

The next day Bardo guided Keera back to the Oglala camp. As they gazed at the tipis and horses and people, invisible to them from the earth side, he pointed out a young woman bent over and shuffling. She stooped like a much older woman battling a cruel wind and walked without any obvious purpose.

*A new widow, Bardo explained. The trauma of her life has caused a shift in her perspective. Her name is Rain Bird.*

Rain Bird. The woman whose body Keera was to take over. She knew about entering bodies—something she had experienced, but the other way round. Spirits entering *her* body so they could speak, pass messages. All that required was a tuning into their frequency. Simple if you were born to it—a matter of a few month’s training to refine it. How this widow would react was an unknown.

How do I do this? Keera asked Bardo silently.

*You embrace her. Start with the head and throat, the rest of the body will follow.*

Keera moved closer and made initial contact. The woman, Keera knew, would experience a rush of energy all over, a soft something gripping the throat and prickling as the two spirits merged. The woman stopped walking and shook her head as if to free it from bad thoughts. Keera tried to control the arms. Not possible. The woman waved them like a windmill gone mad.

She’s not letting me in, She said to Bardo. She’s frightened.

*Yes, this time. She’ll think about the experience all day. Tomorrow will be different.*

The second day they found Rain Bird near the creek. She was alone and dipping a buffalo bladder into the water. Metal containers were still uncommon, and precious in this time and place.

*Let’s try again. If she panics, talk to her* Bardo said.

Keera moved closer and attempted merging. Rain Bird dropped the bladder and stood with a cry. “*Aaaieeh!*”

Keera backed off.

*Tell her you've come to help. She grieves for her husband, and she'll listen.*

Keera spoke. "Do not be frightened. I have come to help."

"Who are you?" Rain Bird asked. Her face frozen, her body stiff.

"I'm your friend."

"You're a death spirit. I am ready." The woman sank to the ground. She squatted with crossed legs and arms resting on her knees. "I am ready to die. I will sing my death song." She didn't pause to compose herself but launched into a keening wail. "I have lived my life, I am ready," she sang.

"Wait," Keera broke in, alarmed that the woman might die simply because she wished to. "I am not a death spirit."

"You are evil spirit then. I will sing my song of protection."

"I am not an evil spirit," she said. "I'm your friend."

"I am Rain Bird, widow of a fine warrior. I am ready for any spirit." She closed her eyes and began to chant a new song.

*Tell her Eagle Chaser awaits her but not today.*

"Eagle Chaser is waiting, but he says it is not your time to join him."

Rain Bird slowed her chanting and stopped. She opened her eyes. "When is my time? I have no strong heart for living these days."

"It is not to be revealed," Keera answered, surprised how quickly the woman accepted her presence. "We need to be together first. For a short time."

Rain Bird looked about her. "Where are you? I see no bird, no ground animal. Nothing that would hold a talking spirit."

"I am close. I wish to share your body. Will you allow this?"

Rain Bird was no longer breathing heavily. Her curiosity had replaced fear. "Have you lost your body? Was it not fit for use when you passed into the land of many tipis?"

Keera hadn't expected any questioning. "I cannot use my old body here. I need yours for now. I can help you in many ways during my stay."

Rain Bird looked off into the distance. "My burden cannot be lifted. It is mine alone." She owned a sense of the dramatic; that much was clear. "Does my husband still want me?" This after a long pause.

"Yes," Keera replied without thinking. She didn't have to. The stuff she said came from without. "He'll wait until you have completed your tasks and can join him."

Rain Bird nodded rhythmically, cementing in the answer. "I have tasks? You'll help?"

"Yes. You must be still. Allow me to move in closer. Keep your mind still of thoughts."

"I'm ready." Rain Bird closed her eyes again, waiting.

Keera slid into the woman's body, found her blood pumping madly, the muscles tensing. Hurried thoughts tangled with her own. She could sense the synapses sparking as messages hurtled up Rain Bird's spine to the brain: messages with news of strange happenings in the body. She tried to make this new body her own, telling herself it was so, that the strangeness was temporary, that it would pass. It worked. Rain Bird stayed quiet, stayed accepting as Keera settled further into her body. It was much smaller than her own. The arms stopped six inches short of where she was used to—a startling discovery.

Roughness scratched her skin. There was no layer of soft underclothes between the flesh and Rain Bird's deerskin garment. She hadn't expected to be so sensitized to another's body. When Bardo had made it clear that she was to take over another body, she had assumed it would be like slipping into a new role. It was nothing like that: it was like taking over somebody's burden.

Rain Bird's arms lay across her knees. Keera tried to move the right arm back to the buffalo bladder. It moved like a marionette's. Jerky, no fluidity, but she grasped the rim. She held it under the water to fill it, the other hand steadying it. To anyone watching it looked a simple scene, a

woman refilling a container. To Keera, it was the first halting step on a new planet.