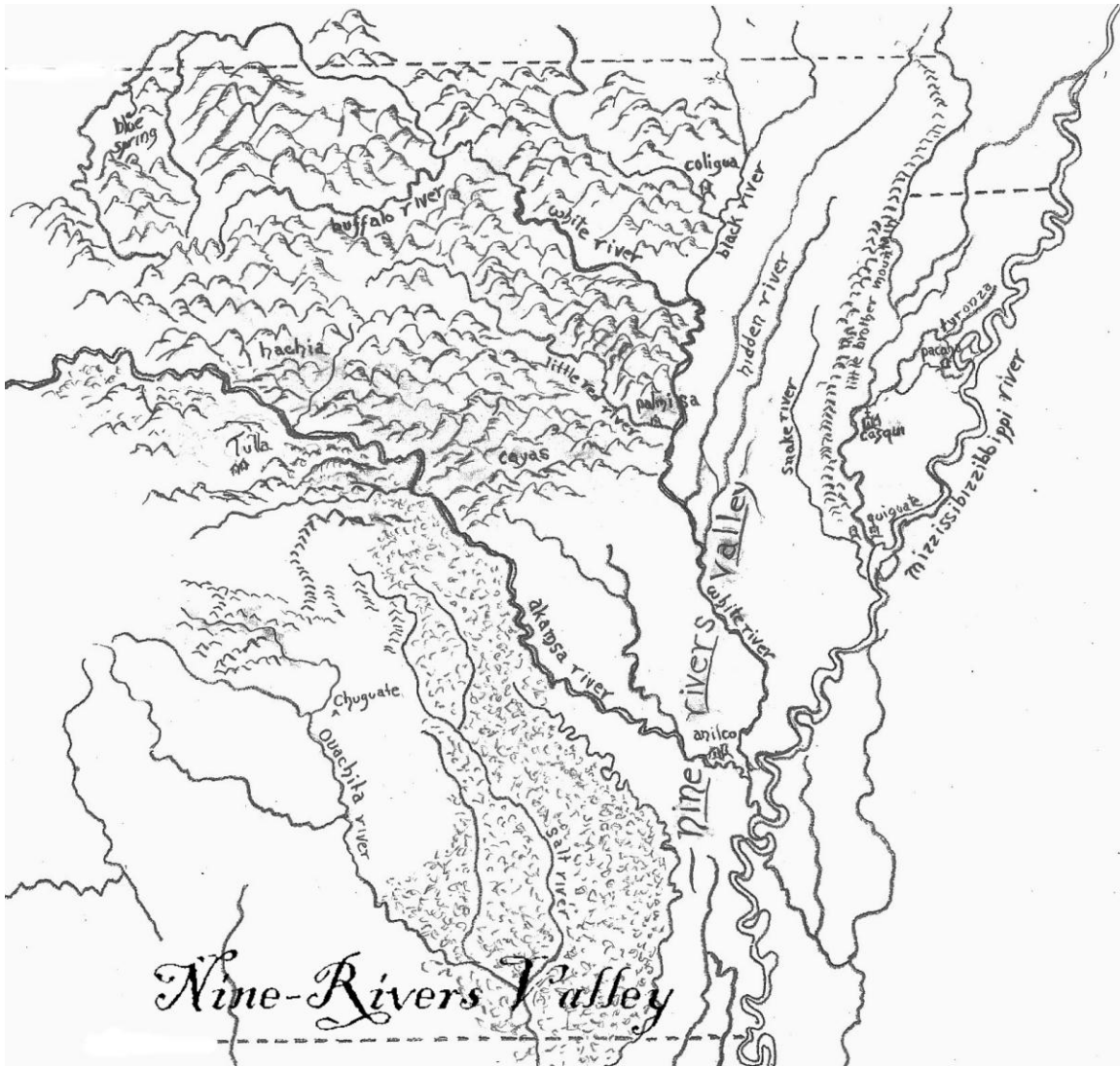


Map of the prehistoric lands west of the Mississippi River in the 1500s.



Storykeeper

By

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Contents

[Map Nine Rivers Valley](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2: Island in the Sky](#)

[Chapter 3: One Slash](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5: Nanza, My Child](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7: The Hiding Cave](#)

[Chapter 8: The Son of the Sun](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10: Looking Down on the Sun](#)

[Chapter 11: Uncle's Hat](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13: Grandfather's Last Day](#)

[Chapter 14: Men of Metal](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16: Cayas Trace](#)

[Chapter 17: Shadow Wind](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19: Meadow Creek](#)

[Chapter 20: Tallest Cypress](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22: First Friend](#)

[Chapter 23: A Sign](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25: Woman of the Falls](#)

[Chapter 26: Bridge to Pa-caha](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28: Orb Stones](#)

[Chapter 29: Revenge and War](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31: The Swarm](#)

[Chapter 32: Battle Won and Lost](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34: Edge of the Mountains](#)

[Chapter 35: ¡Oro!](#)

[Chapter 36: The Right Hand](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38: My First Sunrise](#)

[Chapter 39: All Things Lost](#)

[Chapter 40: One Circle Ends](#)

[Chapter 41: One Circle Begins](#)

[References](#)

[De Soto Map](#)

June 18, 1541, the first recorded Europeans crossed the Mississippi River into the densely populated land of Nine-Rivers Valley. Generations of sad winters have passed. It is now early summer in the southern foothills of the Ozark Mountains.

Storykeeper

Chapter 1

With every dream, she knew it was coming, but this time that made little difference. Manaha ran as fast as she had ever run. The ground shook as the lumbering rage closed in. A low growl swelled to a thundering roar, echoing on all sides.

Hot breath burned the back of her legs. She pushed herself harder. Jagged teeth tore across her heel. She pulled away, but only for a moment. Claws like knives sliced her shoulder and spun her around. One swipe and the giant beast ripped away her arm.

Manaha shuddered awake. The sounds around her were all familiar: the hiss of a pitch-pine fire, the soft song of others sleeping, and the call of night's creatures outside the village-lodge. Wet with sweat, she threw back the bedcover and tried to sit up. She had grown accustomed to waking with stiffness. This was more—her arm would not move. Cradling it like a baby, she hobbled to the small fire in the center of the floor.

Four others without a clan slept on the benches lining the circular walls. Manaha carefully surrounded the flame with some kindling. It was summer, but she felt chilled.

Most of her life she had dreamed of a brown bear chasing her. Sometimes she ran fast. Other times she could hardly move. Even so, the bear had never caught her—until tonight.

As the first morning light slid through the only door, Manaha stood, crossed her arms, bad over good, and crept out. She hurried around the plaza, following a wide, dusty path along the steep bank of the creek to the far side of the growing fields.

Over the short stalks of corn, whiffs of smoke from the nine lodges of her small village rose to the brightening sky. She tested her arm again. Nothing. *What will happen when they find out about my arm?* No matter how the others would react, she knew she had to tell the tribe about her dream.

That evening, she gathered with the others around the square-ground west of the plaza. In the warm months, the sunken clay-packed clearing, enclosed by four open-front sheds, served as the village council site. It once was a place of stories and words of wisdom. The sacred fire still burned in the center, but no one told stories anymore.

Now they gathered with a common face of despair to watch the flames consume wood like so many flickering memories. Her own memories, stirred by last night's dream, forced her to look upon her people differently.

Manaha gathered her courage and stepped from under the thick thatched roof of the Blue Lodge. She pulled the woven scarf she always wore even tighter and marched to the center of the grounds with her arms hanging as if both were the same.

Stepping inside the fire-circle, she turned toward the White Lodge. "I wish to speak to the village." She did not wait for a reply. "I must tell a dream that came to me last night."

Voices of protest from the Red Lodge clamored above the murmurs of general disapproval. Ta-kawa of the Cougar clan, the best hunter of the village, shouted the loudest. "Go back to your place, woman! You have no right to speak before the village fire."

"I must tell my dream," she said.

"No. You cannot speak here." Ta-kawa stood tall and proud of every war scar. "Tell your dream to an elder if you must."

"Hold your tongue, warrior!" Hazaar commanded. The honored elder slowly rose from his position at the center of the White Lodge. Sad eyes, set deep in his taut, weathered face, drifted from lodge to lodge.

"She will tell her dream," he said. "If it has meaning, it will be for each listener to regard or cast away, on their own."

After both men sat down, Manaha breathed deeply and spoke out in a strong voice. She told of a great peaceful valley, where she found death, annihilation, and a brown bear. She stammered as she relived the pain of losing her arm. And she repeated what the Great Brown Bear told her: "*Become the storyteller your people need, and you shall have your arm back.*"

~~~

Manaha bowed her head. She could feel every eye staring at the arm hanging at her side. Murmurs swelled all about.

"There are no more brown bears," Ta-kawa shouted above all the others. "Your dream means nothing here." Manaha closed her eyes to her surroundings. After a moment, she bent over, cupped her hand, and extended her good arm to Mother Earth. Raising it to her face, she blew into her palm. Then in a sweeping circle, she cast the power of the dream to those gathered about. A second sweep circled slower, and the third silenced the last voice.

She spoke. "Grandfather told me long ago, 'a man without a story is one without a past, and a man without a past is one without wisdom.' If we do not teach the children as our elders taught us, all that has gone before will be lost."

"Teach the past?" Ta-kawa shouted. "The past should be forgotten and with it any talk of the *strangers*. The deaths and the defeat of the ancestors have no honor here."

"Listen, Ta-kawa. Listen all of you," Hazaar said. "I believe the dream is a warning."

They all turned to look at Hazaar. The elder held out his arms and opened both hands. “This was a family in Nine-Rivers Valley.” Wiggling his fingers, he said, “Brothers, mothers, sisters, children—this is a family before the strangers.”

Hazaar sadly studied each of his flexing fingers then slowly closed both fists one finger at a time except for the last one, wrinkled and bent. He held it up and turned it in front of his face. “When they left,” he said, “this is all that remained of that family.”

He walked the circle, pointing at each of the four sheds. “We are all that remain. Our ancestors were from different nations, but together we are the last people of Nine-Rivers Valley.

We cannot hold the gifts of our ancestors. We have lost them. We cannot visit their graves; there were none. We cannot speak their names because we have forgotten them. Stories are all we have.”

~~~

Morning found Manaha gathering wood on an island in Long Creek, downstream of the village. The large raised open plot, ringed in willows, was ignored by most. She felt close to her childhood there, separated from the world by a deep channel of simple creek water.

The council made the decision late in the night that she could tell her stories, but only at a fire outside the village. A high point near the center of the island was her choice. Manaha dropped her small collection of firewood and began digging a fire pit. As she struggled, her determination of last night gave way to apprehension. *Why did I say those things in front of everyone?*

Never had she stood before the tribe, and never had her words been so eloquent. *Could the telling of the dream hold as much power as the dream itself?*

The pit dug, she picked up her axe. She crossed the creek and wandered lost in a flood of doubt. No birds sang away her troubles. No coyote howled a resolution. No eagle flew overhead to show the way.

“What did I expect?” she asked. “Why was I given the dream?”

In the time between one step and the next, her thoughts cleared. A simple realization flowed over her. *The dream came to me. I only have to believe, and like the dream, the words will come.*

Turning back toward the island, she came upon a large red oak that had been struck by lightning. Split by the force, the charred tree lay in pieces all about, but for one large splinter that stood straight and defiant in the center of the once-great tree.

As she gathered a pile of broken branches, she sensed someone watching.

“I know you are there. What do you want?” she called.

Two girls and a boy edged into the opening. They wanted to sit at her story-fire, they said, and offered to carry wood.

“I have chosen a place near the center of the island for my fire,” she told them. “You may put the wood next to the pit.”

The children filled their arms and hurried away.

The spirits of the past were with her. They surely had led her to this lightning tree with the proud splinter still standing tall at its center. A piece of oak stouter than lightning should offer a bright flame and lend power to the telling of many stories.

She pounded at the splinter with her dull axe. Her useless arm flopped about until she tied it to her side with leather twine from her pouch. She swung the axe until the last standing piece of the great oak fell. It was flat-sided, wide across the bottom and lighter than she had expected. She dragged it in one piece all the way to the island.

In the center of the fire pit, she placed a large slice cut from the bottom of the splinter. Everything had to be proper, just as her grandfather had shown her: each piece selected and carefully stacked. When she finished, she walked down to the creek to wash.

Children soon began to gather quietly around the unlit fire, their probing eyes watching Manaha. She did not see the boy who had helped with the firewood, but the two girls were there, smiling up at her. Manaha exhaled and turned away to Father Sun.

In the warmth of the day's last breath, Manaha caught the scent of her grandfather and knew then where to begin. With her back to the children, she prayed so all could hear:

*It is not the death;
it is the sadness that stole my hopes.*

*It is not the misery;
it is the sadness that stole my tears.*

*It is not the hunger;
it is the sadness that stole my strength.*

*Great Spirit, hear this humble prayer;
carry away the never-ending sadness.*

Manaha turned to the circle of listeners. "Some of you may have heard an elder recite that prayer to the setting sun. It speaks of a time long ago and to the loss of our ancestors."

She slowly circled the pit, lighting the kindling. Soon a fire crackled and popped. Manaha returned to the storyteller's place as the sky smoldered in a soft purple glow behind her. In front, the fire lit young faces aglow with curiosity.

“Our people have always told stories. Telling is how the Old Ones remember, and listening is how you, the Young Ones, will learn.” For a moment, the flames pulled her deep into her own youth. The children began to stir. Her voice returned, strong and determined.

“I, Manaha, shall tell the stories I lived and the ones I learned from my grandfather who witnessed the arrival and journeyed with Hernando de Soto, the one our ancestors called the *Son of the Sun*.”



Storykeeper

Chapter 2: Island in the Sky

Manaha's childhood Forty-nine years after "their" arrival

As a child, I lived alone with Taninto, whom I called Grandfather and who called me Nanza. One morning, late in the season of my twelfth winter, Grandfather woke me early.

"I will be gone all day," he said. "Before sunset, meet me on top of Narras."

Narras was a high, narrow ridge that stood in a crook of the winding Buffalo River on the edge of the valley we both called home.

This was a sacred place to him, but the skeleton of a long-dead mountain to me. Its soil had fallen away, exposing bony rocks to the sun and the wind. Grandfather went there often to lament and to be with the spirits of the past.

He had told me many times, "You are too young to climb the sacred mountain."

Now he had instructed me to meet him there. I knew the importance of this event. My emotions leaped from fear to hope and back again. The day lasted longer than the patience of my youth. I was at the Narras early. I walked around its base to the Buffalo River, keeping an eye on the rim for Grandfather.

From the bend in the river, it is possible to see both the north and south side of Narras. One side followed the old trail that I had just walked, and the other bordered the churning river. At the water's edge, I could see its highest point almost straight above me. More than once, I saw Grandfather standing on that ledge, but not today. I ran all the way back around to where the trail to the top of Narras started.

The beginning is not difficult. When Grandfather left me alone in the valley I had climbed the lower part several times. The roots of an old cedar tree growing into the rocks made the first steps easy and tempting. Above that, layers of rock formed natural steps worn by the wind and Grandfather.

The climb went quickly until the point where I could see no other place to grab. I tried to convince myself that I had always turned back at that point because of guilt rather than fear.

I had no reason to feel guilty now. Fear alone tested my resolve and seized me as tightly as I gripped the rock. My fingers crept across the surface as I searched for a handhold, a crack in the rock. I could not see the handhold, but I could feel its strength as I pulled myself up and found more, but none within an easy grasp. The rock face began to slope inward. Soon, I could crawl. I stood and laughed at myself for having given up in the past.

A grove of trees shared the high ground with me. Short with thick trunks, twisted but strong, they seemed as old as the mountain. Their gnarled branches forced me to stoop as I followed a well-traveled path.

A few steps into the tiny forest, the view opened to clear sky and a straight drop to the river. Wind rushing up from the blue waters below chilled my face and stole my breath. My legs buckled. Never had I witnessed a more powerful sight. I cowered back and hugged the closest tree.

Rooted to its trunk, I took in the beauty of Mother Earth. The Buffalo River snaked around hills and valleys until it stretched out of eyesight and beyond my knowledge. Off to my right, Taninto's valley, the world I did know, lay peacefully in the crease of two great mountains. The boundary between the worlds, known and unknown, was a ledge no wider than a single stride.

Across that narrow rim and up another steep climb loomed the top of Narras, Grandfather's sacred place. The path twisted and turned before me. Patches of grass grew between the rocks, but either side fell away to jagged cliffs.

A crow's caws drew my attention.

"*Haw ... haw ... haw*," I called back, thrilled to be looking down on his flight as he soared over the river and disappeared into a darkening forest.

"I cannot be afraid," I said and straightened up. I let go of the last branch and focused on my next steps. Few had been taken when I heard the crow again, returning to taunt me.

Circling overhead, he called out, "*Caw, caw*, who is proud, now? Who is brave, little girl? *Caw, caw, caw*."

I tried not to listen as he flew closer. "You are in the world of the Winged Ones now. Look up to me, the Mighty Crow. *Caw*."

I held my arms out like a soaring bird but looked only at the path. Before I reached the other side, I stopped and gazed out over the river into the unknown from the world of the Winged Ones. It was a grand view, but brief. I lunged forward and grabbed the rock wall. I might have shown courage to the crow, but I had proven little to myself.

My legs shook, but I could not turn back. I forced myself to reach up. Like a snail, I clung with my whole body. The crow gave one last *caw* and flew off downriver.

I pushed up and up, determined to reach the sacred grounds. At the top, I peered over. An island of rock in a lake of sky lay before me. Grandfather stood at the other end, his back to me, arms lifted. Faint sunlight glowed over everything in both worlds, and Grandfather seemed to float between the two.

Without a thought for myself, I climbed on top and walked toward him. He lowered his arms. The vision of his power faded. Fear drained the strength from my body.

The land under me was so scant that I could see death on either side. I fell to my knees and reached for all the earth I could grab.

"Nanza, look into my eyes," Grandfather said.

His voice gave me balance.

“Do not look away.” He picked me up and carried me on his back down the rock wall and across the rim. He sat me down at the edge of the stunted forest, facing west. In the last light of the day, he began to sing.

I had never heard him sing before, nor had I heard the language he used. He sang to Father Sun while the yellow disk slid toward the distant mountains. Wisps of clouds drifted in the golden light like giant flames from a world on fire. I remember well what he said when he finished his song.

“My child, whom I rescued, raised, and will always cherish, you have shown great courage and strength in climbing to the top of Narras. Use that power well—hear and remember every word.”

Turning from me, he said, “Time has come for the story I kept far too long.”

After a painful pause, he raised his arms and said, “Let the trees and the ancient mountains be the circle of listeners and the Great Father Sun be our story-fire. May the spirits of all the wise and honorable men who sat at the fires of my youth hear these words as truth.”



Storykeeper

Chapter 3: One Slash

Grandfather's Story Forty years after "their" arrival

I, Taninto, lonely wanderer for thirty-eight winters, traveled for seven days from my valley along with my dog, provisions, and an offering. The pilgrimage took me up the White River to the Blue Spring on the edge of the Healing Mountains. Mother Earth gives forth pure water from springs all over Nine-Rivers Valley, but from these mountains flow many healing springs, each with different powers.

Blue Spring is the greatest of these. Its water flows never-ending down into the White River and on to mingle with all the rivers and streams that bless our land. The closer I came to the spring, the harder the current pushed against the canoe. The quiet comfort of tree-lined banks faded, and the sight of an open field broke the rhythm of my paddle.

Always quick to take advantage, the river forced me to the shore. Several turtles slid into the water as I pulled my canoe next to a fallen cottonwood. Though on its side, the tree still grew strong and mighty.

My dog, Chachiz, climbed onto the tree and scampered up the roots that clung to the steep riverbank. He scouted the area while I tied the canoe under a spread of limbs. I unloaded my offering and the supplies we would need for the climb over the mountain and down to the spring.

Chachiz waited at the top of the bank, ready. That was all I needed to know. I had lived alone since my seventeenth winter. Those are sad words for an old man to boast about his life. My home in a valley so far from any villages, made it easy to avoid people. Sometimes the hunger to travel—to wander over the next ridge—challenged my isolation.

Chachiz walked in front, smelling and listening with every step. My hearing was almost as sharp as his. Sharper that day were the memories of my distant childhood.

I last traveled through this land in my youth with my uncle Tecco, a Tassetti or Wise-One from the temple town of Casqui on the banks of the Little Muddy River. He brought me on his second pilgrimage to Blue Spring. I recalled those happy times with my uncle, but I could never let my thoughts turn back to Casqui. There, memories lurked, ready to snatch my spirit.

Chachiz and I traveled most of the day without seeing anything more than a few squirrels. When we came upon a path, I could hear my uncle say, "The only safe path is your own." Thorny briars scratched at both of us as we followed the overgrown path in the quiet before sunset.

The path led to a larger trail on the edge of open land. I knelt at Chachiz's side and whispered, "My friend, this must be the road to Blue Spring. Come, we will find a place

where we can wait for the night.” We crossed the road and climbed up through the undergrowth to a spot where I could see the road. Chachiz and I settled into the growing shadows.

As the last rays of sun lit the road, I saw a small group—two men, three women, and two children. Judging by their brightly colored garments, they were from the Nation of Palisema, known for its dyed skins. They hurried away from the river. I soon understood their haste. Warriors painted and armed for war followed close behind.

“War is forbidden here!” I wanted to shout. All nations considered this as sacred land. Who would violate the code? The world slipped into darkness. My thoughts ran on, but I remained rooted in my own terror.

“*Ahaya ... Ya, ya, ya, yaaaa.*” The cry hushed the night’s creatures and doused my hopes.

Chachiz lunged to his feet. I grabbed him. The new songs of the evening were yelps and war cries.

Every sound of the massacre reached into our hiding place and ripped at my soul. I could do nothing. There was no way to turn that I did not hear the attack.

Then silence spread over the forest. Every creature stood still, straining to hear the next sound. Screams. It came as screams. Torture of the survivors began. I thanked the shadows that I could not see what I was forced to hear.

What could I do? I had to leave. I had no weapons. I was an old man with no strength or will for fighting. If I stayed, if I listened, those old memories would find me again and overrun my soul.

“I must go,” I whispered. Pain cracked my stiff legs as I stood. “Chachiz, we must go.”

I hurried through the night forest, rambling. “I must go. I must go.” Louder than their screams, I said, “Chachiz, we must go!”

He did not lead, but stayed by my side. I stumbled often, cutting and bruising my arms and legs, but I could not stop. “Hurry, Chachiz. I must go.”

So it went until blind haste brought us back to the trail, the most dangerous path, but the fastest way back to the canoe. I stepped onto the road and turned toward the river. Chachiz circled me and dashed out front, grinning at the sight of an old man running. My chant became our pace. “I-must-go, I-must-go, I-must-go.”

We ran until the road curved out of sight around a steep hillside. Uncertain what might be around the bend, Chachiz turned toward the hill and the cover of trees. I had had enough of running through the forest and started for the open field to the left.

Chachiz hesitated a moment, then raced ahead to scout the field and disappeared among the tall weeds and morning fog. I saw him again at a distance, standing above the meadow grasses waiting for me. I crouched and crept toward him.

He stood on a pile of freshly dug earth. “Ch ... a ... ch ... iz ...,” I whispered more like a sound than a name. He remained still and resolute.

“Chachiz,” I said. He sat down on his back legs. I stood and walked away. He did not move. “Chachiz, we must go.”

I stomped my foot. “Come, dog, come. I must go.”

He lay down. Again, I edged toward the small mound, close enough this time to peer over.

A glimpse, a forgotten sense of hope to one who had seen so much tragedy, was a great surprise. Hope did not spring from the sign of life, those whiffs of breath meeting the cool morning air. Nor had hope returned at the thought of having someone to fill my empty life.

Hope came from a smile—a child’s smile. A child ill with Black Sleep, smallpox! I knew the signs well: the painful, oozing boils, the fever and confusion. The child, a girl properly wrapped in a cougar skin, lay in an open grave. She wore a copper and crystal necklace. A red-striped water bottle rested above her left shoulder, with a basket of cornmeal above her right. A child’s toy bird fashioned from clay and painted blue perched above her head.

Her family must have brought her to the healing springs after she grew sick. When she did not improve, they prepared a burial site. Fear of the disease was so great that many parents refused to touch a child who died of the sickness. Her family could do nothing but place the small child in the grave and wait for her death.

An even greater fear of men had caused the loving family to abandon her. Unable to wait for her passing and unwilling to do death’s deed, they left their hopes in a bundle for me to find. I did not fear her sickness. It could do me no harm, for the disease is *my* curse.

Waging a battle in my thoughts were things I must not remember, must not see, must not do—and one sick child. As I paced, she followed with tiny eyes struggling to stay open. Then I heard her voice, weak and frail, but crashing like thunder.

Terrible, choking memories bubbled up from deep inside. I fought for breath.

A small voice repeated the question. “What is your name?”

How long has it been since another person spoke to me?

“Ta ... nin ... to,” I stuttered.

“Ta ... nin ... to,” she repeated.

It sounded good to hear my name.

“Taninto, the Wanderer,” I said.

She echoed back with even more confidence. “Taninto, the Wanderer!”

I knew then, I could not leave this child. I tried to speak, but the words lodged in my throat. I climbed over the piled earth, scooped the child from her grave, and held her close to my heart. She nuzzled her face into the hollow of my shoulder, looked up, and smiled. I had lived those miserable, lonely forty-two winters if for nothing else than this child.

“Come, Chachiz,” I said as I wrapped the child in my old deerskin. “We must get her into the forest.”

Before I took a step, Chachiz growled. I knew the sign and fell to my knees in the center of the grave, carrying the child gently to the earth.

I pulled Chachiz in with us then peered over the top. Through the tall grasses, I saw three warriors trotting east on the trail. Blinded by the morning sun, they might pass us by. I crouched down and listened. They ran as one, but I heard each set of feet.

When they rounded the bend, I could hear only two. Had one of the warriors stopped? Did I hear true? *There must be three*, I told myself. Chachiz told me differently. One of the warriors headed in our direction. He would find us soon.

An old man of frail spirit, my torment would be short, but Chachiz’s death would be slow. I could not let that happen. Because of me, they would torture him.

What of the child? If they saw the signs of Black Sleep, they would not touch her.

I pulled my old companion close and buried my face in his fur. He sat on his back legs and licked my chin. I pointed his head to the sky.

“Spirit of my good friend, be free of this wretched world. Soar to the clouds. Lead my way as you have always done.” I reached for my knife. I had no choice. Once started, I could not hesitate.

One slash. One quick slash.

Chachiz rolled his head. His eyes fixed on mine. That brief gaze has lingered for a lifetime. He fell into my arms. I fell apart, crumbling into the bottom of the grave. His blood ran down over my body as I pulled the deerskin and the child over my face. The warrior would be upon us any time.

I untied the child’s cloak and slipped out her small arms. For her to live, the warrior must see her sores. I took a deep breath and whispered, “Be still, small one.”

I waited ... and hoped. I could see nothing. My nose filled with the smell of blood. How long could I endure?

The morning songbirds were interrupted by the sound of a blue jay. Even with my ears covered, I knew it was not a bird. The warrior had alerted the others to the grave. Soon I heard voices.

One yelled, “The intruders from Palisema have honored us with a sacrifice and gifts. This is truly our land.”

“Aquan, do not take anything,” a more powerful voice shouted.

The first warrior spoke again. “Who are you to tell me what I can do? I helped kill the intruders from Palisema, and these skins belong to me.”

“The grave is cursed. The child has the sickness. We should leave this place,” the other said.

I heard movement, but I could not tell how many were leaving. My body begged for relief.

“Ahaya ... yaaaa.”

“Aquan, come back,” someone yelled.

He did not heed, but ran to the edge of the grave and shouted of his bravery in a flurry of war cries and boasts. “I, Aquan, great warrior of Pa-caha, fear no man. I fear no curse—”

~~~

*“Stop!”*



# Storykeeper

## Chapter 4

### *Manaha's Journey Ninety-four years after "their" arrival*

The magical web the story and the fire had woven around the children vanished with a sudden roar.

"Stop!" Ta-kawa roared again and threw water onto the fire. It slapped the flames; in the hiss and mist, the children disappeared into the shadows.

Manaha snatched up the remains of the splinter she had cut from the lightning tree. Holding it like a staff between her and Ta-kawa, she spoke so all those in hiding could hear. "I have the right, and the guidance to tell this story and many more."

"Woman, I say you have no right to speak of the old nations. And never again say Pa-caha, never—"

Manaha cut him off. "I will hear no more." She sat down, and closed her eyes.

"The Council will deal with you." Ta-kawa shouted, disappearing as quickly as he had come.

After a time, Manaha rose. She walked to the village without ever looking back at the smoldering fire, took her bedding from the village-lodge, and returned to the island.

The story-fire flared up around its wet edges as Manaha spread out her bedding. She thought about her day. She stood on her own. Her fire had burned bright, and her words had been true. She thought of the children and their faces, and she thought of her grandfather.

Somehow, she did not feel her age or her troubles. Her prayers were short but thankful. A blanket spread on the ground was not as comfortable as her bench in the village-lodge, but she took little notice.

Manaha overslept. She sat up quickly but slowly got to her feet. Mother Earth had been hard on her. "I did not have the sounds of others to wake me." She excused herself.

A group of young children stopped their play as she approached the village. Each one stood silent, staring at her and an older boy who stood apart from the group. Manaha felt certain he had been one of her listeners. She studied his face, but he remained mute, never looking up.

A smaller boy tugged at his folded arms, pulling them apart long enough for her to see a punishment scratch. The shallow scratch hurts only a short while. Real pain came

when others began to tease. The boy stood for a moment, surrounded by ridicule, before bolting.

*What had he done to deserve a punishment scratch?* Manaha wondered, as she left the children and walked into the village. There were no smiles from the women around the plaza—not one greeting.

She saw another child from last night. The girl clung to her mother, Asnewn, a good friend of Manaha's. Asnewn continued her work without looking up. As the girl squirmed, Manaha caught a glimpse of a scratch down her arm.

She glanced from face to face around the village plaza. Every eye turned away. The children were punished because of her. Manaha felt the sting of her own punishment scratch, not on her arm, but across her heart.

*Ta-kawa must be responsible.* She marched up to his sister. "Where is he?"

"He is with the men on the square-ground planning for an early hunt."

Manaha turned to leave.

"Ta-kawa knows," his sister taunted.

Manaha spun around. "He knows what?"

"Your stories will only bring the sickness again."

"Stories are for healing and learning." Manaha moved around to the sister's downturned face. "You know that."

She avoided Manaha's glare. "When Ta-kawa returns from this hunt, his voice will lead our village."

Manaha walked away from the troubling boast then turned toward the square-ground. *Ta-kawa's charge should not be taken lightly.* She paused near the Blue Lodge long enough to hear that Ta-kawa and most of the men of the village would be leaving soon.

After collecting the remainder of her belongings, Manaha walked proudly through the center of the plaza and back to the island. The smell of wet, charred wood welcomed her return. She sat where she had the night before and let her bundles fall. Her arms hung limp as if both were now dead.

*How can I ever regain the life in my cursed arm if I cannot tell stories?*

The wind, the sky, and the world of Mother Earth moved around her, but Manaha sat in opposition. After long, empty moments, her thoughts traveled back to the days spent with her grandfather. His spirit influenced every step of her life's path, good and bad. Just telling one of his stories filled her with a pride she had never known.

Manaha did not know if anyone would sit in her circle of listeners tonight, but she determined to carry on. The remains of last night's fire had to be removed before building a new one. As she pitched the wet wood to the side, something caught her eye. A speck gleamed in the blackened dirt. She rubbed the soot and dirt off the small stone to reveal a tiny arrowhead, the finest she had ever seen, crafted from pure white flint.

She rolled the sharp edges over and over in her fingers, before putting it deep into her pouch. From the same secret depth, she pulled the quartz crystal she had carried for many seasons. Holding it up, Manaha turned it in the light until its reflection twinkled. She placed it where she had found the arrowhead and filled in the pit.

The glow of Father Sun's departure surrounded Manaha as she admired her day's work: a new pit dug and a larger story-fire built. She waited, ready to light the kindling. Slowly, night settled over her, stealing her sight and hopes.

Then behind her, with a crunch of leaves, a twig snapped. She looked around the darkness but saw no one. More sounds came from all sides. Whoever they might be, they were unwilling to be seen by her or by Ta-kawa should he appear. She hurried to remove most of the bigger logs, and soon tended a smaller fire to draw her listeners in closer.

With a short prayer, she dropped three shavings from the lightning tree onto the flames. She took her place in the empty circle and spoke out in a loud voice.

“Manaha, the rejected will finish the first story and many to come.”

