

Sister Raven

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I know my way in the darkness and duck into the familiar thicket. I have hollowed the earth just beneath this hiding place and worn a faint path to it from the hillside trail, so that my braid does not get caught on the twigs and thorns as often as it had before. I lie on my belly, with my head raised, and move nothing but my eyes.

To the right, the dark curve of Raven Keeper's lodge breaks the shadows of the trees. To the left, through the tangle of black branches, Spirit Mountain looms—a great, dark mass, outlined by the star-filled sky.

The bark-covered doorway of the lodge swings open and Raven Keeper's braid sways as she stoops through the opening. A shadow figure in the darkness, she stands as straight as a mighty pine and faces the mountain. The thrill that sweeps my body has not weakened since the first time my mother sent me here to spy.

Yellow shafts of morning break from the crook where the mountain meets the valley. Spirit Mountain grows rounder with the light. I hold my breath, waiting for Raven Keeper to begin. She faces away from me and cups her hands around her mouth. Her mournful song begins deep in her throat and rumbles past her tongue—Raven Keeper calls the ravens.

“Craw-cree-craw-cree-craw-craw!”

I tell myself to study the sound, to know it so well that I can train my throat to own it. But every time I hear it, I think I can

never own that sound—that sound will always own me. It melts into my body. It grabs hold of my heart and chokes my breath. It fills my head and pushes hot tears from my eyes.

“Craw-cree-craw-cree-craw-craw!”

The last notes of Raven Keeper’s song float away and I am released. I would like to drop my head and fall into sobs. It takes all my strength to be still. I blink the salt water from my eyes. If tears blind me, I will not see them.

The ravens.

Six dots speckle the snowy mountaintop, so far away I wonder if I only imagine them. Six black spots fall around each other like leaves in the wind—larger and larger, closer and closer. The ravens talk to each other, chattering all at once. “Craw!” “Cree!” “Craw!” They dance and swoop to the hill, to the clearing where Raven Keeper waits. She raises her arms and they circle around her. They call to her, greet her. Their wings brush her hands.

Then six ravens scatter to the trees.

Raven Keeper turns and stoops to enter her lodge. For a moment I see her face in the new light of day. It is a face at once full of peace and full of sadness. It is a face that has seen many moons, but is not so very old. No woman, I think, is more beautiful than Raven Keeper. I want to run to her now, to fall at her feet. *Please, please, let me live with you. I am not very good but I will help you as best I can and not be any trouble.*

But fear of my mother keeps me hidden.

A beetle scurries across my fingers. In my mind, I give the creature a greeting of respect, for I have its name. In the village, they call me Beetle Girl because I scamper around the hut I share with my mother—or so they say. I do not mind the insect, or the name, although I am no longer a girl. It will soon be the second Planting Moon I spend in the cycle of womanhood.

The beetle burrows into a pile of brown leaves as I back out of the bracken, careful not to snap a twig or catch the fringe of

my skirt. Some days I stay longer to watch Raven Keeper grind acorns or roast meat. Some days I come later to watch her shape dampened cornmeal in her palms and bury the patties in hot ashes. Some days I return at dusk to watch the ravens fly back to the mountain, clutching small sacks or baskets filled with her fine food. But not today.

I have no fear of seeing another person as I make my way to the larger path that leads down the hill. It is a sacred path, used only once in each cycle of Grandmother Moon, on the day after she shows her full face. On that day, Gray Wolf leads six villagers laden with baskets. The burden-baskets contain food and supplies for Raven Keeper and the offerings change with the seasons—dried meat in the winter, fish and maple sugar in the spring, wild rice in the summer, corn and squash at the fall harvest.

Where my path touches the edge of the hill, I pause to rub my ankle. I have again outgrown the leather anklet that I have worn since before I can remember and its white beads cut my skin. I must ask my mother to make it looser.

Below me, to the west, the lodges of the village cast long, oval shadows. The domed shelters, with small garden patches scratched around them, puff feathers of gray smoke. The village yawns and wakes. A mother appears from within and greets Grandfather Sun with a face uplifted. A naked toddler wobbles past the hide of a deer stretched for tanning. A grandfather squats at a basin and splashes water on his face. A yellow dog thrusts its rump in the air and stretches its body.

To the north, planting fields carpet the land. They are brown and bare, just softening from the winter. Beyond them, wisps of smoke rise from a blackened meadow, recently cleared. Behind me, to the east, hills and forests stretch to Spirit Mountain. Southward, the river curves around the hill, almost out of my view.

West, north, east, and south. In these four directions I sense

the crude outline of my life. But the circle is flat—without meaning. From this height, the four directions taunt me. They point away and hint at a far-reaching circle of possibilities—depths I have yet to imagine.

I usually find my way home through the woods, but this morning, as it is on some mornings, the sting of my solitude is sharp. I make a winding journey through the village instead, past bare-footed sisters and sleepy-eyed sons, and pretend that this smell, or that sound, belongs to me—to my life, as I dream it could be.

Little Foot, a girl of my age, pushes aside the buckskin doorway of her lodge and sticks her pinched face outside. With the bark dome behind her, I think she looks like a great turtle, and I smile.

“Where have you been so early?” she says.

I cannot answer her. I must not tell anyone where I go before dawn. From the time I was a little girl, it has been my mother’s wish that I become the keeper of the ravens—that I replace Raven Keeper on that hill. I have never understood how this could be so, but I have always understood that no one must ever know.

How I would love to look upon the face of a friend! But it is the nature of friends to share intimacies, and it is difficult to exchange handfuls of pebbles while bearing the weight of a heavy stone.

I turn my eyes away and walk on without a word.

“No man will want such a proud girl for a wife!” Little Foot releases the buckskin and withdraws into her turtle shell.

Tomorrow I will find my way home through the woods.



The lodge I share with Old Mother, as my mother is called, is set

away from the others, the last before the planting fields. Her herb garden merges with the shrubs and young pines that border the woods. Like the beetle, I burrow into the lodge, but once inside, a sour odor makes me pause. A tall clay pot leans against the fire stones and a root of some sort boils within it.

I hold the buckskin flap and Old Mother winces at the light I let into our tiny lodge.

"*Aye-kye!*" she groans. "Close the door, clumsy one." She leans over a flat stone and cuts thin slices of the stinking root with her bone knife.

We are not alone. A woman sits in the shadows with her hands tight on the shoulders of a small, wide-eyed boy. They have come, as others do, in need of healing. But they are frightened and would not have come unless their own remedies had failed. People in the village are wary of my mother, and some call her Witch.

Old Mother grinds the root. Her face has the texture of a walnut and the coarse hair that frames it is black and white together. Around her neck she wears a string of pointed roots used for healing. Hanging this way, they have the appearance of a necklace of claws.

With gnarled fingers, Old Mother applies patches of the paste to sores on the boy's chest and back. The woman gasps when my mother brings the knife to the boy's skin. But Old Mother chuckles and presses the flat of the knife to one poulticed sore, and then to the next. The woman leaves a wooden bowl as payment for the treatment and hurries from the hut with her son.

My mother waves the bowl. Carved from the hard burl of a tree, its rich, swirling grain shines in the firelight. Many hours, I can see, went into its making.

"This is all the thanks I get," says Old Mother, "when she knows no other could help her little runt."

Because she spends so many hours inside, Old Mother's

back has the curve of the lodge walls. Outside, she stoops to tend her herb garden, but then cannot stand completely upright. I spend as little time inside as possible and practice standing as straight as the pines, as tall as Raven Keeper.

“Did you listen to her?” asks my mother.

“Yes, Mother.”

She grins. Her teeth are strong and they shine in the firelight. “Did you practice the call?”

“I will, later.” I sit on a mat by the fire and extend my leg. “Please, will you loosen it?”

Old Mother takes my ankle in her cold hands. With closed eyes, she presses her bone knife flat against the knot. Many times have I pulled at the knot without success. Many times have I pushed a flint knife across the leather, with no result. Even the quill of a porcupine could not penetrate it. Old Mother opens her eyes and pulls loose the knot. There is magic in the bone knife and beaded band that I do not understand.

“Girls in the village talk of husbands,” I say.

Old Mother pinches me by twisting the anklet tight. “Do you think of a husband too, foolish child? Heh! What can a husband give you? Not the finest lodge, as Raven Keeper has. Not the finest meat and corn, as she is given.” She finishes the new knot and pushes my foot away. “Clean the dirt from your moccasins. Then weave, and weave straight, if you can.”

“Yes, Mother.”

“Tonight you bake corncakes. Better cakes than last time, I hope.”

“Yes, Mother.”

“And you must learn to sing her song.” My mother’s black eyes flash. “How much longer must I wait for you to be good enough to take her place?”

I shiver with the memory of Raven Keeper’s mournful cry. “But what if she does not want to leave?”

The question earns me a hard rap across my knees with a

switch Old Mother keeps for that purpose. I gasp, but do not cry out. Old Mother pretends to be feeble because she does not enjoy work in the fields, but the welts on my knees prove she has the strength of a bear. I swallow the pain and use the energy of my rage to clean moccasins, weave baskets in straight lines, and pound dried corn into meal.



Grandmother Moon shows her full face and whispers to the village that it is time to plant. Soon she will make way for Grandfather Sun, but her milky wash on the carpet of brown leaves outside the cave is all I need for now. I do not venture very far inside—the first chamber serves my purpose well enough.

I stand in the damp gloom and practice the raven call. The notes I know by heart—up, up, and down—like a pattern repeated in the weave of a basket. I whisper the sounds over and over. The repetition is both comforting and exhilarating.

A chipmunk sits motionless on its haunches at the opening of the cave, watching me. The moonlight behind paints it black. I whisper to the chipmunk, “Craw-cree-craw-cree-craw-craw.” It does not move.

I fill my chest with the close air of the cave and when I release the breath, I allow my whole throat to take over the sound. With eyes closed, I sing to the ravens. “Craw-cree-craw-cree-craw-craw!” I finish the song and let its echo ring in my ears.

When I open my eyes, the chipmunk is gone.

I bounce on my toes as I walk through the woods. I have never before sung as I have sung tonight. Perhaps I could call the ravens. How glorious it would be to stand on the hill, as Raven Keeper does, and raise my arms to the dawn! But I should not think so much of my small success. I am nothing—it

is Raven Keeper who is holy.

As long as Raven Keeper sends her ravens with gifts for Man Who Is Raven every evening, the crops are not ruined by insects or taken by birds, the woods remain full of game, and fish fill the river. I do not know how this is so, or why Raven Keeper lives in loneliness on the hill. I have heard the ravens are her sons, but I am not invited into story circles and have heard no more than that.

I wonder what I always wonder. How could my mother have such hopes for me? It is her desire to live in Raven Keeper's lodge, to enjoy the reverence and offerings of the village and the benefit of my labor. But how can she be sure that the ravens will come when I call? And how will she convince Raven Keeper to give up her hill? I pause by a white birch and shiver. Does Old Mother have enough magic to harm Raven Keeper? Might she hurt her—would she kill? Paralyzed by this recurring fear, I stare into the moonlit woods.

Two points of white distract me. Two eyes reflect Grandmother Moon. Slowly I distinguish the shadow of an animal. A mountain lion. It stares at me, its head low, its haunches raised. I wrap my hand around the branch of the birch tree and squeeze it tight. The mountain lion creeps forward, never surrendering its stare.

Sweat chills my skin.

The lion snarls. Its pointed teeth glimmer yellow. I imagine those teeth clamped around my neck.

Its muscles rippling, the lion moves closer.

I have only one skill, only one strength, newfound. I fill my chest with air, tighten my throat, and scream the call of the raven. "Craw-cree-craw-cree-craw-craw!"

The sound of my cry, like a power released, invades my head and pushes out against my skull. The edges of my vision blur. "Craw-cree-craw-cree-craw-craw!"

My breath escapes me. My vision closes. In my haze, all I

can see is the double reflection of Grandmother Moon. And then I see nothing at all.



I open my eyes to morning dampness and inhale the rot of wet leaves. By my head, a chipmunk turns an acorn in its paws. *Ah, not so afraid of me now.* I check my fingers, my toes, my limbs. All there. Nothing wet with blood. Nothing missing. I stand up with the ache of stiff bones and shake with the cold. After a few faltering steps, I make my way to Old Mother's hut.

She grins when I enter. *"Aye-kye, what took you so long?"*

I had expected anger and a raised switch. Old Mother's smile confuses me.

She shuffles around the fire in a crooked dance. "Heh, heh, we are ready," she sings. "We are ready. We are ready. Heh, heh, we are ready."

I find my voice. "Ready?"

"Ah, you are modest. What a good mother I have been to make you so. I heard you before the dawn. I heard you call the ravens, Beetle Girl. Heh, heh, we are ready!"

My skin tightens.

Old Mother cackles. "Where have you been, lazy one? Celebrating in the woods?"

"No, Mother." I swallow hard. "I did not call the ravens. Perhaps it was Raven Keeper you heard. Or the ravens themselves. I ... I slept in the woods. I heard nothing. Were you worried? I am sorry if you worried."

Old Mother stops her shuffle dance around the fire. She looks up from her bent back and her eyes narrow. "You ... you ungrateful fool. You called the ravens in the woods." Her voice rumbles with anger. "And you will call them for me when we live on the hill."

My mother reaches for the polished switch.



I wake in time for the first planting. The sting of my back is fresh, but the pain in my heart, like droplets of maple sap in the snow, has hardened. No more. No more, I think. The idea for my escape had sprouted in the night and by dawn it had blossomed into a plan.

The sound of Old Mother sucking her hand in her sleep makes me cringe. What a relief it is to emerge from the rank closeness of our hut!

Across rolling fields, clusters of women stoop to caress and tame the brown earth, their bare backs awash in the yellow liquid of morning light. Young and old, they are strong and beautiful. Before I join them, I tie a rough-edged deer hide across my shoulders to hide the welts made by my mother. My heart chokes at the memory of the blows. Children of this village would never see a hand raised to them. Only Old Mother, in the darkness of our little hut, inflicts such pain and humiliation.

Little Foot's mother hands me the basket of fish and I see the women around her smile and turn away. I know their joke. They think I am proud and they would like me to smell of fish. I think to cry out and expose the evidence of my torture. *This*, I scream inside my head, *this is what makes me afraid to speak to you!* But I swing the strap around my shoulders and say nothing. I do not mind the smell of fish.

Dancing Otter, the wife of Gray Wolf, stamps the black, pointed end of a digging-pole into the ground. I follow and drop two little fish into each crater she makes. Gray Wolf's daughter, Bright Star, throws four kernels of corn and two beans into one hole, then three seeds of squash into the next. We continue this

way until one row is planted and then another. The women talk and laugh and sing songs, happy for the promise of a good harvest.

This is the second planting season I have worked in the fields. Now that I labor among the women, I am entitled to a greater share of the harvest—a welcome addition to the meager provisions my mother earns for her potions and cures.

At midday we rest in the shade of the woods that edge the field. The others drink water from gourds and eat the food they had left the little children to guard. A group of hunters saunter by. Gray Wolf's son, Two Feathers, pauses to tease and smile at the little boys who beg to accompany them. As always, a pair of white-tipped turkey feathers dangle from the straight hair that falls free across his shoulders. I admire his ease and humor among the children.

Little Foot, I see, studies him too. When she feels my eyes on her, she tosses a small smoked fish at me and laughs. "Today you are Fish Girl."

I turn away, boiling with a mixture of anger and shame—Little Foot must have seen that I have no food of my own—but I slip the blackened fish into the pouch at my waist. The smoked fish will keep for days and I must hoard food for my journey.

We return to the fields and I follow Dancing Otter once again, lining her craters with dead-eyed fish. We labor in this way until Grandfather Sun makes our shadows long toward Spirit Mountain.

Little Foot's mother takes her fish basket from me. "You work well, Beetle Girl."

I am not used to praise. While I think of what reply I should give, she turns away and walks toward the village. Little Foot joins her. They swing empty baskets and sing together.

I enter my smoky hut. Without a word, Old Mother hands me a strip of dried meat.

Is this plan of flight another daydream, or will I act

tomorrow? Fear grips my body and leaves no room for hunger. But I force myself to chew the toughened flesh. I will need the nourishment.



It is usual for me to rouse before the sun, but my mother first opens an eye as I roll up my skins. She warns me in half-sleep: “Do not be late.”

I emerge from the lodge into the predawn chill and find the elm that hides my buckskin sack and rolled sleeping-skin. Inside the long-handled sack is a rod and dry softwood for making fire, a flint knife, and two flat cakes of cornmeal. I loop the broad strap across my body, balance the rolled deerskin on my shoulder and walk into the woods. I move in the direction of Raven Keeper’s hill in case Old Mother listens, but after a way, I turn toward a hunting path I know.

My heart races with the risk of my deceit. It has taken me two days to prepare for my escape—two days as the welts on my back healed. I feel them now, when the motion of my pack tugs the strap across my back.

I step onto the hunting path and walk north. Perhaps I will find another village. Perhaps I will die in the woods. I cannot know what lies ahead. The certainty of my course is determined only by what I leave behind.

Clouds hide Grandfather Sun, but the air has warmed. My moccasins pat the soft earth of the path. At midday, I squat at a small rocky stream and take sips of water. Two deer tiptoe to the brook and share a drink with me. I listen to the tinkling song of the water and watch the brown-eyed deer. The pleasure of the moment seeps into my skin and warms my bones.

The patter of rain begins at dusk and I unroll my deerskin at the base of a tall pine. The warm scent comforts me and the

dense branches above my head provide some protection from the shower. In a circle of stones, I cover the softwood with brown pine needles, insert the hardwood rod, and twirl it between my palms. The softwood smokes and the pine needles smolder. I add a pinecone and dry twigs and soon my fire glows red and orange.

With my flint knife, I skin the fish that has been hiding in my pouch, and offer silent thanks to Little Foot.

The strap on my ankle has become uncomfortable and I blame the dampness.

I gather the skin and bones of the fish, place them in the blackness outside my small circle of light and lie down on the deerskin. I shift the anklet once again before I huddle into a restless slumber.

A dream disturbs my sleep.

I see Raven Keeper lifting her arms to the ravens at dawn. Slowly she turns her elegant face to me and smiles. Raven Keeper reaches her arms, beckoning me and my spirit soars at her welcome. I jump up and run to her, but as I am about to touch her fingertips, my leg is wrenched back and I fall to the ground. Behind me, a black bear grips the end of a long cord in its teeth. The trail of the cord leads to the leather band around my ankle. I try to tug it loose, but band and cord are fastened tight. The face of the black bear transforms into Old Mother's face and the round of its back becomes hers. With wild, laughing eyes, Old Mother slides the cord from her teeth and clenches my tether in her bony fist. She dances her shuffle dance around me while I lie helpless on the ground. *Heh, heh, we are ready. We are ready. We are ready!*

I wake with a start. The fire has died and the blackness is so complete that I do not know at first if my eyes are open. My foot throbs with pain. I touch Old Mother's leather loop and feel it tight around my ankle. Too tight. I cannot pull it looser. I fumble for the tree trunk, locate my pack, and grope inside. I

wrap my fingers around the handle of my flint knife and carry its sharp edge to the anklet. I rub the leather with the blade, back and forth, back and forth. The pain goads me, even though the cloud of my mind knows this effort is futile.

The throbbing intensifies. Frustrated, I push harder. The knife snaps and a sharp pain bites my foot. My fingers feel the knife tip, embedded between the bones along the crest of my foot. I extract the flint with a swallowed scream and press my hand against the warm dribble of my blood.

“I curse you, Old Mother!”

The darkness mocks my cry. My mother’s magic clutches me, keeps me prisoner. I am the fool she thinks I am, to think I could be free.

Great sobs consume me. I am determined to die here, to bear the pain until my foot shrivels and the pine needles have soaked up all my blood. If I am dead, my mother has no hope of stealing Raven Keeper’s lodge. If I am dead, my mother cannot hurt me.

Time slows in the blackness of a clouded night. I measure it in countless heartbeats, each heartbeat a thud of pain.

The rain stops and a shroud of silence cloaks the forest. My still-tender back rests against the tree and I have propped my ankle upon the rolled deerskin. I do not close my eyes for the pain in my foot and the sadness in my heart.

A whisper touches my darkness. It is Raven Keeper’s call. Her voice is small and distant, but the rhythm of her song and the coming of the dawn kindle a tiny flame within me. I shift the bulk that swells inside my bloodstained moccasin. My foot is the red of crushed raspberries and the wound oozes blood. There is no relief from the throbbing pain.

But I am not brave enough to stay here and die.

I find a forked branch I can use as a crutch, then gather my belongings and hobble along the hunter’s path, one painful step after another, back toward the village. The going is slow and I