

Excerpt from *Child of Sonora* by Joseph VanZutphen

Sonoran Desert – May 1848

Humming a song sung from last night's spirit ceremony and dance, the boy padded his moccasins over the desert sand while rhythmically stabbing his polished walking stick into the baked ground. Occasionally he swung a jackrabbit-skin bag above his head as he carefully fixed his eyes on the terrain ahead. His father was watching from the hillside a short distance away. This was a learning trip for his son; his lesson for today was to go to the wild plants of the desert and bring back i-huk, young devil's claw vines. It was the first of his several trips because supplies of the claws would be necessary for women to boil the yet-to-ripen fruit and capture its seeds for food; in later days, he would gather the ripened, sun-dried devil's claw for women of the village to transform into sturdy baskets.

Black hair hung like a thickly woven mop of pointed paint brushes from his head, bouncing randomly off his cheeks and grazing his shoulders as he walked. He smiled as the musical tone of a Mourning Dove called to him from the sky. "Hello, my friend, can you help me find the devil's claw?" he said laughing.

Jogging in the direction of tangled vines woven over the base of a gentle slope, he recalled how his father the night before had eaten four peyote buttons in front of the swirling sweet smoke of the center fire in the ceremonial teepee. He smiled when he thought of the dance his father and the other fathers performed as they tried to mimic the snaking motion of the smoke as it rose in spirals to the opening at the top of the teepee. But he also remembered his moment of fear when his father left urgently from the teepee with the swift and deliberate movements of a warrior who was called to a sudden danger; then he disappeared into the darkness of the ironwood trees. The fear subsided though when he saw that his father soon lay down slowly on a moonlit cluster of fountain grass and fell asleep on his back, his head still and facing the full moon between the trees above.

"Ogol! Ogol!" he called to his father as he quickened his movements and deftly dodged the desert obstacles, skipping over sagebrush, springing off rocks, and rapidly turning his body between cacti. Then in a clearing, he stretched his short legs in an effortless sprint along the striated desert wash, causing his deerskin breechcloth to cling to his thighs.

He was proud of his scouting responsibility; his father said it was the Tohono O'odham way for young boys to frequently practice making rapid movements while seeking bounty in the desert; in this way, they could model tasks of their fathers. It was through play, and gathering vegetation in the desert, that smooth, coordinated movements were honed. When the crawling unending fingers of the curling devil's claw were visible beyond a small sand mound just ahead, he suddenly stopped. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a pair of short cattails poking up out of a grassy mound between two boulders. But he knew immediately that they were not cattails, for there was no water source capable of nourishing them; and, more importantly, the tawny protrusions had black tips; they were the ears of a jackrabbit who decided to rest in the shade of the fountain grass.

"Dance in step with your adversary," his father whispered from behind him. "Tomorrow we will hunt, but now you can practice; try to catch the hare." At that, his son tiptoed along the dusty pebbled ground until he reached the grassy area behind the rabbit, the distance of about the length of his shadow. Suddenly another jackrabbit sprang from the grass directly in front of him, causing the other to bound out of the grass, and in a sudden flash both hares blended into the tawny, venerable desert surface; they moved fast, as if they were large faded leaves rushing atop streams of water roiling through the hard alluvial clay. Surprised and reacting impetuously, he jumped through the grass and began to chase the rabbits as they zigzagged between large rocks and sagebrush. Within seconds the rabbits had disappeared.

“Ha, ha, haaa!” He heard his father laughing loudly. “Dance in step with your adversary so as to learn its weakness. What have I told you about jackrabbits?”

“Oh Ogol, they are clever and rest in the shade in groups so that there are more eyes to see predators,” he pronounced, shaking his head at his mistake.

“Now you have learned this lesson and you will be a better hunter tomorrow. So, let’s get the devil’s claw; it’s easier prey to hunt,” his father said with a chuckle.

This ravine in the desert wash was a welcome destination because he had been there with his friends; it was their make-believe *hideaway*. After he took several long strides to spring from rock to rock, he came to a stone pile surrounded by cat’s claw and partially shaded by three sprawling crucifixion thorn trees, each of which rose about three times his height. Boulders, appearing a little taller than he, were actually just the tips of massive rock formations submerged in the desert soil. With a brisk sideways step, he slipped between the rocks, and there in the shadows lay a stony path downward; it led to a smoothly carved pock, crafted by millennia of water flows; a small cave suited in size for him and his two friends.

“Why are you going here?” His father was standing on one of the boulders looking down him.

“This is a special place and it will give me even more energy because I will soak in the cool air too.” Inside the cave was a red stone tablet resting snugly on a smoothly rounded granite rock; it functioned as a table and was near the center of the cave. These heavy slabs of rock, bound together in a permanence, sheltered a blanket, an organ pipe fruit, and a clay jug of water beneath.

He proudly offered the organ pipe to his father. He had climbed a tree to get it the day before. “You are prepared,” said his father with a broad smile. They both took their portions but left a little fruit and a few seeds in each skin. The boy smiled broadly and stepped out of the small nook between the rocks and set the skins on the desert floor to dry in the sun. The bats would come later to enjoy the treat, and after their meal they would complete nature’s cycle, leaving the seeds with their waste to spawn new organ pipe cacti.

I will surely have great energy for gathering i-huk! You’re my favorite person to hunt with Ogol! Thank you!”

“You’re my favorite hunting companion as well. Let’s sit and look at the flowers which decorate our desert,” his father said, motioning to a dead ironwood tree limb among wild Datura flowers.

When they sat, his father moved his hand under the flower and cupped it to show its beauty. “Look at the bright Datura flower; it has ten points which are like stars arranged in the heavens around a comforting white sun.” He gently pulled two green leaves from the stem and put them in his mouth, slowly chewing, then breathing deeply through his nose. “One day, you too will enjoy the powers of the Datura,” he said.

The boy nodded, jumped up, and cried, “Time to hunt devil’s claw,” then ran toward the vegetation in the shadow of sprawling paloverde trees.

“See you soon,” his father shouted as he stepped in the opposite direction toward a low-sloped hillside. The sun, angular now in the afternoon sky, shone brightly on the devil’s claw, making the green tips yellow like fireflies at night. He arrived at the bottom of the slope, and placed his basket between two creosote bushes next to a tall leafless ironwood tree; under the basket he spread the travel blanket his wife gave him for the journey.

With his stone blade, now lightly stained with organ pipe juice, he began cutting away short sections of the green vines and tossing them into his basket.

He swiped sideways at a thick vine and only managed to cut it halfway, so he began sawing into the vine to finish the cut. This plant was hard though, almost woody, and required him to press firmly, even driving his shoulder down for more pressure. As he stared at the blade slowly breaking away fibers, a red drop appeared at the cut, and it ran along the outside of the vine in a thin flow; then another red

drop appeared quickly followed by another and another, until it became a steady stream coming out from the incision he had made in the plant.

“Ahhh,” he said in a mixed tone of surprise and fear. *It was bleeding.*

He pulled a blanket from under the basket, removed his blade from the sliced vine, and pushed a handful of the cloth over the cut – which was now a widening crack. And from the crack, red bursts began to pulsate steadily under the cloth. He pushed down harder and harder, but the liquid started to soak the blanket. So with both hands he held up the blanketed vine and squeezed tightly, choking it in order to stop the flow.

Suddenly the vine stiffened and the flow abruptly ended; then just as quickly, the vine became flaccid, so he let it go, releasing it from the blanket and sending it downward to the ground.

He gasped in relief, sat down and leaned against the trunk of the ironwood tree. He picked up the stained blanket and covered the pulpy vine. “I must have killed it,” he said aloud. “It bled to death.”

However, there was a movement and the blanket was pushed aside from underneath. Rising from the retreating blanket was a thick, yellow, arrow-shaped image. He gasped and stood rigid as the rattlesnake slowly rose, its dark, forked tongue pulsating like a small whip coming from its mouth. “No,” he said softly as he took a careful step backward.

Just then, the rattlesnake lunged at his head. Instinctively, he slashed his blade across the front of his body and it severed the snake’s head. As his heart beat rapidly, he knelt next to the lifeless reptile and took deep breaths. Slowly he leaned backward, drained of energy, and settled himself gently in the long green switchgrass sprouting from the bottom of the slope. Closing his eyes, he felt the exhaustion of his bizarre encounter.

“Ogol! Ogol!” he heard his son cry out. “Wake up! The sun is almost behind the trees. We must finish!”

His father looked up and rubbed his eyes. His head rested on his blanket in the switchgrass, and next to him was a cut section of devil’s claw. There was no blood and no sign of a snake. He smiled slowly and shook his head as he got up to his feet.

“Why were you sleeping Ogol?”

“The Datura has power son. Sometimes it can make a man strong and resilient, but other times it will make him dreamy and sleepy. But it always speaks, and at times what is heard and seen in the Datura is revealing.”

“Look Ogol!” Excited about showing his harvest, he was oblivious to his father’s mention of Datura. His gathering had been finished and he proudly pointed to his bounty, a basket full of devil’s claw that lay at the foot of the hillside.

His father smiled at him and looked down at the basket of devil’s claw, all seemingly hooked together in one large entanglement. “You have done very well. Je’e will be happy; she will share your accomplishment with the other mothers. But another test will be if you can carry that back to the village without my help.”

“Don’t worry Ogol, I have carried more than this from the village to my hideaway in the cave.”

His father adjusted the basket on its greasewood frame and set it against his son’s back, tying it tightly so it would not disturb the jackrabbit-skin sack that hung below against his lower back. “We will eat the fruit with Je’e at the fire tonight!” He straightened his back and strode proudly toward home.

“Yes, we will.” His father smiled.

Arriving close to the village, still careful not to drop the devil’s claw bulging from the basket on his young shoulders, he heard the noises of distressed birds. He stopped and looked around; for perhaps he could see Mourning Doves or ravens defending their nests from a predator. “Did you hear that Ogol?!” he shouted.

“Yes, let’s stop here for a moment.” His father bent down on one knee, motioned for his son to do the same, and moved his head slowly back and forth, staring toward the origin of the sounds. His keen senses were immediately at work: his eyes focused deeply into the stands of yellow paloverde trees; the skin on his temples tightened causing his ears to open widely to tune in on the noises; his mouth opened and his nostrils flared as he took in the air, in which he detected a hint of smoke.

As they walked slowly forward, the sounds became louder, and they both knew they were not the songs of the Mourning Doves. It was when they saw smoke that his father first realized the noises were screams coming from people -- scared people in dire trouble; he crept lightly, careful not to push the desert gravel below his feet and make discernable noise; the boy mirrored his silent gait.

“Why is there smoke? Is there something wrong Ogol?”

“Yes, they cry for help. I will go ahead and scout; you stay here among the paloverde trees and desert shrubs, and if there is danger, hide under the low branches near the trunk of a tree.”

“But Ogol, I want to go with you – I’m scared!”

“Do as I say – you are safer here.” His father held out his left arm stiffly and raised his hand. “Stay here,” he said firmly. Then he quickly pulled his knife from its sheath and began to move in a jog toward the village.

The screams grew more frequent, louder, and more frantic. Heeding his father’s instructions, he retreated to the trunk of a yellow paloverde tree, unseen behind drooping branches of clustered leaves and the desert scrub surrounding. The calls for help rose from all sides of the village now, and he heard women and children crying loudly. He clenched his fists tightly; he remembered his father’s return from an attack in which his tribe had outfoxed the Apaches in order to rescue two older children taken by the Apaches in a raid on their village. When they returned, men told him of his father’s skill and bravery in overcoming two Apache warriors, finding the children, then guiding them to safety in the darkness of night. He wanted to be brave like his father, but this feeling of courage mixed with fear; he choked back tears of frustration and indecision.

Just then, he heard the distinct sound of his mother’s voice yelling in anger, followed by popping noises sharply ascending from the pandemonium in the village. Right after, he could no longer hear his mother’s voice, and he could not bear standing by in helplessness any longer.

“Je’e! Je’e! Je’e!” He shouted as loud as he could.

He untied the basket of devil’s claw from its frame on his shoulders, lowered it quickly to the ground, ignored the few bunches of windswept sagebrush rolling out in front of him, and started to run toward the village.

His short legs moved rapidly over the desert wash. The smoke became thicker and he began to cough; his eyes started to burn as he tried to blink out the thick blackness and see ahead.

When he arrived at the outskirts of the village, his face considerably smudged with soot, he wiped his eyes and squinted into the billowing dark fog. Like the tips of giant torches, he saw the thatched huts had become menacing flames reaching urgently upward for the dry branches of the ironwood and paloverde trees. Above the screams of the villagers and between the angry, strange shouts of men, he suddenly heard his father yell. He moved quickly through the cacti and low scrub vegetation toward his father’s voice. But before he saw his father, he saw men – white men – wearing brown buckskin pants and pale ponchos; and on their heads they wore saggy straw hats; some were on foot, others were on horseback; but all carried long weapons which made loud hammering noises. They were all yelling and shouting angrily, but he could not understand their words.

A light gust of wind passed quickly through, pushing the smoke aside for a moment, and what it revealed horrified him. On the grey cracked desert clay, he saw two of his playmates lying, not moving, and with blood surrounding their heads; the screams were now almost deafening, and he saw that some came from women who were on the ground waving their fists at white men who were ripping the women’s clothes off.

Suddenly he heard his father's voice again and looked in that direction: his father and other fathers were tied to tall cacti and shouting angrily. His father was yelling to him: "Run away Jumping Badger, and do not come back!" At this, his son burst into tears and he stood unable to move, in shock; the wetness of his tears mixed with the soot on his cheeks, and the black drops fell on his moccasins as he sobbed uncontrollably.

"Whyyyyyy!" he bellowed.

"They will kill you if they see you!" his father screamed, again in Tohono O'odham and undecipherable to the marauding soldiers, and this caused him to turn back with one step, unsure of what to do, then he saw a soldier look his way. At that, he took a last look at his suffering father and ran as fast as he could back toward the devil's claw, staying among the sprawling bunches of paloverde so as to be hidden from view.

Never having experienced this kind of overwhelming fear, he kept running as fast as he could, not thinking of being tired, just thinking that his father was very angry and had told him to run. He punched the balls of his feet over the hard pebbled sand mirroring the adrenalized zigzag of the fleeing jack rabbits he'd chased that day; he jumped to avoid low shrubs – there was no time to run around them – and he knifed between boulders which he hoped would hide him from the view of the very bad men on horses.

Then he heard loud popping noises – the same as he heard before; it sounded like an axe being driven into a tree, only it was too fast for an axe – *no one could swing that fast!*

Finally, he reached a decline in the terrain and skidded into a long green ravine. About this time he heard no more sounds of horses galloping nearby. That was good, because now he was aware that he was breathing very hard and gasping for the air from the hot desert stillness.

As he heaved to get his breath, he also realized that there were no more screams or popping noises coming from the village. It was like a fierce thunderstorm had suddenly stopped and a calm ensued.

He thought of returning to the village, but he remembered what his father said: *Run away Jumping Badger and do not come back!* He must obey his father; O'gol will come to get him when it is safe, he thought.

Just ahead was the shaded path between the crucifixion thorn trees which lead to his hideaway in the cave. It was not a place to pretend anymore; this was terribly real. After catching a little more breath, he continued, skipping across stones, the small islands in the sea of wild thorny cat claw. He ducked into the cave, and after taking a few moments to quell his gasps, he reached for the stashed jug of water. Turning the jug forward to his lips, he drank slowly but intently, not as much for thirst but more for steadying his anxious body; this focus on water distracted him from the horror he did not want to think about. But after putting down the jug, he collapsed on his side on the blanket and cried. Soon, he knew, he would have to move and try to find out when his father and other members of the village might come for him, but now he just wanted to let out the tears. He cried until he slept.