

Winter of the Metal People

CHAPTER 4

Poquis leaned on his bow at the edge of the bluff beside Ghufloor overlooking Big River.

Ishpanyan stepped beside him without saying a word. The summer night's warm air had eased the long day's heat. To reach the terraces and rooftop entrances to their apartments, the others in their group climbed the ladders leaning against Ghufloor's doorless adobe walls.

This early part of the evening relaxed Poquis after the long walk back with the injured priest from the cones of burned rock.

Crickets chirped in the bunchgrasses and bushes along the stony and dry land of the bluff on which Ghufloor stood. Poquis watched a bat fly back and forth above him. Its wings fluttered in the dim light of Corn Moon. The moon sparkled the river's water below. A ripple and small shadows revealed three ducks swimming.

Poquis and Ishpanyan were twenty. They had been friends since boyhood and looked like brothers although they were from different clans. Both were slender and muscled. Mountain lion-skin quivers holding their arrows and unstrung bows hung across their backs. War clubs were thrust into the cotton belts of their loincloths—a stone-headed club in Poquis's belt and a wooden club with a heavy knob on its end in Ishpanyan's belt.

Ishpanyan clapped his hand onto Poquis's right shoulder and held it there.

Together, they looked at the shining river water. The Night People scattered overhead, sparkling like quartz chips.

"I will speak to the elders of your battle," Ishpanyan said, looking out over the river. "I will tell them how the wild raiders came out of the rocks and knocked Turshán the priest down. I will tell how you leaped from a high boulder with your war club. How you fought all of them

alone until we could come to help.”

Poquis nodded. He'd been determined to give his life if necessary to protect the unconscious priest. It was good that his battle should be remembered in the tribe's oral history. However, he was not popular with some leaders. He worried that some might accuse him of negligence for leaving the priest open to attack.

Ishpanyan interrupted Poquis's thoughts with a low laugh. “You and the priest are lucky you were not killed,” Ishpanyan said, slapping his hand twice against Poquis' shoulder. Ishpanyan had stitched Poquis's knife wound shut with a cactus spine and strands of hair plucked from his own head. He looked down at the wound. “Does it hurt?”

“No. It feels like a mother's caress.”

Ishpanyan laughed again. “You are a brave fighter, Poquis. You bring honor to our people. The priest is being cared for inside the kiva. Already the elders wait to hear from you.”

Poquis felt a bit breathless. “I am weary. I have lost so much blood. I need to rest, not speak with the elders all night. Tell them I will come at dawn.”

His hand still on Poquis's shoulder, Ishpanyan looked toward Ghufloor as a ladder rubbed against the wall from a person descending.

“It is Panpahlu. The wives hear as quickly as the elders. I will go and tell the elders you have returned safely. I will speak to them for you.” He squeezed Poquis's arm and turned to leave as the woman ran toward them. She was wrapped in two cotton blankets sewn together that Poquis had woven for her when he asked her to be his mate. The cloth bared her left shoulder and was tied around her waist with a white cotton sash. Her black hair was in a round whorl on each side and tied inward in the middle. Around her neck hung a large scallop seashell, brought at great effort from the endless salt water to the west and accented with sky

stones of blue turquoise.

Poquis grimaced from a sharp pain as Panpahlu hugged him. Her body shook with soundless crying. She pulled back and looked up at his face in the shadow-light. He had washed most of the blood out of his headband in the river, where he and the others had bathed upon arrival to purify their bodies and their minds. But even in the moonlight she could see pinkness in the cloth.

“Poquis, are you all right?”

“I am home, Panpahlu. So now I will be all right.”

She examined him as well as she could, gasping as she turned him and saw the sutures and still seeping blood on his side. He felt her hand caress the swollen bruise on his back. She smiled in relief that the wounds were not worse. She pulled his head down, pressing her cheek to his face for a long time, whispering her fears for him.

“You must talk to the elders tonight,” she said as she led him by the hand to the ladder.

“I feel weak. I have asked the elders to wait.”

They climbed a ladder to the roof of the first terrace. From there, people could walk around the entire rectangular block of the village. He pulled the ladder up the wall so no one else could climb up and enter the doorless village. They stood next to the rooftop opening into their apartment, where another ladder descended. He had one duty to perform first. All day he had been rehearsing his honor song in his mind. As a warrior who'd slain an enemy, he was to sing it each night and early each morning for the sacred number of four days, singing his song atop each of Ghufoor's four sides.

Moon Mother cast a shadow against the wall of a tower rising behind Poquis. His voice split the nighttime silence like the call of an eagle as he sang:

He has returned, Poquis, who killed the enemy.

He draws his strength from the ancestors

And the Warrior Twins, Maseway and Oyoyeway.

The noise of the enemy falls quiet.

The people are protected.

Fire lit their room from the cobblestone-lined hearth in its middle. The mud walls scented the room with an earthy smell. Panpahlu listened, sitting on the floor facing him. He told her first of the wall of black boulders, which wound in lazy turns at the base of the ridge where the six cones of burned rock rose in a line, one after the other. He told her how he and the others had watched as the priest pecked an image of a shield-carrying warrior on the living surface of a black boulder facing the rising sun. They spent three days at the sacred rocks, plus most of a day walking there and another day walking back. Each morning and evening the priest and warriors climbed to the summit of a different cone along the ridge. Poquis told how he'd felt close to the Creator while peering into the ragged holes of burned rock, honoring the inner world with prayers and ceremonies. The people had emerged in a time past remembrance from such holes in the earth or out of a sacred lake. Poquis tried to describe his sense of wonder as he had gazed into the darkened depths.

It was not until he finished telling her about his religious experience that he told her of the fight with the enemy warriors.

“Poquis!” She tilted her head and her eyes widened. “You were relaxing on the rocks when you were supposed to be guarding the priest. What were you thinking?”

He tried to protest. But he knew he should have been at the priest's side.

He was spared from further explanation by the footsteps of a Healer walking across their roof. The man descended the ladder into their room. He wore a kilt with a blanket across his back, carrying healing herbs and fats for the wound Ishpanyan had described. The room's shadows hid details of his dark face.

Poquis and Panpahlu greeted him. Panpahlu stood aside as the healer examined Poquis's cut, turning the young warrior's side to be brightened by the room's fire. He sang a prayer and placed a potion of herbs and fats on Poquis's sutured gash.

He gave Panpahlu directions for treatment. Then the healer paused at the ladder and turned to face them. "I can see the wound and long walk has made you feel dizzy, Poquis. Ishpanyan told me he worried about you. You need to rest. I will explain and speak on your behalf in the kiva tomorrow. Even so, the elders still might be upset that you did not visit them tonight."

The man nodded to Poquis, a pleasant look on his unsmiling face, before he ascended the ladder.

After the healer had gone, Panpahlu spoke softly to Poquis. "Tonight you must sleep," she said, her hands warm against his wound as she applied more herbs and fats. "When you are recovered from this day of your heroism, perhaps then we will give life to a child."

He eased her face toward him, feeling her softness next to his cheek. She whispered, "I wish you had gone to the kiva and made your report to the elders tonight. The elders probably have not left yet. Perhaps you should still go. Then come back."

He walked to the ladder rising toward the roof's opening into their room. He pulled the ladder down from the opening and leaned it against a wall.

As he had told her, the elders could wait.

She smiled at him from where she was sitting. "We must begin planning for your honor

ceremony and feast,” she said. “Other women will help me cook the corn, beans, and squash we have stored. We will keep only enough for us until the harvest. We have some dried meat, and hunters are sure to bring more so we can feed the entire village.”

He sat on the floor beside her. “I will give the warriors who came to my aid the three buffalo robes I traded for last spring. Ishpanyan has one, but it is in poor condition. The other two are young and do not have robes for this winter.”

His excitement built as he thought about the expected ceremony and feast. “I will give Turshán the blanket I just finished weaving,” he said as he watched Panpahlu’s smile grow more expressive. “And I will give my new mountain lion quiver to Xauían. I can use my old one.”

She leaned up against him. “The bow priest’s mate admired my heishe necklace once, and praised me for how I ground the shells down so small and drilled the holes. I will give him the necklace, and he can give it to her.”

“That will be wonderful, Panpahlu. I also have saved some macaw and turkey feathers. I must think of who could use them the best.”

She hugged him, being careful to avoid his stitched side and bruised back. “Your courage and generosity are making you a leader of our people.”

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Toward morning the pain in his side awoke him, and he lay for a few minutes beside Panpahlu on a soft buffalo hide, enjoying the warmth of her right arm slung over his waist and her body next to him. He listened to her sleep-heavy breathing.

Loyal Panpahlu, he thought, to support him in his contests with others in the community. He knew it was not easy for her.

Panpahlu had not been able to become pregnant. For the past year, the elders had said Poquis should find another mate. Any other man would have listened to the priests and elders. But not Poquis. The man with the title of Eye-Black Leader, who led the village in organizing the fall-winter ceremonials, had told Panpahlu to pile Poquis's belongings outside the kiva because Poquis would not leave her. When she'd tried to obey, Poquis had stopped her. He'd held her and told her, "Do not leave me, Panpahlu, and I will never leave you. Do not pay any attention to those who would separate us. You are my loved one. You know I never care what others say."

His stubbornness had cost them both. There were harsh punishments for tribal members who did not obey priests and elders. As a boy, Poquis had been flogged while living at nearby Puaray. He'd even been flogged once at Ghufloor after he took Panpahlu for his mate. He was eighteen then and she was seventeen.

After Poquis saved the battle against warriors from Pecos, however, there had never been another flogging. Instead, because he'd conquered two Pecos warriors in hand-to-hand combat, Poquis had been accepted into the Warrior Society. Other battle exploits followed, and now some warriors already considered him their leader.

Even so, Panpahlu often expressed her worries. She said other women scolded her when he defied Tiwa customs. Living in the close quarters of the Tiwa apartment homes, everyone had to cooperate and follow rules. Individuality was condemned. Poquis often did things against the established order—such as his walks into the mountains for days at a time and his defiance of Eye-Black Leader's order of a new mate.

Perhaps he should have reported to the elders in the kiva. He worried Panpahlu would be criticized because he had not gone immediately to the kiva. Women were cherished for

childbearing. In Ghufoor's matrilineal society, they even owned the homes. However, they were not to interfere in men's affairs. He hoped she would stay strong. He would advise her to go see the matriarch, the aged woman who passed secrets and duties on to young women as their confessor and adviser. The matriarch did not approve of Poquis's attitudes, but he knew she would not blame Panpahlu. Perhaps, he thought as he closed his eyes, he should give the turkey feathers to the matriarch.

The pain in his side throbbed as he fell asleep thinking of the one time his individualism had been accepted. Although his occasional improvisations in the religious dances often drew disapproval, who could forget the buffalo dance two years ago?

Poquis had surprised everyone when he'd paused at one point and, to the beat of the drum, stomped his feet and shook the huge animal's head he wore like an angry bull. Ghufoor's other dancers had adopted that action, making Ghufoor's buffalo dance distinct among other villages.

Poquis awoke to pre-dawn's melody of chirping birds all around outside. Panpahlu already had gone out. It surprised Poquis he had not heard her rise. The pain in his side had awakened him.

He ate the cornbread breakfast Panpahlu had left for him near the flat-rock griddle beside the fire. He considered his meeting with the elders. Ishpanyan would have alerted them to his exhaustion and wound, but they might still be upset with him for not reporting immediately. He did not care much. His concern, rather, was with actions. He should have been more vigilant in guarding the priest. As he sent the other warriors to hunt rabbits for the evening's meal, Poquis had promised to stay close to the priest until they returned. Instead, he had lain—like a child, he admitted—half-asleep on the boulders.

The enemies might not have attacked if they'd realized Poquis was nearby. In the long

desert walk back to Ghufloor, Ishpanyan had not criticized him. The others also did not speak about their leader's lapse in diligence. But Poquis sensed their disapproval hanging in the air like smoke.

Poquis knew his neglect had almost cost the priest's life. If Poquis was to rise in the Warrior Society, he must become more single-minded about his responsibilities. He must act the part of a man. He vowed to never allow himself to be so careless again.