don't feel entirely safe here, with so much having gone wrong. We're in a weak position. If anything else goes wrong, it could be disastrous."

Mouse nodded. "I'm glad First Badger is here," she said. "We need his eyes and his bow."

"I noticed he was sitting pretty close to you by the campfire," Ferret said. "Do you think the elders sent him for a particular reason?"

"Are you saying he may be my mate?" Mouse asked.

“I don’t know,” Ferret said. “But the elders usually do the things they do for a reason. And if our quest is truly almost over, it is time to start matching us up. What do you think of him?”

“I try not to think of mates,” Mouse said. “It seems unwise until the elders make their will known.”

“You liked Beaver a lot, didn’t you?” Ferret asked.

“Of course,” Mouse said. “He was a good friend. And a great asset to the tribe.”

“And handsome and strong,” Ferret said. “You two spent a lot of time together.”

“We did,” Mouse said.

The two young women gazed into the distance. Ferret looked out over the valley, which was lit by moonlight, and wondered if she would always see this landscape and remember it as the place where Beaver died. It looked so big and so lonely. Lost in her memories, Mouse saw nothing at all.

“But you are right,” Ferret said. “The elders will give us all great mates. Still, I think you and First Badger would be a perfect match. You’re both strong and fast and smart. Your children would be great leaders. And, just between us, we need good leaders that aren’t from the Ocelot family. They scare me.”

“Be careful what you say,” Mouse said. “That could be considered a treasonous statement.”

“I’m not trying to be unfaithful to our leaders,” Ferret said, “but I’d like to see some more compassion than the Ocelots tend to show. They’re so fierce all the time.”

“Sometimes we have to be fierce to survive,” Mouse said, as she smoothed out her mat and pulled her blanket over

herself. She sat back against the cliff face. Ferret lifted up one side of the blanket and snuggled up against Mouse.

"Sometimes," Ferret agreed. "But you are a good and kind person. I want my children to know leaders like you."

They fell asleep together. Hours later they were awakened by a yell.

"Lizard shit!" said an unfamiliar voice. It took Mouse a moment to realize it was First Badger. "You stupid girl!"

Mouse pushed Ferret out from under the blanket. "Go find out what's going on."

There was more yelling as Mouse got up and slowly made her way to the campfire area. As she drew near, Ferret grabbed her by the arm.

"First Badger and Snake are fighting," Ferret said. "Badger's face is all bloody."

"She stabbed me in the face," First Badger yelled.

"First Badger!" Mouse yelled. "What is going on?"

All the voices stopped and Mouse heard many feet shuffling around.

"First Badger! Answer me!" Mouse ordered again. This time she didn't yell, but her voice was stern.

"Snake and I had a fight," First Badger said. "And my face is bleeding."

"What was the fight about?" Mouse asked.

She heard First Badger inhale deeply, but he said nothing.

"Snake, what was the fight about?" Mouse asked.

"First Badger tried to kill the prisoner," Snake said. "I was sleeping near her to guard her. I heard him approaching and assumed he was going to check her bindings. Then I saw him raise his knife, so I stopped him."

"First Badger, is this true?" Mouse asked.

First Badger took another deep breath, then answered.

"Yes," he said.

"Why would you take it upon yourself to murder a bound prisoner?" Mouse asked.

"I didn't take it upon myself," First Badger said. "I was sent here to kill her."

"By whose command did you come here to do this?" Mouse asked.

"Your grandmother and Ocelot Grandmother, the chief elders," First Badger answered.

"We don't murder people," Mouse said.

"She's dangerous," First Badger replied. "She killed Beaver and she tried to kill all of you."

"She's not dangerous while she's tied up," Mouse said. "When the elders get here, they can do what they want. For now, no one will hurt her. Is that understood?"

There were various answers, but Mouse didn't hear First Badger's voice.

"First Badger, do you understand that while I am in charge here, you will not harm the prisoner as long as she is bound?" Mouse asked.

"I understand," First Badger replied.

"Good," Mouse said, "now, walk with me. I have questions for you."

First Badger joined Mouse, as he held a bandage to his face. They walked away from the common area. Mouse carefully felt the ground with her walking stick.

"Why did you wait to do this in the middle of the night?" Mouse asked.

First Badger was quiet for a few moments. Mouse gave him time. She noted that he rarely spoke without thinking first.

"I didn't want everyone else to have to witness a murder," First Badger said. "It is bad enough that it must be done by one of us. Everyone else did not have to be involved."

This made sense, Mouse thought. They walked in silence, but this time it was Mouse who was considering her next words. It was First Badger who spoke first.

"You know that this has to be done," First Badger said. "If she returns to her people, they will all know where we are. They've already shown they are willing to kill us. She cannot be let free."

"I intend to keep her bound and safe until the tribal elders arrive," Mouse said. "They can deal with her then. But as long as I am in charge and she poses no danger, she lives."

First Badger nodded. He was walking and talking so naturally with Mouse that he almost forgot she could not see. "I understand," he said.

"Will you obey me over the wishes of the elders who sent you to kill her?" Mouse asked.

"For now," First Badger said, "as long as I am convinced she is secure."

"You hold no hard feelings towards Snake?" Mouse asked.

"I will try not to," First Badger said. "But that will be difficult."

Mouse smiled and almost laughed. "Snake has that effect on many people. She is intense, like all of the members of the first quest."

Ferret attended to First Badger's wounds. Mouse thanked Snake for her diligence and told her of First Badger's promise.

But she also warned her to remain vigilant. Cactus Thorn had many enemies.

As Mouse returned to her bed, she heard Cactus Thorn speak to Snake.

"You should have let him kill me," Cactus Thorn said. "Because if I get loose, I will show no mercy to any of you."

Mouse paused in the hopes of hearing Snake's reply, but Snake said nothing.

On the following day, Mouse sent out scouts to find campsites for as many people as possible. She made sure First Badger went with the scouts. Mouse wanted to keep him away from Cactus Thorn. Once First Badger was gone, Mouse conferred quietly with Snake. She wanted Snake to look for any evidence that Cactus Thorn had been loosening her bindings, or trying to weaken the ropes that tied her. Snake dutifully checked these things and reported back that she saw no evidence that Cactus Thorn was having any success in freeing herself. Mouse decided she would carry her fighting knives with her at all times, just in case.

The day was long and boring for Mouse. She was not accustomed to doing nothing all day while others explored. Several more days passed in similar fashion. Finally, on the fourth day of scouting, Mouse heard noise on the cliffs above, just after the scouts had left for the day. Mouse called to Snake.

"It is the elders," Snake said. "Your grandmother and Ocelot Grandmother are climbing down the cliffs. There are several others with them, including Ocelot and Deer Girl."

Mouse was very excited to see her grandmother. She was less than enthusiastic to see Ocelot Grandmother.

Mouse Grandmother was the first to reach the campsite. Mouse heard her and recognized her by her voice as she conversed with her fellow travelers. She was waiting when her grandmother reached her level.

"Grandmother!" Mouse said.

Mouse Grandmother seemed to catch on quickly that Mouse could not see her.

"I am here, granddaughter," she said.

They embraced.

"Ocelot said you have found us a great new land," Mouse Grandmother said.

"We hope so," Mouse said.

"I am also hopeful. It has been a difficult trip for us," Mouse Grandmother said. "First Fox was killed on the journey."

"I am sorry to hear this," Mouse said. "May I ask how he died?"

"We were attacked by ghost cats one night," Mouse Grandmother said. "First Fox defended us well, but there were too many cats. He was horribly wounded."

The rest of the party descended, seven people in all, including Ocelot and Deer Girl. Mouse was impressed that these two grandmothers were willing to travel so dangerous a journey with so little protection. Although, she recalled, Mouse Grandmother was excellent and swift with her bow.

Mouse welcomed all the travelers and invited them to gather around the campfire circle.

"The rest of our people are out scouting for home sites and they will return before sunset. Only Snake and I are here. And the prisoner," Mouse explained.

“That will give us time to speak with you and Ocelot,” Ocelot Grandmother said, as she sat. She sounded very tired. “And I will appreciate a little time to rest.”

“It is only you and Snake guarding the prisoner?” Mouse Grandmother asked. “I need not remind you that without your sight, you are a poor guard.”

“That is true, grandmother,” Mouse admitted. “But Snake is a diligent guard. And First Badger made sure the prisoner was secure before he left this morning.”

Mouse listened for any reaction from the grandmothers as she mentioned First Badger’s name. Would they give any sign that they knew of his secret mission? In true Bird tribe style, they showed no reaction whatsoever.

They spent the rest of the day talking about the quest. Mouse followed Ocelot’s lead, since she was not sure what details of their journey Ocelot may have concealed. She was surprised that her own decision to explore without Ocelot, against Ocelot’s own orders, was known by the grandmothers and seemed to not be a problem. However, there was no mention at all of Snake’s crime.

It turned out to be a pleasant day. An additional guard was assigned to help Snake watch the prisoner. The grandmothers were surprisingly good company when they were not acting in their roles of tribal leaders, Mouse thought. Perhaps the general mood of the situation was helped by the fact that the grandmothers were looking out over a vast, uninhabited river valley that might soon belong to them.

By late afternoon the scouts returned and there was a feeling of celebration around the camp. Mouse found another opportunity to talk with Ocelot and the grandmothers alone while the rest of the people enjoyed this time of reunion.

“Grandmothers,” Mouse said, “Now that you are here, who is in charge of this place? Is it you as the tribal elders or us as the quest leaders?”

Mouse Grandmother smiled as she realized that Mouse Girl had reclaimed her role as quest leader, even though it had been officially taken away from her by the elders. Ocelot Grandmother did not smile and, instead of answering, she looked to Mouse Grandmother. Mouse Grandmother spoke.

“This matter is up to us to decide. I suggest that you and Ocelot remain in charge until a majority of the elders arrive. At that point, we will celebrate and officially declare your quests completed. Does that sound reasonable to all of us?”

Mouse Grandmother looked at each person. There was no objection. Mouse Girl noticed that Ocelot Grandmother was saying little or nothing. Mouse was pretty sure this was something Ocelot Grandmother would have objected to if she had had the energy.

“How soon do we expect entire families to arrive?” Mouse asked.

“That is going to be a difficult decision,” Mouse Grandmother said. “It is a dangerous journey, as we have all seen. And we must be sure this new land is safer than our old land. But, now that we have seen that other tribes are willing to kill us rather than let us claim this land, we may want to move quickly.”

She looked to Ocelot Grandmother who nodded. In a quiet voice she replied, “I say we move quickly and quietly. Take a route upstream, away from our enemies and hope we are not detected.”

“And if we are detected?” Mouse Grandmother asked.

“Then we give them a fight,” Ocelot Grandmother answered.

Mouse Grandmother looked at Ocelot Girl. “We will need your experience and your bow. You will help lead the tribe here?”

She nodded in agreement but Mouse wondered why Ocelot Girl was being so quiet. What was happening that the entire Ocelot family was becoming meek?

“It is a shame both of you cannot help,” Mouse Grandmother said, caressing Mouse Girl’s hair. “The loss of your eyesight is a grievous loss to our entire people.” She turned to Ocelot Grandmother. “Do you think her eyesight will ever return?”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Ocelot Grandmother said. “I wish Ferret Mother were here to help us. She would know more than I.”

The four women rejoined the rest of the group at the campfire. There was singing and dancing and many stories of the journeys they had made. Squirrel Father had brought a skinful of some intoxicating beverage that he shared around the campfire.

“With all the food we had to carry, did you really carry that foul drink all this way?” Ocelot Grandmother asked.

“This and quite a bit more,” Squirrel Father answered.

The celebration lasted until late in the night. Mouse Girl was falling asleep as she listened to the stories. Suddenly she felt a hand on her arm, shaking her awake.

“You say you think the arrow that struck you was poisoned, and that is why you’ve lost your eyesight?” Squirrel Father asked.

“Yes,” Mouse Girl replied.

“Then why don’t we take the very same arrows and poison the prisoner,” Squirrel Father announced to the entire group around the fire. “If there is a cure for it, I’m sure she’ll tell us once she’s blind.”

Several voices loudly agreed. “Get her arrows!” someone cried.

“Wait!” Mouse Girl said. “You can’t do that. That would make us as evil as her.”

The excited voices quieted down.

“Don’t be so forgiving, child,” Squirrel Father said. “She would not do the same for you. And your future may depend upon this. You will be of little use to the tribe as a blind woman.”

The words stung Mouse. She had imagined all the consequences of her blindness in her mind, but to hear an adult say it so plainly was shocking. She would always be a burden on her people.

“No!” a voice shouted. It was Ocelot Girl. “Mouse is right. We’ve seen enough killing and maiming. And we are likely to see much more. But I will not allow anyone to attack a defenseless woman here in our new home. I don’t know what to do with her, but we will not poison her just to see what happens.”

The angry voices quieted a little. They were still angry, but Ocelot seemed to have prevailed for now.

“We’ll see what the elders say when they return,” Squirrel Father said. “I will take no joy in harming the girl, but, if she knows this poison, we ought to get her to talk.”

This grim conversation ended the celebratory atmosphere of the evening. One by one, people went to sleep.

Mouse sought out Ocelot. “Thank you for taking up for me,” Mouse said.

“I believe it is wrong to hurt Cactus Thorn,” Ocelot said. “But Squirrel Father is right. She probably knows something about the poison, if we can only get her to talk.”

Mouse made no reply and Ocelot walked away to her bedroll. Mouse carefully felt her way to her sleeping mat. On the way she passed by Ferret’s mat. She heard Ferret whispering to someone.

“Rat, you sleep with the men!” Mouse said, guessing correctly that Ferret’s late-night conversation partner was probably Rat. “The elders are returning. You two should be more careful than this.”

Rat quickly shuffled away. Ferret said nothing and Mouse wondered what she was thinking. Mouse’s mother had always told her that young people in love rarely thought at all. Mouse was beginning to believe it.

Mouse collapsed onto her mat, completely exhausted. She was falling asleep very quickly, when she noted the light of moonrise. This thought immediately woke her up completely. Did her eyes just detect moonlight? Her heart began to race. She crawled back to Ferret’s mat and gently shook her.

“Ferret,” Mouse said softly. “Where is the moon right now?”

Ferret turned away from Mouse and said, “It’s just now rising.”

Mouse smiled and crawled back to her mat. She fell fast asleep. She remembered nothing at all of the rest of the night until she was awakened by a screech. That sound was followed by angry screaming.

Mouse stood up, still groggy from sleep, and staggered in the direction of the noise. She heard a number of people near the campfire circle.

"What is going on?" she asked.

"Something bad," said a voice. It was Ringtail's. "From Cactus Thorn's cave."

"Get me through this crowd and into the cave," Mouse commanded.

Ringtail grabbed her arm and pushed through everyone else. Mouse realized the screaming belonged to Cactus Thorn.

"Here," Ringtail said.

"What is going on?" Mouse demanded to know.

"Squirrel Boy attacked the prisoner," Snake said. "He snuck by me while I was asleep."

"Squirrel Boy?" Mouse asked. "Why would you do that? You heard our decision at the campfire."

Squirrel Boy's voice was very soft as he answered. "My father was right. Let's poison her and see what she does about it."

"You piece of coyote crap!" The voice was Cactus Thorn's. "I will kill you, Squirrel Boy. And then I'll do the same to Mouse Girl for putting you up to this."

"I did not send Squirrel to do this. I demanded that no one harm you," Mouse said sternly.

"You lying bitch," Cactus Thorn said. "One day my whole tribe will know that you torture defenseless prisoners. You coward!"

"Gag her!" Ocelot Girl ordered. "Or I will not let her live to see the dawn."

Mouse heard struggling as Ocelot's order was carried out. The struggle sounded intense. Mouse desperately wanted to see what was happening.

"What did Squirrel Boy do?" Mouse asked Ocelot.

"He seems to have scraped one of Cactus Thorn's arrows across her face," Ocelot answered. "There's a lot of blood."

"Is Squirrel Father here?" Mouse asked.

"Yes, he is," Ocelot replied.

"Squirrel Father!" Mouse barked. "I want to talk to you."

Ocelot led Mouse Girl out of the cave and Squirrel Father joined them.

"Squirrel Father, did you know anything about this?" Mouse Girl asked.

"Are you questioning my honor?" Squirrel Father asked in an angry tone. "I told you I would not harm her. I would abide by the elders' decision."

"And you didn't send your son to do this for you?" Mouse asked.

"You had better be careful who you accuse of dishonesty, little girl," Squirrel Father said. "You can't afford to have many enemies in your helpless state."

"That will be enough, Squirrel Father." The voice was Mouse Grandmother's. "Calm down for a moment and you will realize that Mouse must ask you these questions. A serious breach of trust has occurred."

Squirrel Father took a deep breath. "You are right, grandmother. I apologize, little Mouse. You are only doing your duty. And I was wrong to threaten you. But a little girl such as you ought to take more care when challenging a full-grown man."

“That is enough, Squirrel Father,” Mouse Grandmother intervened. “You should have stopped with the apology. Even without sight, someone as capable as Mouse Girl will never fear your drunken ravings. Now, I want you to answer this next question carefully. Did you have anything to do with Squirrel Boy’s actions tonight?”

“No, I did not.”

“I do not believe you would betray your own son, Squirrel Father. Therefore, if you say Squirrel Boy acted with no provocation from you, I will believe you,” Mouse Grandmother said.

“I swear, I did not even say a word to him tonight,” Squirrel Father said. “The boy is headstrong sometimes. He must have thought he was doing the right thing, somehow.”

“We will speak to the boy,” Mouse Grandmother said, “and his punishment will be severe.”

Mouse Grandmother walked Mouse and Ocelot to the fire circle. Some of the older men were watching Squirrel Boy.

“As you can see, it is going to be difficult for either of you to maintain control of this group for very long,” Mouse Grandmother said. “Even if Ocelot Grandmother and I obey every word you say, some of these warriors will get unruly, especially over emotional issues like this.”

“What do you suggest we do?” Mouse asked.

“First, give the prisoner more protection,” Mouse Grandmother said. “I fear someone may try to kill her.”

Ocelot nodded. “I will personally protect her, if necessary.”

“And then, I suggest we conduct one more survey of the valley, and we send every adult away every day. Keep them

busy and away from the camp. Once they are finished, we will move the village here."

Mouse saw the logic in this, but she didn't understand why the basic rules of her people were not working.

"We have traditions," she said. "And we have always been expected to live by them. Why won't people simply do that?"

Mouse Grandmother smiled. "There are laws of nature more powerful than our traditions. It is not the ordinary way of life when young women give orders to adult men. And, unfortunately, revenge seems to be one of the most powerful forces in nature."

Mouse nodded, but she was still unsatisfied with this answer.

"But, even in doing all of this, I do not think either of you will be able to lead this group in a serious crisis. The men simply will not trust your orders."

This made Ocelot Girl bristle. Mouse Girl knew what was coming next. The leadership that was rightfully hers was about to be taken away.

"How do we make you grandmothers the proper leaders in this camp?" Mouse asked.

"You simply give the command and it will be done," Mouse Grandmother said. "I don't like this situation, but I've been a young woman, and I know that life is very unfair to the young. However, you will find it is even more unfair to the aged."

"I request that our quest be declared complete," Ocelot said. "If we cannot have the rightful privileges of being quest members, then I would like the privileges of adulthood."

Mouse Grandmother nodded. "I suppose we can do that. But what privileges do you want?"

"I have spent many years faithfully following the orders of adults," Ocelot said. "And now, when it is proper for me to give orders, those same adults do not wish to abide by tradition. At the very least, I do not wish to be treated like a child again. Now that I know how lightly the adults consider our traditions, I do not think I would be able to obey them."

Wow, she's mad, thought Mouse Girl.

"I see that you are angry, Ocelot Girl," Mouse Grandmother said. "Consider how you might use that anger to make us a stronger people. Now, we will rest and make our final decisions tomorrow."

Just then, they heard a shout. Mouse heard Ocelot run back to the fire circle. There was quite a bit of commotion. And then Ocelot returned.

"Cactus Thorn has escaped," Ocelot said. "She overpowered Ferret while Ferret was cleaning her wounds. She went down into the valley. I'm taking two men to find her."

Mouse nodded and made her way as quickly as possible to the cave. She was worried about Ferret. She quickly discovered that Ferret was not harmed much. Cactus Thorn was much more interested in escaping than slowing down to hurt anyone. Mouse knelt next to Ferret, who was lying down on her mat.

"I'm so stupid," Ferret said. "I should have known she was going to do that."

"It's alright," Mouse said. "It isn't your fault this whole situation happened."

Ferret snorted in self-disgust.

"Where was Snake when this happened?" Mouse asked.

“I told her to get some rest while I attended to Cactus Thorn,” Ferret said. “So, it’s my fault.”

“Maybe it’s better she’s gone,” Mouse said, thinking aloud. “She’s not causing discord among us anymore.”

“Do you think they’ll catch her?” Ferret asked.

“Of course,” Mouse said. “She won’t get far. But I doubt they’ll bring her back alive.”

She and Ferret sat side by side, both wondering what news the dawn would bring.

19 - Ambush

(In which Cactus Thorn is captured, attempts to escape again, and is put on trial.)

Ocelot's search party did not return at dawn. By mid-morning, First Bobcat returned. He explained that Ocelot and First Badger were still hunting for Cactus Thorn. She had disappeared without leaving any visible trace, and they needed more help.

Everyone except Mouse, the grandmothers, and Ringtail joined the search. Ringtail insisted on staying to guard the camp. Mouse agreed this was a good idea. Cactus Thorn knew there were food and supplies there and she might decide to come back, especially if it looked like everyone was out searching for her. Ringtail stationed himself overlooking the valley and tried to look for any movement whatsoever that might be Cactus Thorn.

It was a long and boring day for Mouse. She tried to notice if there were any more indications of her sight returning, but she could detect no changes whatsoever. And then she noticed a flashing light, a small greenish flash that was gone in an instant. A few moments later it returned. And then nothing. *A firefly?* Mouse wondered. *But why would I see a firefly and nothing else? And how could I see a firefly during daylight?*

By sunset, everyone returned. How Cactus Thorn had disappeared was a mystery. Ocelot sought out Mouse.

"How soon after your injury did your eyesight begin to fail?" Ocelot asked.

"I don't know," Mouse answered. "I was unconscious for ten days."

“If she’s losing her sight, she must be desperate to find a safe place. It is many, many days of travel to the land of her people. Is there any chance she still has allies near here?” Ocelot wondered aloud.

“I hope not,” Mouse answered. Mouse was thinking how dangerous and terrifying it would be to have no sight and to be alone in the wild. How long could a person survive before the coyotes found them?

Ferret joined in the conversation. “The poison may have lost its power in the days since it was used on Mouse. It is likely they poisoned their arrowheads just before they attacked us so that it would have its maximum power. After several days of being out in the open, it may have no effect at all.”

Ocelot didn’t want to hear that. “So, we may be looking for a very healthy and very angry enemy.”

Ocelot wandered off to strategize with the adults. Ferret sat with Mouse. She thought Mouse needed the comfort of company, especially with Cactus Thorn on the loose somewhere. Jaguarundi came over to join them.

“I feel oddly torn in this search for Cactus Thorn,” Jaguarundi said. “I would never say this to Ocelot or the men here, but even though she is a violent and dangerous person, I feel guilty being a part of a hunting party that is seeking to kill her.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Mouse said. “I guess you’ve known her a long time.”

“All of my life,” Jaguarundi answered.

“Could you kill her if you had to?” Ferret asked.

"Yes," Jaguarundi answered. "I'm certain she would kill me now that I'm a member of your tribe. I could kill her in self-defense. But I would not kill her if she were a prisoner."

"But if she gets back to her people, she could bring another war party here," Ferret said.

Jaguarundi nodded. "I know. But maybe since our entire tribe is now gathering here, they will not do such a thing. It was easy to try to stop one quest looking for land. It will be much harder trying to stop an entire tribe."

"It is interesting to hear one of our elders be so generous in dealing with one of our enemies," Mouse commented.

"Who, me?" Jaguarundi asked. "I came from a violent tribe. If I can help this tribe be less violent, I will."

"Tell us about your tribe," Ferret said. "You keep saying they were violent. In what way?"

Jaguarundi untied the top of her leather shirt and exposed a shoulder and part of her back. There were long, red scars across her back. Ferret took Mouse's hand and placed it on Jaguarundi's scars. Mouse gently ran her fingers over the long, red welts.

"My father beat me frequently," Jaguarundi explained. "I was never fast enough or good enough at any competition. He wanted me to be married well and help raise our family's status. I was a disappointment to him."

"How horrible," Mouse said. "And sad."

Ferret nodded.

"My people value the warrior spirit," Jaguarundi said. "Our competitions are much more violent than yours. Children and parents take them very seriously. So seriously that children get hurt. And there is much discord among families. It is not unusual for men to get into dangerous fights

with each other. As a child, I always felt that I was surrounded by danger. Here, among your people, is the first time I've felt safe."

"I hope you can help keep us that way," Mouse said. "It troubles me how much our adults want to kill Cactus Thorn. And I can feel that hatred in myself as well. Part of me hopes that she will be killed for what she did to Beaver."

"Would you have her killed now?" Jaguarundi asked.

"I am still angry. And the angry part of me would like to see her killed," Mouse answered. "But if I were to make a calm decision, I would agree with you. She should not be killed. I would like her to face some kind of punishment, but not death."

"What can we do to her?" Ferret asked. "Making her a servant won't work because she'll simply run away."

Mouse shrugged. "I don't know. But killing her would make us into killers just like her."

Ferret and Jaguarundi agreed. They all sat in silence, lost in their own thoughts for quite some time. They could hear lively discussions coming from the fire circle about how to proceed with the search for Cactus Thorn.

"Can I tell you both something in confidence?" Jaguarundi asked.

"What kind of thing?" Mouse asked.

"I have an idea of how Cactus Thorn might have escaped," Jaguarundi said, "but I don't want to share it if it will lead to her death."

"What do you want us to do if you tell us?" Ferret asked. "Tell no one?"

"If I'm right, would you help me help her get away from us alive?" Jaguarundi asked.

Mouse shook her head. “No. I will not help her escape.”

This obviously was not the answer Jaguarundi wanted to hear.

“What if we agreed to not kill her, but just take her prisoner again instead?” Ferret asked.

“She overpowered you once,” Jaguarundi pointed out.

“True,” Ferret said, “But with your help, and maybe someone else we could trust, what if we could take her prisoner? Do you know where she is?”

“No, I don’t,” Jaguarundi said. “But I do know the tactics of my people. I might be able to help find her.”

Mouse’s mind raced. “Wait,” she said. “Is she still here? Maybe they couldn’t track her because there were no tracks.”

Jaguarundi gave Mouse a sharp look. “Please don’t say anything to anyone. I’ll help you recapture her, but you must promise to defend her life.”

“The cave,” Mouse said. “Is it possible she hid in the cave instead of making a run for it?”

“If she is there, she’ll probably wait until we all go to sleep and then she’ll try to escape,” Jaguarundi said.

“Who can we trust to help us?” Mouse asked.

“Anyone on our quest,” Ferret said. “Probably not anyone on Ocelot’s quest. Or any of the adults.”

“It will have to be Ringtail,” Mouse said. “He is our guard and he’d be offended if we did not use him. Besides, Badger is injured and Rat is slow and clumsy. Sorry, Ferret.”

Ferret nodded. It was true. Rat was slow and clumsy. Besides, she was relieved Rat would not be involved in such a dangerous activity.

“Get Ringtail,” Mouse said. “We’ll plan a trap.”

Everyone gathered for dinner around the fire. Mouse made sure to send Ringtail on frequent trips to the cave to make sure it was never left too quiet there for too long. It would not do for Cactus Thorn to escape before they were ready for her. Ringtail did his best to make sure no one else went into the cave. They didn't want their preparations disturbed.

While some of the adults reminisced about earlier days of adventure, Mouse leaned over and spoke to Ferret.

"I can see the fire," Mouse said, softly.

"You can?" Ferret asked.

"Yes," Mouse continued, "and I can tell there are people around it, but I cannot see who they are."

"Why are you whispering?" Ferret asked.

"For now, I think it's better for everyone to think I am still blind," Mouse said. "It will give me more freedom to do what I have to do without raising suspicions."

They went off to bed early and waited for the rest of the tribe to quiet down. It didn't take long. Everyone was anxious to get an early start in the morning searching for Cactus Thorn's tracks.

When the camp finally became silent, Mouse was alert. She knew exactly where Ferret, Jaguarundi, and Ringtail were positioned. If Cactus Thorn were really here, they would have only one chance to catch her before she escaped or was killed by another tribe member.

Crickets were the only sound Mouse could hear for quite some time. And then she heard the sound of a pebble falling. Someone in the cave had moved. She listened closely, but whoever was moving was so quiet she heard nothing at all

until there was a gasp followed by a thump as a body fell onto the ground. Whoever was coming out of the cave had stumbled on the trip strings Ringtail had rigged across the entrance.

In an instant, Ringtail rolled over, throwing his blanket off of himself and onto the person on the ground. Ferret was immediately there to help and they quickly had the struggling and cursing person tied and bound in Ringtail's blanket. It was Cactus Thorn.

It all happened so quickly and quietly that no one else in the camp seemed to have noticed.

"What do we do now?" Ringtail asked.

"Wake the grandmothers and tell them we've captured her," Mouse said.

"Or we could try to sneak her out of the camp, for her own safety," Jaguarundi said.

Mouse shook her head. "She'll be safest here, where everyone knows where she is. No one is going to secretly stab her while she's here. Out there, who knows what might happen?"

Mouse took her walking stick and walked over to her grandmother's mat. She gently shook her grandmother. "Wake up," Mouse said. "We've captured Cactus Thorn."

In mere moments, the entire tribe was awake again. Ringtail and Ferret dragged Cactus Thorn to the fire ring and stationed themselves as guards on both sides of her. First Badger rekindled the fire.

"What is this you have done?" Mouse Grandmother asked Mouse Girl once everyone had gathered.

“We reasoned that if none of our best trackers could find Cactus Thorn’s tracks, perhaps she had not made any,” Mouse said.

“She was here the whole time we were looking for her?” Mouse Grandmother asked.

“She found a dark crevice in the cave and she stayed there, silently waiting for a chance to escape,” Mouse said. “Jaguarundi told us it was something they learned when she was a child.”

“She’s been there a day and half without moving, without food or water?” Mouse Grandmother asked.

“Yes,” Mouse said.

“Give the poor girl something to eat and drink,” Mouse Grandmother said. “We’ll decide what to do with her tonight. I don’t want to give her time to escape.”

“I say we kill her now,” First Badger said. “She’s killed our people.”

Mouse Grandmother nodded in understanding. “Indeed, she did. But she came here as part of a war party. And she is young. I’m not convinced she deserves death for doing what her people told her to do. Let’s let her speak for herself, if she will.”

All eyes turned to the bound body of Cactus Thorn. Most of her face was concealed by Ringtail’s blanket. Ferret pulled down the blanket. Cactus Thorn looked angry. Her bindings made it difficult for her to make eye contact with anyone, but she didn’t seem to want to anyway. She looked straight up into the sky.

“It is true, we were a war party,” Cactus Thorn said. “And my people died as well as yours.”

“If we release you, we may require that you serve one of the families of our tribe,” Mouse Grandmother said. “Perhaps for a year, to earn your freedom. Would you be willing to do that?”

First Badger gasped at this suggestion of mercy.

“How do you know I wouldn’t escape during that time?” Cactus Thorn asked. “In a year’s time, I could easily escape.”

“True,” Mouse Grandmother said. “But if you agree to this, then you would have to break your word to escape. For a Bird person, that would be a very sad thing.”

Cactus Thorn considered these words silently.

“And I would probably send First Badger to track you down and kill you,” Mouse Grandmother said.

“Perhaps I would agree to this,” Cactus Thorn said. “Would I be treated well?”

“You would be treated as a servant,” Mouse Grandmother said. “But we do not abuse our servants, if that is what you are asking. You would not be beaten. Your only punishment would be serving the tribe from whom you have taken life.”

“If you will give me a fair hearing,” Cactus Thorn said, “I will agree to whatever service you impose upon me.”

First Badger looked very angry, but said nothing.

“Untie her,” Mouse Grandmother said.

Jaguarundi nudged Mouse Girl as Ringtail untied the prisoner. “Where is Ocelot Grandmother?” Jaguarundi asked.

Mouse Girl looked around. She, too, had noticed Ocelot Grandmother’s absence.

“I don’t know,” Mouse said. “She hasn’t been feeling well.”

“I’d like her to be here at this trial,” Jaguarundi said. “I think she would know how to handle Cactus Thorn better than Mouse Grandmother. Cactus Thorn is a killer.”

The voice of Mouse Grandmother stopped Jaguarundi's conversation.

"Tell us your story, girl."

Cactus Thorn rubbed her arms where the ropes had bound them. She adjusted her leather dress and sat facing Mouse Grandmother.

"I was raised as a warrior," she began. "As you know, the Bird people have many enemies. We need strong and fierce warriors if we are to survive."

Mouse Grandmother nodded but said nothing.

"As you also know, our people are very careful about how we produce children," Cactus Thorn continued. "We will not survive unless our children are fast and strong. We cannot allow our people to become slow or weak."

Mouse Girl realized that she had never heard anyone from another tribe speak about life and what it meant to them. Except Jaguarundi, of course. But Jaguarundi didn't really count because she greatly preferred Mouse's tribe to her original one.

"Every day of my life, I dedicated myself to becoming the best warrior I could," Cactus Thorn said. "I lost my eye in these endeavors, but that did not discourage me. I knew there was always a price to be paid for survival."

"Tell me how you lost your eye," Mouse Grandmother said.

"In a foot race," Cactus Thorn said. "We were competing for positions on our quests. We were given a very long race to run, over rugged terrain. My brother and I were the best runners of our tribe and it was a fierce race. My brother was a little faster than I, but I knew I could beat him if I took a

quicker route. I ran through a thicket of juniper so fast that a branch tore out my eye."

"Who won the race?" Mouse Grandmother asked.

Cactus Thorn looked down. "My brother."

"But you showed great motivation," said Mouse Grandmother. "I'm sure that has served you well on many other occasions."

"Yes," Cactus Thorn said. "It has."

"How did you come here to attack us?" Mouse Grandmother asked.

"My tribe is healthy and growing quickly," Cactus Thorn said. "We need more land. One of our elders suggested that if we monitored the quests of other tribes, we might find land through them."

"And the plan was to kill the quest members and claim the land for yourselves?" Mouse Grandmother asked, appalled.

Cactus Thorn nodded. "If we were strong enough to take it, we would deserve the new land. If we were not strong enough, the other tribe deserved the land. As you can see, Mouse Girl has earned you the right to inhabit this land."

Cactus Thorn looked at Mouse Girl with what Ferret thought was a particularly hateful glance.

"I do not agree with the violence that your tribe seems to encourage," Mouse Grandmother said. "I believe we do better when we cooperate. We are stronger when we have many friends. However, you were raised in the ways of your people, and I cannot fault you for that."

Mouse Grandmother looked around her people. "Does anyone else have questions for the prisoner?"

First Badger stood up. “You killed my friend, Beaver,” he said. “Would you honestly feel safe in this tribe after doing such a thing?”

Cactus Thorn nodded. “You are honorable people, as is my tribe. We are fierce, but we are fair and we stand by our word. I believe you will do the same.”

First Badger glared at her, but said no more.

“She has answered our questions well,” Mouse Grandmother said. “I am inclined to judge her favorably. Are there any other questions?”

Mouse Grandmother looked around the tribe. No one said anything. And then, Jaguarundi stood up.

“Cactus Thorn,” she said. “Where is your brother today?”

“You know that my brother is no longer living,” Cactus Thorn said.

“Your brother was a friend of mine,” Jaguarundi said. “I honor his memory and I miss him. But tell us, how did he die?”

Mouse Grandmother looked with great interest at Cactus Thorn.

“You know how he died,” Cactus Thorn said.

“I do not,” Jaguarundi said. “But I do know *when* he died. He died not long after you lost your eye. And you were the only person with him when he died.”

Cactus Thorn looked with hate at Jaguarundi, but said nothing.

“What are you trying to say, Jaguarundi?” Mouse Grandmother asked. “Do you believe Cactus Thorn killed her own brother?”

“I do not know,” Jaguarundi said. “But, to be honest, I do not trust this girl. People who offend her tend to get hurt. I would not wish to live in a tribe in which she freely moved.”

“What do you suggest we do with her?” Mouse Grandmother asked.

“Banish her,” Jaguarundi said. “Lead her under guard as far from here as we can and let her go. And never let your guard down.”

“I say we kill her,” First Badger said.

“Enough, First Badger!” Mouse Grandmother said, testily. “We know what you think. Jaguarundi, your judgment of your fellow tribe member is very harsh. I will have to consider it.”

“By the bloody coyote gods, Mouse!” a voice yelled out from the darkness. Mouse realized it was Ocelot Grandmother, still on her mat it seemed. “This girl has known the prisoner all of her life. If she is afraid to have her close by, let’s get rid of her. What is there to think about? Kill her or banish her. The longer you deliberate, the more chance she has to hurt somebody.”

Ocelot Grandmother began to cough horribly. All eyes turned to Mouse Grandmother, who suddenly seemed to lose her dignified bearing.

“You are right, sister,” she said. “We will banish her tonight.”

Mouse Grandmother turned to face Cactus Thorn. “Do you understand this? We will send an armed escort to lead you far from us. You will be free to leave us, but you may never return. If we ever see you again, we will kill you.”

Cactus Thorn smiled. “Thank you, Jaguarundi. You have given me my freedom.”

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As they prepared for the journey, Jaguarundi packed her pack directly next to Mouse. Mouse had admitted to her

grandmother that her sight was returning, and she had requested to help lead Cactus Thorn away from this new valley. Mouse Grandmother agreed. She was worried about Mouse's limited vision, but she also believed that Mouse would have to either begin a full life again quickly or be forever hindered by doubt and fear.

"Here, these are finished," Jaguarundi said, handing Mouse the wings Ferret had been working on for months.

"I can't take these," Mouse said. "You and Ferret made them. And you put everything you've ever learned into them."

"You don't understand," Jaguarundi whispered. "We made them for you. I am too large. You are perfect; small and strong. I made them for you."

Mouse took the wings and looked at them. "Thank you," she said. "But I'd prefer to leave them here where they'll be safe. We don't know what kind of mischief Cactus Thorn might do."

Mouse stashed the wings under the big bedroll that she intended to leave behind. Jaguarundi took the wings out again and put them in Mouse's pack.

"Take them," Jaguarundi said. "They are not ceremonial wings."

Mouse looked confused.

"In your tribe, you only use your wings for ceremonies," Jaguarundi explained. "But our hunters and warriors who are small enough often carry them for practical reasons. There is no better way to escape danger than off of a cliff."

Mouse carefully stashed the wings.

"You'll have to show me when to use them," Mouse said.

"I will," Jaguarundi answered. "But keep them out of the sight of Cactus Thorn."

Mouse looked around for Ferret but she was nowhere to be seen. Ringtail and First Badger were packing a little pack for Cactus Thorn. Ringtail would put in some item, then First Badger would take it out. Then Ringtail would put it back in again. Cactus Thorn watched them without showing any reaction.

Finally, Ferret appeared just before it was time to leave. She and Ringtail ascended the cliff first. It was an easy enough climb that Ringtail had little problem with it, even with his bad leg. Next, Mouse and Jaguarundi went up. When they were all safely to the top, the men guarding Cactus Thorn let her climb.

They began their journey as the sun was sinking below the horizon. Jaguarundi and Mouse led the group. Actually, Jaguarundi did the leading. Mouse still didn't trust her vision. She had the feeling that she was not seeing as sharply as she once had, especially in the dark.

Ferret and Ringtail brought up the rear and kept an eye on Cactus Thorn. They traveled downstream, along the sunrise edge of the river valley. The plan was to lead Cactus Thorn for a day or two and then let her go. Her tribe lived far downstream, at least ten or more days of travel.

What Cactus Thorn had not been told was that Mouse and Ocelot's entire tribe was already on the move to their new home. With luck, they would be in the valley by the time Cactus Thorn reached her home. There was no way Cactus Thorn could bring back a war party while the tribe was still traveling. If Cactus Thorn's people were going to attack, they were going to have to attack a well-defended area, not simply ambush a traveling group of men, women, and children.

About midway through the night, the group stopped to rest. Ringtail pulled Mouse aside while the others refreshed themselves with water.

"Cactus Thorn is acting strangely," Ringtail said.

"What do you mean?" Mouse asked.

"If you were a prisoner being led by others, I would think you would look bored and maybe a little lethargic," Ringtail said. "But Cactus Thorn is being very attentive to the trail. She is staying very aware of her surroundings."

"Maybe she's been trained well," Mouse said. "Coyotes can attack anyone at anytime."

"Maybe," Ringtail said. "Let's just keep a close watch on her."

"We will," Mouse said.

"One more thing," Ringtail added. "She keeps wandering right, toward the river."

"She'll need the river for water once we release her," Mouse said.

Ringtail nodded. "I just don't want to be trapped between an enemy and those cliffs. Let's stay away from the edge of the valley."

"Good idea," Mouse said.

As they continued their walk, Cactus Thorn tried to engage Ringtail in conversation.

"What were you and Mouse talking about during our little rest?" she asked. "Anything interesting?"

"Stay ten paces ahead of us, please," Ringtail responded. He was not about to let his defenses down with the warrior who killed Beaver. Cactus Thorn rolled her eyes and continued to walk.

"What do you think she's up to?" Ferret asked.

“I don’t know,” Ringtail said. “But she’s planning something.”

Ferret nodded. She readied her bow just in case. They walked on, but nothing unusual happened. They heard coyotes in the distance, but they didn’t sound too near. As the sun rose, Jaguarundi sought shelter amid the boulders of a large stone outcrop. Among the boulders, they had a good view of their surroundings and a little cover from attack. They made camp and ate. No one talked much. No one felt safe saying much around Cactus Thorn.

They took turns keeping watch all day, but Cactus Thorn seemed to sleep peacefully. If she was planning anything, she gave no indication of it. By the time the sun was beginning to set, they awoke, ate, and began their journey again.

Once it was dark, Ferret walked close to Ringtail. Ferret was still keeping her bow ready.

“Do you hear anything behind us?” Ferret asked. “Like someone following?”

Ringtail nodded. “Just barely. I’m guessing it’s Ocelot, because it is so quiet. Either that or a very stealthy enemy.”

“Why would Ocelot be following us?” Ferret asked.

“Why do you think?” Ringtail answered. “She doesn’t trust us and the adults don’t trust us.”

“How far do we have to go before we leave Cactus Thorn on her own?” Ferret asked.

“Mouse plans to let her go free just before dawn,” Ringtail said quietly. “That way, we can get away from her in the daylight and make sure we’re not being followed.”

Their midnight break was very quiet. Mouse knew that if Cactus Thorn was planning anything evil, she would be doing it soon. But Cactus Thorn looked very calm and introspective.

They walked much slower after that break. Mouse's nerves were so on edge she had trouble walking in a straight line. Everyone was waiting for the moment that Cactus Thorn would be freed.

Finally, the time came. The horizon was just beginning to show some light when Mouse called a halt. Mouse pointed downstream.

"Cactus Thorn," Mouse said. "You are free to go. Travel safely. Tend our world. Remember our story. Continue our people."

Cactus Thorn rolled her eyes. After Ringtail cut her bonds, she walked away. As soon as she was out of sight, Mouse pointed away from the river, and she quickly led the group in that direction. She was moving so fast they were almost running. This was a common tactic of the Bird people. As soon as an opponent is out of sight, do something completely different and unexpected to ensure their mental idea of where you might be is as wrong as possible.

The entire group followed so quickly and efficiently it caught their ambushers completely by surprise. Cactus Thorn's tribe had several warriors who had never attacked and were functioning as spies, looking for a weakness. They had planned to kill Mouse and her party as soon as Cactus Thorn was out of the way. But they were not expecting the party to come charging at them so quickly. All weapons were drawn since both parties were expecting trouble.

An arrow hit Ferret in the gut. She screamed and fell. Ringtail readied his atlatl. An arrow struck his chest armor, but he quickly saw the man who had shot it. His atlatl dart ran the man entirely through. Mouse was on the ground behind a

boulder as soon as she saw Ferret fall. Jaguarundi was grazed by an arrow and took cover behind a huisache tree.

Mouse saw that Ferret was still down and still exposed to enemy attack, but there was no safe way to get to her. Mouse's bow was ready to shoot anything that moved, but in the dim light of morning, there was nothing she could see. She silently cursed her weak eyesight. Ferret made eye contact with Mouse and seemed to understand Mouse's frustration. Ferret searched the area where their attackers were and pointed. Mouse followed Ferret's direction and thought she saw somebody. She released her arrow, but only silence followed.

Mouse, Ringtail, and Jaguarundi knew what had to happen next. They were caught in an ambush and their training gave them no options. They quickly checked each other's positions, nodded, and charged the enemy. Mouse saw another arrow strike Ringtail, but he kept running forward. Everything seemed to be happening slowly. Arrows flew, the two parties drew closer to each other, and knives were drawn. This was going to be a fight to the death.

But then, Mouse heard something behind her. She glanced back and saw someone running toward Ferret. It was Cactus Thorn! And her knife was drawn. Mouse stopped her charge toward the enemy. She leapt against a large boulder, pushed off with her legs and was instantly running full speed back toward Ferret. However, Cactus Thorn reached Ferret much more quickly. She dove onto Ferret. Mouse was glad to see that Ferret managed to have her own dagger drawn and put up some small, but unexpected, defense. The two bodies rolled in the dirt and Mouse could not tell what was happening.

Mouse was perfectly silent and she flew like an arrow at Cactus Thorn. Cactus Thorn managed to make a powerful stab through Ferret's defenses. Her knife hit flesh, and then Mouse was upon her.

Cactus Thorn was fast. Mouse would have gutted her, had Cactus Thorn not caught Mouse's knife at the last instant with her left arm. Mouse's knife sliced deep into Cactus Thorn's arm and the young women rolled to the ground in different directions. Ferret made no movement at all. Mouse rolled to her feet. Cactus Thorn stood and faced her.

The two young women panted with exertion and glared at each other with hatred.

"Which of you has the poisoned knife?" Cactus Thorn hissed.

Mouse said nothing. She knew her own knife was not poisoned. Then she remembered how Ferret had disappeared for so long while they were preparing for this journey. She must have been preparing a poison for her blade.

Cactus Thorn looked unsteady and made no move toward Ferret or Mouse. Then, Cactus Thorn turned and ran. She ran toward the cliffs. Mouse knew she could not escape quickly in that direction. She would have to turn left or right along the top of the canyon's edge or climb down. That gave Mouse the time she needed to do one last unexpected thing.

Mouse ran to Ferret and dropped her pack. Ferret was still breathing but looked barely conscious.

"Did my knife cut her?" Ferret asked.

"Yes," Mouse said.

"Good," Ferret said weakly. "She'll be weak and confused. Hallucinogenic powder."

Mouse smiled. She was glad Ferret hadn't resorted to poison. There was nothing Mouse could do for Ferret with the enemy still attacking, so Mouse continued to plan her counterattack.

No one seemed to be near, so Mouse took the wings out of her pack. She quickly put her arms through the straps and tightened the leather thongs. If Jaguarundi and Ferret had done what Mouse thought they had done, someone was in for a big surprise. Mouse sheathed her knife and re-slung her bow and quiver down near her hips.

It was then that Mouse heard the enemy approaching. Mouse walked cat-like away from Ferret, staying visible and trying to draw her enemies' attention away from Ferret. It seemed to work. Two male attackers saw her and began to move in her direction. Mouse continued to move away from Ferret. She broke into a run. She leapt over boulders and around trees. The men were fast, but not as fast as her. Finally, she changed direction slightly and ran directly toward the canyon's edge. To her left and front, she saw Cactus Thorn. Cactus Thorn quickly saw that Mouse was being pursued. She smiled and drew her knife, and began to run towards Mouse.

Everything depended on perfect timing. Mouse ran slightly away from Cactus Thorn and was glad Cactus Thorn had a knife and not a bow. Mouse continued to run, but slowed down enough to draw her knife. She turned even more from Cactus Thorn. She had to reach the cliff before Cactus Thorn did and before her pursuers decided to kill her with their arrows.

Twenty steps from the cliff's edge Mouse turned directly toward Cactus Thorn and threw her knife. Cactus Thorn had not expected this direct assault. She stopped dead in her

tracks as the knife caught her left thigh. Not a fatal blow, thought Mouse, but good enough. Mouse continued to run at Cactus Thorn. Cactus Thorn braced herself for Mouse's impact.

Two steps away, Mouse turned right, struck at Cactus Thorn with her bow and then leapt with all her might off the cliff. Cactus Thorn grabbed at Mouse's bow, angry enough to follow Mouse over the cliff. Cactus Thorn fell.

The two pursuers stopped, unable to mentally process the fact that both girls had gone over the cliff. They looked at each other in amazement, then slowly walked to the cliff's edge and looked over. It was a long, steep, rocky drop. They shook their heads. They could not tear their eyes away from the great distance to the bottom of the cliff. The thought of two warriors falling to their certain death instead of dying in battle baffled them.

It was then that Ocelot finally came upon them. They turned to face her drawn bow. But there were two of them and their bows were ready. Ocelot knew she was about to die, but she knew one of them would die with her if her arrow flew true. And with Ocelot, it always did.

In the moment of hesitation before the warriors killed each other, the unbelievable happened. A black shape streaked across the sky toward the two men. An arrow from the black streak struck one man in the neck. Then, the black streak was gone over the cliff. The second man released his arrow at the dark thing, but it was moving so fast he had no idea if his arrow had flown true. However, he had taken his attention away from Ocelot. He had an arrow in his throat before he even realized this fatal mistake.

Ocelot was left standing alone at the cliff's edge. Although the warrior from Cactus Thorn's tribe was unsure of his arrow's flight toward whatever that flying thing had been, Ocelot had heard the arrow strike flesh.

20 - Lost

(In which Ocelot Girl cares for the wounded and searches for Mouse Girl.)

Ocelot collapsed in the shade of an old oak. Ferret was dead. By the time Ocelot found her, she had lost too much blood. Ringtail was hurt badly, but Ocelot had been able to bind his wounds and lay him in the shade to wait and see if he survived. She had found Jaguarundi shivering and crying with a broken arrow lodged in one of her ribs and her throat deeply cut. She would probably survive, unless infection killed her. Finally, there was First Badger, who had come with Ocelot. He had taken an arrow deep in his knee. He could not walk without assistance.

As for Mouse, there was no sign of her.

Among the fallen enemy, all were dead. Ocelot had seen to that herself. Anyone who might have had breath or pulse left when Ocelot found them was completely dead when she left them. Except Cactus Thorn. Ocelot had seen her body at the bottom of the cliff. It was too far down to go without leaving her own wounded comrades for too long a time. But Cactus Thorn's body was not moving. Ocelot had checked several times.

Now, Ocelot fell against the tree and felt completely empty. She had never seen so many dead and wounded people. She wanted to cry, but could not.

After the first day, when everyone was as stable as possible, Ocelot had climbed down into the canyon to look for Mouse. She found no sign of her. Cactus Thorn was definitely dead. In fact, the vultures had already found her. Ocelot

searched for as long as she dared. She was afraid coyotes would find her wounded friends at the top of the canyon while she was gone. Still, she took quite some time searching the canyon floor for any sign of Mouse. There was none.

It was two days before Ringtail and First Badger were ready to attempt to walk. Ocelot would not leave them alone and Jaguarundi was being very little help. The battle seemed to have broken her spirit.

Ocelot found a peaceful and secluded spot to lay out Ferret's body, so that the world could claim her back in an honorable way. She gathered all of her possessions and rolled them into a little pack to return to her family. Then, she dragged the enemy dead to a barren patch of sunstruck rock and left them there. One of them had a particularly well-made knife, but Ocelot wanted nothing to remember these horrible people with. She did loosen their clothes a bit to help the vultures and coyotes get to their flesh. Then she returned to her friends.

"We'll get home and then send a search party to look for Mouse," Ocelot said.

"You're sure you saw her fly?" First Badger asked.

"Yes," Ocelot answered. "And this was not the first time. I saw Mouse, Ferret, and Jaguarundi testing her new wings by the river when they thought they were alone, before Cactus Thorn arrived."

Ocelot turned to Jaguarundi. "How far can Mouse fly with those wings?"

Jaguarundi shrugged. "Those were great wings. They should have been wonderful."

"I've never seen anyone fly upwards with wings before," Ocelot said. "But I saw Mouse do it by the river. She could fly

upwind for thirty or forty steps and then land again. But off of that cliff? I have no idea how far she could have gone."

"If the wings were good enough to allow her to circle around and shoot an arrow at Cactus Thorn's comrades, they were pretty good," First Badger said. "Better than I've ever heard of."

"They were great," Jaguarundi said. "Ferret found the secret on the cave wall. She knew it would work. I built them just like she said."

"Could you do it again?" First Badger asked.

"Without Ferret, I don't know," Jaguarundi said. "I could try."

The journey home took three days. That was far too long for Ocelot's patience. If Mouse was injured and alone in that canyon, three days was likely to prove fatal. But Ringtail and First Badger were too weak to travel alone. And Jaguarundi was still unpredictable.

On the third day, they were met by a sentry, Second Deer. Ocelot explained what had happened. The tribe quickly organized to get the injured down to the main camp. And a rescue party was ready to go before Ocelot had time to even catch her breath. Otter Girl, Mouse Boy, and Snake were the first to volunteer to go back with Ocelot. Zari also wanted to go, but Ocelot hesitated to bring him along. He was young and had already faced far too much death. However, Ocelot Grandmother herself had agreed that Zari should go, so Ocelot complied.

Jaguarundi assumed she was going along as well. Ocelot was actually looking forward to getting rid of her, and was surprised she wanted to go along.

“Listen, I know I’ve been acting strangely,” Jaguarundi said. “I lost some good friends back there, but now I want to be a part of helping Mouse, if I can.”

“We’ll be traveling fast,” Ocelot said.

“I’m ready,” Jaguarundi said.

Ocelot agreed, and they set off. That first day, they ran from sunrise to sunset. They paused only to drink water. Ocelot chose to stay on the rim of the canyon because there was less vegetation to slow them down. There was also more danger from predators, but each person was armed and angry. Predators stayed away. By nightfall, they were close to where the battle had taken place. Ocelot pushed on.

“I want to get down into the canyon tonight, before we stop,” she explained.

Each person agreed. After the sun set, they moved more slowly, but they were still going fast. It was the smell of the bodies that first told them they had found the spot. Ocelot kept them far away from the dead enemies, but it was sobering to know they were there.

“How many were killed?” Otter asked Jaguarundi.

“Five up here. Plus Cactus Thorn down below,” Jaguarundi answered.

“Five adult warriors?” Otter said, astonished. “And they ambushed you?”

Jaguarundi nodded.

Ocelot led the climb down. Cactus Thorn’s body was gone, evidently dragged away by some carrion eater. It was too dark to try to find any tracks.

“Let’s search downstream, in the valley tonight,” Ocelot said. “Tomorrow we’ll double back to look for anything we may have missed in the dark.”

“But won’t we be walking over any tracks that might give us a clue to where she is?” Zari asked.

“We will,” Ocelot said. “But if she’s alive and she still needs help, we need to find her soon.”

“After four days?” Snake asked. “What are the chances of her being alive and in need of help?”

Ocelot didn’t answer. She simply started walking down river. They spread out from the canyon wall to the river. They walked half the night, and found nothing. Finally, Ocelot gave the order to stop searching. They found a small crevice at the foot of the canyon wall and they slept sitting against it. No sentry was posted, but each person slept with weapon in hand. Any coyote that attacked them would soon regret it.

As the sun rose, they awoke. They ate silently.

“Today, we’ll keep going downstream. Remember, she was flying as she fell, so we don’t know how far she went. But the last I saw she was headed downstream. We’ll divide into two parties, one on each side of the river. And we’ll stay in sight of each other at all times. Understood?”

Everyone nodded.

“Otter and I will cross the river. The rest of you will search this side,” Ocelot said.

By noon, they had thoroughly searched every place they could. But there was no sign of anyone.

As they rested and ate, Snake asked, “Could she be upstream?”

Ocelot thought. “Maybe, but my best guess is downstream. All of you. Think about what you know of Mouse. What do you think she would have done?”

Jaguarundi looked around. “She would have looked for cliffs for safety. Especially if she were on her own.”

“Good,” Ocelot said. “There are plenty of cliffs on the bank of the river towards sunrise.”

“Home is upstream,” Mouse Boy said. “If she was injured, I think she would have tried to go that way.”

“Makes sense,” Ocelot said. “Unless she thought any of the enemy were still alive. Then she might have tried to avoid them by heading away from home.”

Ocelot realized they had no idea where Mouse might have gone. But they had to search. They could not abandon her.

“We’ll go downstream until evening,” Ocelot said. “Then in the morning, we’ll scout farther down to see if anything in that direction looks promising. After that, we’ll give up in that direction and we’ll search upstream until we make it home.”

Everyone began to realize they were nearing the end of the search. It was not likely they would find anything, from the sound of Ocelot’s voice.

They continued to move downstream all afternoon. They found nothing at all. It was late afternoon when Snake froze in her tracks.

“Up in those cliffs,” she said. “I saw something move up there.”

She was looking far downstream.

“Okay,” Ocelot said. “Don’t get excited. Keep watching the trail. Whatever is up on those rocks could be an enemy. Let’s go slowly and carefully.”

The group spread out and kept under cover of the brush. They maintained an attack formation. As they approached the area that Snake indicated, a man stepped out on the rocks, far above them. He held no weapon.

“This is unusual,” Jaguarundi said to Snake.

Snake nodded.

“Who are you?” Ocelot yelled up to the man.

“A friend,” he answered. “I’m climbing down. Do not be afraid.”

Everyone kept their weapons ready. Ocelot ordered Mouse Boy and Otter to watch their rear in case this was an ambush.

The man climbed down a little way, and then deftly jumped to the canyon floor.

“I am First Spider,” he said, extending his hand to Ocelot. “I know who you are. You are called Ocelot.”

They grasped wrists in greeting.

“How do you know my name?” Ocelot asked.

“I am the husband of Squirrel Girl,” First Spider said. “She was traded to my tribe.”

“Is she here?” Ocelot asked.

Spider nodded. “We are taking refuge in these cliffs. Our tribe was attacked and we have scattered. Few of us survive.”

“What happened?” Ocelot asked.

“A tribe from far downstream desired our land,” Spider explained. “They used treachery to sneak up on us and they took us by surprise.”

“Cactus Thorn’s people?” Snake asked.

“Maybe,” Ocelot answered.

“Are there many of you here?” Ocelot asked Spider.

“Only Squirrel Girl and me,” Spider answered, “And my two daughters.”

“This is very bad news for us,” Ocelot said. “A warlike tribe has been attacking us. We have managed to defeat them thus far, but we’re now searching for a friend who was lost in battle.”

“We have seen no one,” First Spider said. “We’ve been traveling up this river for many days. We saw Bear people seven days ago, but no one else. We were rejoicing that our enemies seem to have lost track of us.”

“I hope that is the case,” Ocelot said. “May we see Squirrel? And children? Surely she hasn’t been with you long enough to give you two children?”

First Spider laughed. “No,” he said. “We have no children together yet.” His smile faded. “My first wife died when our children were very young.”

“I’m sorry to hear this,” Ocelot said.

“But please come up and visit with us,” First Spider said. “We will tell you what we have seen in this valley. And then you can tell us what lies upstream, if you know.”

The entire group climbed to where Squirrel Girl and two young children were sitting around a small fire circle. It was unlit, but it had the ashes of many days of fires. Squirrel Girl was very excited to see her old friends.

“It’s like a dream to see all of you again,” Squirrel said.

“You’ve seen a lot of bad situations, it sounds like,” Otter said.

“I have,” Squirrel agreed. “But tell me why you are here.”

Ocelot told her of their successful quest and the need to move the tribe to this new valley. She also told her of their attack by Cactus Thorn’s people. She ended by telling how Mouse was lost.

“After she went over the cliff, no one has seen her,” Ocelot said. “And so we are searching this valley for any sign that she may have survived.”

Squirrel looked very upset over the news of Mouse Girl’s disappearance and Ferret’s death.

“Flying?” Squirrel asked. She looked at Jaguarundi. “You and Ferret have done an amazing thing.”

“And I never even saw it,” Jaguarundi said. “But she must be somewhere. Dead or alive, she and those wings are somewhere in this valley.”

“We will find them,” First Spider said. “We have waited many generations to hear this news. And we must guard it from our enemies. They will use it against us.”

Ocelot nodded in understanding. She had not yet made the connection between the importance of the wings and the importance of keeping them away from Cactus Thorn’s tribe.

“I have been asking all the people of Mouse’s quest,” Ocelot said, taking Squirrel’s hand. “Where would she be? You knew her well. Where is she?”

Squirrel looked thoughtful for a few moments.

“She would try to make it back to her people. She would try to hide the wings from her enemies. We need to look up river and high in the cliffs.”

Ocelot nodded.

21 - Hope

The next morning they began the search up the river. Every cliff and every crevice was searched. First Spider searched along the river, although Squirrel was convinced Mouse would have looked for high ground, not low.

The days passed slowly as the group traveled upstream. Finally, Ocelot began to recognize landmarks. They were within a few days of their new land. On that afternoon, Jaguarundi was high up on the plateau of the edge of the canyon opposite the setting sun. Looking across the canyon, she saw that the distant wall of the canyon had an unusual white marking upon it. As she strained to see more clearly in spite of the afternoon sun in her eyes, she thought the white shape looked familiar.

Jaguarundi called to Ocelot and Ocelot agreed that perhaps the markings did not look completely natural. But she was not convinced it was anything worth noting.

"What do you think it is?" Ocelot asked. "It looks like maybe a boulder fell and scarred the cliff wall.

Jaguarundi shook her head. "I know that shape. It's the shape of the wing joint that Ferret discovered."

Jaguarundi stooped down and picked up two sticks. "Look," she said. "The joint can bend down, but not up. That way when the wing is forced down, the joint cannot bend, so the wing stays rigid. That gives you uplift. But when the wing is brought up, the wing bends, until the next downbeat. So that doesn't force you back down again."

Ocelot looked at the two sticks and then again at the distant cliff.

"You can see that in those white scrapings on the rocks?" Ocelot asked.

"No, not really," Jaguarundi said. "But that does look like the drawing Ferret found in the cave. I think Mouse drew that because she knew only Ferret and I would recognize it."

Ocelot did not look convinced. "Well," she said, "we made a commitment to search in every possible place, so let's go look."

They crossed the canyon floor, including the river. Ocelot brought everyone along, just in case Jaguarundi was right. She stood at the bottom of the cliff and looked up.

"This doesn't look like an easy climb for someone who might have been injured," Ocelot said.

"But it would be safe from coyotes," Otter added.

"Jaguarundi," Ocelot said, "You go first."

Jaguarundi climbed. It was a slightly challenging climb. Mouse might have picked such a place for a measure of protection. It was a surprisingly long climb up. The ledge over which the lines had been drawn was more than halfway to the top of the cliff.

Jaguarundi crawled over the final overhang. She saw the drawing up close. This was definitely what she was looking for! No one else could have drawn that. She looked around in the dwindling sunlight and saw the body lying between a boulder and the cliff face. She ran to it.

It was Mouse Girl. Jaguarundi knew that she must be dead, but she didn't want to believe it. Her skin was cold and her limbs were limp. But as she held Mouse's body close to her, she felt a faint heartbeat.

Jaguarundi looked around. Mouse's pack was here. The food pouches were out and empty. There was a little trickle of

water coming down the cliff wall near Mouse's body. Mouse had found a safe place to wait until she healed or until friends found her. She had food, water, shelter…

Ocelot walked up behind Jaguarundi, also expecting the worst.

"She's still alive," Jaguarundi said, lifting up the small body. "She's still alive."

———

Mouse awoke to an orange sky. She didn't know where she was. A small girl was sitting on a rock and staring at her. As Mouse tried to speak, the girl got up and ran away.

A few moments later, a woman appeared. It was Squirrel Girl, but Mouse knew that was not possible.

"Mouse!" the woman said. "You're finally awake."

"Squirrel?" Mouse managed to say in spite of her fatigue and surprise.

"Yes," Squirrel answered. "I'm back. With a husband and two children."

None of this was possible, Mouse thought, but it was better than being cold and alone in that canyon. So, she closed her eyes and went back to sleep.

Later, Mouse was gently shaken awake. This time the face she saw was her brother.

"It's my turn to feed you," he said.

"Am I really alive?" Mouse asked.

"Just barely," Mouse Boy answered. He spooned some watery pinole into Mouse's mouth. Mouse ate gratefully. She was hungry.

"Everyone wants to know what you did with the wings," Mouse Boy said.

“I destroyed them,” Mouse said. “I didn’t want Cactus Thorn to find them.”

“Cactus Thorn is dead,” Mouse Boy said as he fed her another swallow.

“Ferret and Jaguarundi can make more,” Mouse said.

“Ferret didn’t make it,” Mouse Boy said. “She’s dead, too.”

Mouse was silent for a moment as this revelation sank in.

“And Jaguarundi?” Mouse asked.

“Jaguarundi’s doing fine,” Mouse Boy said. “In fact, she and Ocelot are busy turning you into a legend. You had better hurry up and get well so that you can defend yourself. If not, the Spirit people may soon come to take you away.”

Mouse smiled. “I don’t think I’m going anywhere,” she said. “Not anytime soon.”

“You’ve flown!” Mouse Boy said. “You fulfilled our greatest dream. Surely the Spirits will come for you soon. And maybe they will take us all away to a better place than this. Someplace without war.”

Mouse Girl shook her head.

“We’re still in the same dangerous and beautiful world, brother. Nothing has changed.”

Mouse Girl fell asleep leaning against her brother. For now, she was at peace.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Doug Dalglish was born in San Antonio, Texas, surrounded by open land in which he wandered and learned to love the natural world. Serving as a reconnaissance marine taught him even more about the wilderness and how to live in it without leaving a trace behind. (Regrettably, it also taught him the harsh realities of human-on-human violence, which explains in part why the characters in this book live such difficult lives.) Studying at an agricultural college gave him another perspective on nature. He has been a U. S. Marine, an electrical engineer, a Presbyterian pastor, and the president of an international, residential high school.

He continues to be fascinated by the native plant life of Texas, and how those plants shape the humans and other creatures that depend upon them for life. He is married and has four adult children.