Chapter Nine / Weaving

The elder woman was a weaver when she was young. There were patterns in the fabrics she wove, complicated, intricate, delicate patterns.

She watched the landscape with the artist's eye, and pulled patterns for her weaving.

A broad expanse of gold, mingled here and there with green or blue, a trace of purple at the edges, brown underneath.

There was an order, a logic, a set of assumptions that provided structure to the work.

And yet, in the movement of the fabric, or the shaping of the basket, what people noticed were the colors and how they felt when they saw the work.

When she was young, she was a weaver, but an accident had taken a hand, and thus her craft. A young mother, she learned to cook, to clean, to garden with only one hand. But to move the shuttle, to thread the loom, took two hands. And so she turned to other things.

One thing she learned to do with her single hand, and the help of a clever husband, was to spin. She was able to hang her spindle from a hook on the ceiling, and pushing at a paddle with her feet she could feed the fibers into it to make yarn and thread.

So she became a dyer and spinner, and they managed.

She still watched the patterns of the landscape, though, and recalled stories from childhood that spoke of the same patterns.

The patterns of light in the sky, from the crisp, crystalline quality of light just before mid-day in the spring to the full, heavy light of afternoon in summer, to the gasp of warm glow at the end of the day as autumn waned. The patterns of rain and snow, weaving in and out in the wet season, first gentle rains, then hard with wind, then a gentle snowfall, then rain... a harder snowfall, then rain... and then, just before the cold air began to warm in earnest, a heavy snowfall that blanketed just-emerging shoots until the nights stopped freezing.

She knew how the patterns of animals were interwoven with the light and the rains, when the gravid grazers would calve and the seasonal birds would nest. She knew that the hungriest time of the year for the animals and the people was just before planting, and then again before harvest, and which plants would produce fastest to keep starvation at bay.

She noticed the patterns of people, too – how the endless days of childhood suddenly ended with an explosion of elbows and knees, awkward attempts at adult tasks, and how that ended just as suddenly as love blossomed and pairs of lovers, seeing only the good in each other formed strong unions. She knew the patterns that would lead to long-term households, and which would not last more than a few seasons.

As her family grew, she taught them what she could, apprenticed them to skilled people in return for teaching the youngest children the ancient stories and songs.

When she grew older, and her husband had walked through the veil into the next land, she went to live with her eldest daughter who had married a woodcrafter in a far village. Over time, she learned the patterns of the new place, how the patterns of work and play chased each other in the village, with children laughing and calling back and forth and parents wearily trudging back and forth at their tasks. But the patterns in the village were weakening, and the woman felt the strain intensely.

Inevitably, for a strong-willed young man, the woodcrafter had a falling out with the elders of the village and the family moved back to the woodcrafter's ancestral home, a small ranch far from the village in a canyon. And there, the young couple began a life with even more patterns. Patterns of herding and planting, butchering and harvesting, drying, storing, cooking... and children. The daughter soon became adept at carrying her infant in a sling while she did her chores. In good weather, the grandmother would take the herd back and forth or guard the crops and in bad weather would watch the children and spin in the home.

The patterns were strong in the canyon. The woman noticed the patterns, and spoke often to her daughter about the differences between the canyon and the village. But the patterns were changing, and each season was surprising. An occasional visitor would carry news about the village and the world beyond, how the wells were drying up, the storms stronger and the difficulty people had getting food. And then, like the wells, the few visitors dried up also.

For a year or two the family continued in the canyon, working, gardening, living. And then the creek in the canyon stopped flowing. And the springs dried up. The family knew the changes had finally reached them.

They set out after harvesting what they could, driving their herd before them. The father had a large bundle on his back, the mother a small bundle. The children carried more. The grandmother carried the infant.

They walked away from the villages, away from the plains. They walked up the canyon, toward the mountains. Farther than any of them had ever been.

At first, it was fun for the children. An adventure, to go far from home, to see the world, as the heros in the adventure stories. They made up names for each other, heroic-sounding names: she-with-legs-of-bronze, man-with-song and he-of-many-strengths. They named their parents and grandmother as well: hammer-hand, and light-as-wind, and rainbow-teller.

They herded the animals, taking care to not let any fall behind, sending out a scout for forage, seeking water, seeking shelter.

At first, forage could be found each day. The song of birds along the canyon walls and overhead was joined by the voices of children and animals playing. The warm sun was welcome in the morning, less so at the end of the day when it beat down over the rim of the canyon and, and again when at night it grew cool but the rocks on which they slept were still warm.

Then the floor of the canyon began to rise, and there was less shade at the bottom of the canyon. Even the damp spots that had remained after the creek stopped were gone. Now the forage grew sporadically and they began to carry some along for the days it could not be found. The birds were quieter now, and the children, hot and tired, played less often.

Then they emerged from the head of the canyon onto the vast plain, and discovered the reason for the creek's disappearance: the lake that had once topped the plain had been drained. All that remained behind was the baking mud, dry and sharp, and the skeletons of fish.

A few rough reeds and rushes grew at the edges of the former lake. The trees that stood at the edge had been cut, the wood hauled away for some purpose or another.

The grandmother sighed, and shook her head. The lake had fed the plain and the people for countless generations. Her own ancestors had lived by the shore of the lake, and she had assured the children they would play in the great, wide waters.

But the waters had gone, and there were few signs of life.

A bird, here or there, flying in the distance. Plants, too small and thorny to be eaten or a single small tree, perhaps it had been judged too insignificant for whoever had cut the trees.

Indeed, it was not only the trees at the margins of the lake, it was an entire forest that was gone. As far as the family could see, many days' walk in every direction, no trees remained. Nothing stirred on the land.

No homes stood.

Far in the distance, mountains loomed, gray and shapeless, appearing as small hills against the ochre land.

Mountains, the grandmother said, were the best place to shelter from the sun and the weather.

And they walked on.

The father began to slaughter an animal each time they stopped, taking the weakest and least healthy each time to give the stronger animals a chance to make it. They dried what meat they could over a fire each night, and carried it along, but had to leave much of the carcasses behind.

The scavengers followed the family as they moved along, waiting for the next animal to fall. They ranged just out of sight, but not far enough – the children could tell the animals were frightened whenever the family stopped.

And then the forage failed completely. The family reluctantly slaughtered the remaining animals, knowing a quick death was better than fear. They spent two days there, preparing the meat as best they could, knowing that the hides would have made good cloaks but unable to carry them along, untanned.

And the grandmother continued to recount stories as they traveled along, pointing out the occasional shape of a fruiting shrub or flower that was edible.

The family walked on, passing along the edge of the lake, and then beyond, always toward the mountains, watching for signs of life.

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