

Sarabande

Mountain Journeys Book 2



by

Malcolm R. Campbell

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Dedication

This book is for my wife, Lesa, soulmate, hawk whisperer, first reader, guardian of cats and other small critters.

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Child of morning, dawn of the green eyes, hears Bluebird's daybreak call as my teacher begins her search for Robert Adams, the Sun Singer, who was killed in our battles against King Justine three years ago, with the frail hope he will return from his grave that is named Illinois on the other side of time and help her find herself.

—Willow, on the 28th day of the Mead Moon

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Chapter One: Dark Dawning

Fiercely order of day and exuberant sun, young primroses drenched in the light of a long afternoon await like phantoms seeking night, any shade. She traverses a limestone ledge, hears marmots whistle, smells ferns, close, supported into the sky by rock, feels Bluebird's chatter—hypnotic and dear up from the green mountain valley. Whispers scrape her aura overhead. Scoop throw: like a Judo master, dulled light flings her away. She fights for Mother Earth, would sell her heart for her, and hears, is hearing, "There are numerous ways to live, little girl." Warm blooded, that voice is the sister of chaos.

Sarabande bled on the leading edge of the Angel Wing while the moon was dark. The grey-green rock at the summit accepted her flow without complaint. Yesterday, Gem said sky wasn't a fit place of renewal: dark woods and tents served best for bleeding. "Touch," she said without finesse, "why expose yourself on that strange spur of rock at the high end of the valley? You'll catch a cold sitting on unforgiving stone above that cold glacier."

Indeed, but it suited her.

During the night, Sarabande heard the beating of her heart. She heard the voice of water flowing eastward out of the cirque that hugged the glacier snugly against the Continental Divide. Water called her attention to a world on the other side of time, a world with a road running truer across the plains into dawn than golden eagles, a world with destiny straighter than cedar arrows, a world called the World of the Dead. There was a dead horse alongside the road. Past the horse, an angry fire gave off black smoke that lifted away from the prairie and the straight road like a prayer.

Water's voice distracted her from the discomforts of the joyful dying of a synodic month and the sad birth of another. She sat within her sacred circle at 7,430 feet above the level of oceans she had never seen and evaluated the thirty-six new moons that had come and gone since Osprey, who is also called the Sun Singer, left them for his home on the other side of time. Those who did not believe in the other side of time said the Sun Singer was dead.

Yes, Goddess of the Night, she thought as she ate a handful of roughly ground flax seeds from her leather pouch, the moons are cycles of rebirth—even for creatures of the sun. Sarabande meditated on flax seeds and the potentials of flax seeds from the center of her compact circle while sipping the nettle and stonewort tea she brewed in a tiny kettle over a tiny fire. She placed sacred objects: to the east for air, a hawk owl feather; to the south for fire, a drum; to the west for earth, a red and yellow rattle; to the north for water, the flow of the glacier in a copper cup. She traced her name in blood on a shard of bloodstone, then sheltered it within the cat's cradle of her hands.

Though she waved the feather, banged the drum, shook the rattle, and drank the water, her visions were of death rather than life.

Two days before Osprey departed, Yarrow—her husband of a mere two years—was killed in the battle between their resistance group and King Justine's soldiers on North Ridge. Two hours before Osprey went home, he was wounded in a skirmish in the forest where the River of Sky flows into

Lake Deucalion. When Osprey fell, his powerful avatar's staff was split in two by the enemy's scimitar.

While Gem tended him as best she could, the wound would soon require a surgeon's skill if he were to use his left arm again. In spite of his injury, Osprey had words of comfort for her even though her wound on that night was deeper and—as time would prove—more difficult to heal. Her wound was as invisible as the Mead Moon rising soon today with the sun, but no less potent than the lower aspect of midnight's eye. Guilt flowed through her veins, sorrow; too, for killing her sister in the center of the River of Sky beneath the clouds of a gathering storm.

Dryad turned the moon upside-down. Even in death, the pale light of waning crescents gave her a palpable presence and a voice that whispered out of shadows. Dryad whispered often; that whisper brought her power and that power brought her corrupted men.

Dryad sullied Osprey, though incompletely. Initially, Osprey's resistance excited her. Then it puzzled her. By the time they reached the River of Sky where all of them fought for their lives, Dryad felt the rage of a woman belittled. She whispered his name, "Ospreyyyyyyyy." Because her mark was on him, her chant weakened him.

"Sister, must you?" Sarabande asked her then.

"What a widow slut you are," said Dryad without taking her eyes off the Osprey, who had fallen. "Yarrow's not yet cold."

Sarabande had pushed Dryad into the river. When the cold water broke her concentration, she laughed.

"Lust has dulled your reflexes. It's too late," shouted Dryad. She lunged at Sarabande with her dagger. "Your lovable boy is no match for Caw and his men."

"Kill him," shouted Caw. "Save the staff. Kill him."

"Ospreyyyyyyyy."

"It's always been you." Sarabande slashed her double-ply bow across Dryad's neck. "Conspiring against kin." She tossed the bow aside, drew her hunting knife and parried Dryad's blade before the river spun them into the path of a fallen tree borne on the current.

"Misguided kin," said Dryad. She flung herself away from the tree and Sarabande stepped aside, safe by inches. "Expertly done, Sara; you're the son our dearly departed father always wanted."

"Speak not of Wapiti while acting like a spoilt child."

She had her mother's azure blue eyes. Dryad always laughed at the spoilt child reference, for she was a worldly twenty years old then to Sarabande's adolescent eighteen. While laughing, she lunged again, play acting perhaps, and the gods conspired against them, for her advance ended upon the point of Sarabande's waiting knife.

Dryad's last whisper was, "I will never leave you."

Osprey, Aton, Marten, and Seth saw Dryad die. They called her a traitor and agreed that Sarabande's actions constituted self defense. Old Aton, their frail and diplomatic leader in those days, two months dead now, by the Guardian, was the one who used the word "constituted." It brought her no comfort as she sat in the cold river where Dryad fell, even after the men carried the body away and began scratching out shallow graves beneath the aspen trees across the river.

Now, as the dawn's alpine glow resolved into sunrise, the voice of the melt water stream called to her as it flowed down the stair-step valley toward Lake Deucalion to meet the water from the River of Sky. Water reminded her she didn't have the courage to drown herself on that rainy night thirty-six moons ago. Instead, she had prayed to the Guardian to bring the storm's lightning down off the rough face of Deucalion Point beyond the graves and the aspens and kill her with fire.

Sarabande's right hand folded around the silver talisman suspended on a chain around her neck. Osprey's gift, a hallowed miniature of a god singing to the sun. Osprey infused it with sunlight and

magic before he draped the chain around her neck. She remembered the idiom he used, one from his world, that she would “freeze her ass off” if she kept sitting in the icy water. Funny now, but puzzling then. Yet, while he touched the talisman, they sat dry and warm within the glow of sunlight.

He taught her to sing magical notes that renewed the miniature Sun Singer’s secret fire. That fire kept Dryad’s ghost away for twenty-one moons, then by degrees, the fire grew weaker and went out. Perhaps Willow and her other students were right in their belief that Osprey died when the talisman’s sunlight went dark. She had asked the Guardian if her protection disappeared because a silver necklace could not contain his sunlight forever. It was so. She had her answer, though she did not know if he still lived east of the mountains in his world on roads called Fifteen and Ninety-four and Fifty-one as he told her when they said their goodbyes. She had kissed him then, thinking he would soon return to her. Who knew she would need a map to search for the one whose power could banish a ghost.

Sarabande stretched into the cool morning, idly watching the mare’s tail clouds flying high over Husetop Mountain and the narrow arête called the Boundary Wall. She was in no hurry to leave the secluded safety of the Angel Wing. The world was precious here above the valley’s turquoise lakes and fir trees. While her friends in the Judith Settlement in the old lambing flats below Lake Deucalion considered the Angel Wing and the Glacier as remote landmarks on their world’s western edge, the seven miles were nothing to a twenty-one year old woman with long legs well-accustomed to walking. Once she stepped through the time portal into Osprey’s world, those legs would have to carry her 1,650 miles to his house. Osprey was remote. The Angel Wing wasn’t.

She was excited about those remote miles. She feared them, too, and for more reasons than the dead horse and the fire of her visions. With her talent for projecting some small part of herself into faraway times and places, Sarabande had seen—in the manner of dreamtime—the eighteen-year-old Osprey on whom her sanity, and perhaps her life, depended. No longer was he the gangly, deferential boy who journeyed into the mysterious land of Pyrrha out of love for an ailing grandfather, Thomas Elliott, Gem’s father, three years ago. She sensed great changes in him. Maybe they came from the long-term effects of his shoulder wound or his family’s realization that Pyrrha’s darker magic had reached their household—and might again. Or maybe the changes came from three additional years of schooling and approaching adulthood in a world that stood on a pragmatic foundation of technology and science. Osprey was, she thought, mentally much farther away than the 1,650 physical miles between the newly formed Judith Settlement and a town with a name she did not know in the flat lands east of her morning sun. Though she had committed herself to the journey, she was uncertain about just who or what awaited her at the end of it. Reason enough, she thought as she ate her apples and cheese, to relax within the snug comforts of her sacred circle like a sleeper not yet ready to arise from a long nap.

On the first day of spring when bright yellow fawn lilies lifted their heads up through the snow, Sarabande had told Gem of her decision. She would seek Gem’s nephew Osprey, known in his world as Robert Adams, in the month of the Mead Moon. Her best friend and mentor pushed her chair away from the little wheel where she was spinning flax into yarn for plain-weave linen.

“So.”

The word was an invitation and a sigh of resignation.

“Dryad’s ghost is dragging me into lunacy. Can you understand?”

“I can,” she said. “I see what you must do.”

“Sundew and White Rabbit took the news poorly. The boys were more reserved.”

“Come, sit,” said Gem, shoving a pile of white fabric remnants off the spare chair with the quick sweep of a hand. “I will look after your students while you’re gone if you desire it.”

“Good. As you know, Willow is the most dutiful. She helps the younger children with the lessons.”

“Willow is a dear one,” said Gem. Her greying braids framed her exquisitely lined face and welcoming smile. “I will ask our equally dutiful marsh hawk to inform my father. Your choice will please him.”

“Oh, will it?”

“By the Guardian, Sarabande, why would it not?”

“I had thought Thomas Elliott would share your worry.”

“He does. But worry does not rule his life, nor mine either.”

“Tell me why you worry.”

Gem pulled Sarabande’s hands together and wrapped her larger, rougher hands around them.

“I worry that you will be shamed.”

“Osprey may have forgotten me, but there’s no shame in that.”

“Osprey has not forgotten you in spite of his parents’ hopes that he will forget mountains and magic, and most of all, me.”

“They fear for him,” said Sarabande. “Do you think so?”

“Yes. My father has spoken of it. He was no longer made welcome in their house after Robert, Osprey as we know him, returned and told his story.”

“Sad, Gem, and unnecessary.”

“*Tsch*, much of what people do out of love is sad and unnecessary.”

Gem pulled her hands away and stood up so quickly she knocked over her spinning wheel. She didn’t appear to notice. She walked to the window and leaned out as though making sure no one else would hear her words.

“I was shamed by the king.” Gem pulled up her left sleeve to reveal the letters SJ in a bold pink scar that contrasted with her walnut-colored skin.

“Your strike brand!”

“I bore Justine’s mark as well as his child. Both were conceived in pain in a dark cell covered with urine and rat droppings.” Sarabande went to her, but Gem rolled down the sleeve, covering the ugly mark that signified *Sovereign Justine*. “No, my friend, I cannot abide your seeing it close at hand. My daughter, though, this dotting mother will speak of her at great length if allowed to do so.”

“Cinnabar has shown me her brand,” said Sarabande.

“Discretion is a lesson I was never able to teach her. But listen: on your journey to Osprey’s house, you won’t walk through the domains of kings.”

Sarabande gasped and sat down, suddenly lightheaded when she understood why Gem showed her the scar.

“If there are no kings, what dangers have you *seen*?”

Gem put her hands on Sarabande’s shoulders and kneaded out the growing knots. Her touch always felt like a touch of power, and she wondered if she shared Osprey’s way with healing magic.

“I have seen a dark creek beneath a bridge on a foggy night. I have heard screams and howls outside my comprehension. I don’t understand it,” said Gem, holding their eye contact as though she understood more than she would say. “Sarabande, you know without my lecturing at great length about the ways of the world. A woman on a lonely road can be a target. Travel with a sharp knife.”

The impromptu massage felt good. The unclear warning did not. Vague predictions were worse than silence. They stirred up what did not need to be stirred up.

“Yes, I know that, Gem. I will carry a knife and take care to have it handy.”

“With due care, you can avoid your fate, but destiny is the way you’ve already written your life’s story.”

“I wanted to walk the sixteen hundred and fifty miles to Osprey’s house long before it occurred

to me I would ever do so. If there is to be shame in it, then I will live or die with whatever I find on that lonely road.”

“So, the matter is decided.”

“Yes.”

Gem pulled the wheel upright, returned to her chair and began spinning the thread that often became Sarabande’s *skinny white dresses*, as Cinnabar—who was somewhat stocky—always called them. (“Holy bear puke, you’re narrower than a lodgepole sapling. Do you never eat?”) Gem’s hands did not need Gem’s eyes to coordinate the stretch and twist of the damp flax strick on the comb over the guide hooks and through the spindle en route to the wheel.

“You’re walking to Decatur and I am making you a skinny dress to wear when you get home,” she said.

“Thank you. What manner of name is ‘Decatur?’”

“My father has said little about it,” said Gem. “It is in a small kingdom which the residents refer to as a state. There is a river. There are old houses and lovely parks on quiet streets. They grow corn without the need of kings.”

“I will look for cornfields after I have walked awhile.”

“Those cornfields are closer than you imagine,” said Gem as her right foot worked the treadle on its own accord as one might talk and rock a cradle. “When Eagle, my intended, and I were to marry, my father sent him a letter extolling my virtues to such an extravagant extent, that I blush even now when I think of it. Fortunately, I no longer remember precisely what superlatives he included. What comes to mind now are the words Dad used to explain how he could live far away and also be close at hand should we need his help. ‘All times are equidistant from each other,’ he wrote, ‘and all space rests in the palm of your hand.’”

“Do you know what that means, Gem?”

She laughed. “Actually, no. But we were looked after. My father could not alter our destiny—our marriage lasted fifteen years before an unknown sickness took Eagle away. But my father tended to appear when we had joys to celebrate and sorrows to endure. While you are walking toward those cornfields, Thomas Elliott will see to it that you are looked after.”

“When I walk, it will be a time of breathing out. I’ll take comfort knowing I’m not isolated from all I know.”

Now, within the safety of her circle beneath the sheltering sky, neither fate nor destiny seemed relevant. When she saw the world from the Angel Wing, the cycles of the sun and moon and seasons were readily apparent. She bled with the moon, as ospreys, eagles, mountain goats, bighorn sheep, Indian Paintbrush and Bog Gentians had their times and places throughout the great wheel of the year. Yet, she wondered if each new moment was ordained at the dawn of time by the Guardian or if timeless weavers spun out people’s lives from mountains above the mare’s tail clouds.

No, engraved destiny was not her belief. She grew cold at the thought of it, and colder still when she remembered that today, her journeying day, was no spontaneous flight of fancy, but a time and place regulated within the dictates of the old story, told thusly:

A man or a woman who claims an enduring link with the dead may, within three years of their dying day, journey into the fetid realm of the underworld and petition the deity of that dark place for a Boon of Returning. If the Dark Goddess finds favor with the petitioner’s words, the dead will rise again in full flower. If the Dark Goddess does not favor the application, she flings a spear through the petitioner’s heart and the cause is ended.

While Dryad dared not step within the sacred circle, she might hold the future of the Sun Singer in the palm of her hand. With that thought, Sarabande fetched up the hawk owl feather, drum, rattle, the copper cup and the blood stone, opened the circle, and climbed down into the saddle between the Angel Wing and Housetop Mountain. The rock and the snowfield above the stream were stable,

and due care in negotiating them would suffice.

She crossed the stream where it met the lake, looking forward to a breath-stealing plunge into the cold waters. It was a bath, yes, and badly needed. Even a rogue grizzly would flee from her earthy marigold stink.

“Ospreyyyyyyyyy.”

There she was, as well proportioned and innocently wanton in death as she had been in life. She wore red and held a black and tan pheasant tail feather in her left hand. Sarabande towered over the apparition even though the close-by feral howl had startled her, causing her to jump back and douse her feet in the center of the stream.

“Good morning to you, too, Dryad.”

“Sara, you’ve never been good at sarcasm. You don’t have the mouth for it.”

“I’ll speak plainly, then. Why do you greet me with a befouled hiss?”

Dryad sat on a boulder at the stream’s edge—to the extent a ghost could actually sit on anything—and shook her tumbling blond hair away from her face.

“The world turns on that hiss,” said Dryad.

“How so?”

Dryad smiled the way a mother smiles at a pathetic child.

“Let us begin with a sixteen hundred and fifty mile stroll.”

“My traitorous sister, I am strolling because you couldn’t keep your dress buttoned when you espied a fifteen-year-old young man.”

Even in death, Dryad’s blue eyes were capable of fire. “My mark is on him, yes.” She stood and pulled up her dress and extended her right leg. “Just here,” she said, tracing a small crescent with the feather. “No doubt you will find it when you two are rutting in a corn field.”

Sarabande slapped her, connecting with nothing but cold air.

“Must you shamefully befoul everything and everyone?”

“You are the woman standing here with blood on your dress,” said Dryad, poking her feather at the large splotches. “I’m sure mother warned you about wearing white when you’re on the rag.”

“Standing Cat had little time for me,” said Sarabande. “I’m not a fabric that suits her.”