

Chapter Eight / Patterns in the Wind

It is normal for people to grieve long after they lose someone they love, or even someone they have known for a long time but have not loved.

Each loss changes the patterns of our lives and causes our consciousness to seek a new pattern, to find meaning and purpose in the change, and thus to gain the strength to continue living.

The family had lost a beloved grandparent, a tender child. These losses cut deeply, but the biggest loss of all was a silent, looming ghost.

The world had changed.

It was easier to focus on the loss of wisdom the elder held, to remember what one could of the love and care with which food was prepared and children tended. It was easier.

It was easier to focus on the too-short life of joy and hope that would not reach its full potential. To wonder in vain whether this, or that, might have come to pass. It was easier.

In the lowlands, years of strange weather had changed Life itself. The waters that once fed the land had shifted, scouring new paths in fearsome storms, and then disappeared, evaporating into the parched air. The land, desperate for liquid, hoarded what little rain fell and destroyed the plants, shriveled and dry like bones. With no food, the grazers, then the scavengers and the predators drifted away, or died. The once lush and gentle landscape had, with little warning, become a barren and scarred place, inhospitable to Life.

The small villages, and even towns, that thrived in the rich, fertile land, had succumbed to famine, then disease. They were flattened as if by war, but no weapons had fired. They were deserted as if by exodus, but the bones of the people remained behind.

The family had lived on a small ranch, far from town, raising flocks and growing crops. They were among the poorest of the land, and when the winds changed, bringing cold at the wrong time and heat for too long and they could not trade what they had for cloth or metal. They were forgotten by the people in the towns, who looked to other, more productive farmers.

Perhaps this was what saved them, they were hidden in a distant canyon, with a well fed from below. When, after years of decreasing food the townspeople who still had the strength emerged, they did not come to the dry, out of the way canyon. Instead,

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they sought the broad fields and orchards of the plain, and in their desperation destroyed what they didn't.

In the next year, there were no people left in the towns.

The people of the plains had likewise perished.

But the family in the canyon, though hungry and weak, had managed, surviving on dried and stored foods.

And in that year, the grandmother remembered old stories from her own childhood, told by her grandmother's mother. Stories about weather, Nature's equalizer, and time. She began to tell them to the family.

Once, long ago, when the land was new, Nature prepared a fine cloak for herself. She took great swaths of green and laid them out on the plain. She scattered red, and yellow and blue and purple across the green and made the fruiting and flowering plants. She took expanses of blue and smoothed them across the sky, then wove threads of blue through the green to bring the cool liquid down to the plain. She took gray, and making it rough, spread it at the margins of the plain to create a border. She took orange and gold and tipped the grasses with them, then used the grasses to color the sun. She took silver and yellow to cap the mountains and the moon. Satisfied with her work, she wore the cloak everywhere she went.

Everywhere she went the people admired her handiwork. She proudly explained that as long as the blue and the green could touch, and the gray and the gold remained in place, so long would the people have food and abundance. But when the cloak became worn, she cautioned, and the people stopped admiring the patterns, then the colors would fade, and the people would perish, and the mountains would be all that remained.

When she finished telling that story, the children had climbed to the top of the canyon and looked out across the land. They noticed that the green that used to ring the canyon had faded, and the gray of the mountains was harsher than it had once been.

The old woman nodded solemnly. And told another story while she prepared a meal of dried berries and grains.

Time was a great and stern king. He set the seasons in motion, placing clouds that bore rain and snow in the sky, moving the sun higher or lower to warm and light the earth, and regulating times of work and rest so that all might thrive.

But Time stood apart from the people, and did not consult with them. He watched them from his throne, noticing how they moved, but deaf to all their entreaties and

needs. Ignorant of their individual fates, Time proceeded without care. The people, in their turn, forgot that Time was the king and proceeded in their doings without care.

When the people, in their ignorance, and lacking guidance, believed they were masters of the world, they began to change the patterns that Time had set in place. They began to subdue the plants and the animals, considering these to be far less worthy and valuable than the people. They used up supplies from one place, then brought in more from another.

Time watched this, dispassionately, and did not interfere.

The people pretended to own Nature, and abused the gifts. They changed the paths of the rivers, they fenced in the free-roaming grazers and organized plants into segregated fields of great size. They took lumber and hides, metals and stone, and created large edifices and impressive clothing.

Time noticed, and did not interfere.

As the people took the trees, the clouds shifted in the sky and the rains moved. The winds changed as the trees were felled, coming now faster and from many directions. The birds became confused. The animals bore young at the wrong season and wandered out of their former homes.

Time passed by and did not stop.

He watched from his throne in the mountains, as the patterns changed.

At this, the mother and father glanced at each other, and sent the children to bed.

They stayed up long into the night, learning the stories of the past and talking about the changes they had noticed.

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