

THE WHEEL DIVER



ASHLEY SCHWELLENBACH

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CHAPTER 1 • Beare runs away



The storm couldn't have chosen a
more dramatic opening. It broke
an hour after dark, releasing great,
jagged shards of lightning that
ruptured the lining of the night
sky. The heavens flashed blue,
blinded white, surged purple,
forcing the stars to halt their
mighty, petty goings-
on lest the inferior
beings below snatch
a terrified glance at
the chaos above and
happen to witness a
dwarf planet blowing
a kiss at the tail of a
comet. Far beneath
the notice of the
heavenly denizens,
slender stalks
of riparian
vegetation
huddled over
the River and
bowed and
shook
with
each
mad
gust
of
air.

But the long and rolling cracks of thunder, though they were sonorous, as you might expect, and though they were uncivilized, as storms have a habit of being, were muted by the tumult that marked the River's rapid rise. There is nothing in all the world quite so uncivilized as the River—unless you count the matriarchal tribes who skate it.

The trees swung round like a *kvinne* in the throes of an *ayahuasca*-induced vision. Those that could not remain upright were claimed by the River, which marshaled its contents into a swift-flowing upheaval that charged downstream with destructive purpose and more or less in the same direction.

Through it all, a single vine clung to the thwart of a dugout canoe. The canoe—commonly known as an *einbaum* on this part of the River—wanted quite desperately to join the violent procession of stumps and logs and branches. And the vine wanted to maintain its grip on the canoe, in part because the person who had wrapped and knotted it had done so carefully, and the vine did not care to disappoint her; but mostly, vines love to cling.

Still, every plant has its limits.

When the vine anchoring the dugout canoe to the left bank of the River finally decided it had endured enough and snapped, it failed to notify the Girl slumbering peacefully at the bottom of the vessel, and so sent the canoe careening merrily down several miles of turbulent water under no command but its own.

Tupã, the Girl's chinchilla and only companion—besides the *einbaum*—being both crepuscular and uneasy about storms, witnessed the entire incident. And though he had been tempted, briefly, to make a heroic leap for shore, he spent too long weighing the comparative safety of the land against the likelihood that the storm, which had ceased gathering force and was now raging with waning power, would exhaust itself, as the vine had exhausted itself trying to restrain the Girl's canoe. Stymied by indecision, Tupã missed his opportunity to abandon ship.

It didn't much matter; Tupã had been dependent upon the Girl for care and camaraderie far too long to desert her over so slight a threat as a thunderstorm resulting in a runaway canoe. You might go so far as to call the chinchilla's affection loyalty—or, at least, the greatest show of loyalty

one of the hov (the wheelless) could expect in the lands that flowed from the great River.

Whatever deficiencies in sense or experience the Girl's current predicament might suggest, there were few alive who possessed so keen a sympathy with the River, for she had navigated and survived solely on its bounty for more than 15 of her 17 years.

Like countless species of fish, the Girl was born with a map of the River deeply embedded in her genes. The Girl's parents—also being what the warrior tribes that lived on either side of the River called hov—had spawned her and then set her adrift in her first dugout canoe, before paddling away in their own respective directions to find, conquer, or possibly be killed by their own adventures.

It could come to pass, if the Girl paddled quickly enough, that she might one day overtake her parents' canoes with her own. But she wouldn't stand any chance of recognizing either of them if she did. In light of this upbringing, the children of the River choose their own names, or none at all, and discard them when they no longer fit properly, and there's no one around to be bothered or confused by the arrangement.

So the storm, which ultimately killed one, deprived hundreds of shelter, and inconvenienced a few more, was no great tragedy to the Girl. The canoe traveled south for several miles, singing the song all vessels that ride the water know by heart, a psalm without words and whose instrument was always at hand—provided the River was near. By launching boldly and directly at jagged rocks that wanted to split the canoe's smooth underbelly or flank, he managed to avoid the mistakes of less experienced watercraft.

Tupā, being a rational chinchilla and seasoned River traveler despite not knowing how to swim, nestled into his dry leaf bed at the boat's stern and resolved not to emerge until the sun was well into his daily climb.

Since you're probably eager for news of the adolescent girl sailing steadily southward despite her best efforts at loitering, the first thing you must know is that she is a Wheel Diver by profession.

The second thing you must know is that there is no creature on the River more highly regarded than a Wheel Diver—unless it is a Jammer, and Jammers are so deadly and rare that only a few dozen exist at any

given point in time. Without the skilled labor of the Wheel Diver, the 39 tribes that lay claim to the vast lands where the River runs would be unable to pursue their chief business and pastime: making war upon one another. And if they were no longer fit to make war among themselves, the more technologically advanced Grabbers would finally elbow their way in, and there would soon be no River for the Girl to run.

The third thing you must know is that the Girl has a wide, happy face with cheekbones as prominent and high as the mountains thousands of miles to the north where she was born. Even in a land where cheekbones are abundant and have no special purpose or value to speak of, the Wheel Diver's are noted wherever she goes. Her hair is a shade of dark brown often mistaken for black, and she wears it in long braids that dip into the River when she bends forward to fetch food from her pack or reprimand Tupā for arguing with a wooly monkey that strayed too near the canoe.

She paddled most of the day beneath a punishing sun but never darkened or burned, leaving her skin several shades of brown lighter than her hair—though she blushed pink so easily and often that you might have thought a river dolphin had taken possession of the small, sleek canoe. And though they were presently shuttered, she had lively, brown eyes that tended to reveal thoughts she meant to keep guarded from the matriarchal warrior tribes with whom she bartered ripe, freshly plucked wheels for goods she had neither the patience nor expertise to make for herself.

No proper isolationist wants to trade her unfettered independence for a basketweave-patterned wrap skirt, but there are limitations to what a single person alone on a vast river can accomplish—even a 17-year-old as resourceful as the Girl. And if it were just a question of wraparound skirts and crop tops hand painted with the tribes' raucous mascots and slogans, the Girl would probably forfeit her dealings with the tribes and dive merely for pleasure. But the nimble-fingered tribeswomen of the River could conjure feasts that were not to be ignored, panpipes nearly as beautiful to look upon as they were to hear, and—most useful of all—blowguns that hit their target straight and true every single shot.

Skirts the Girl could do without; she still dove naked, however much material she had in her pack, and was perfectly comfortable without any

garment on warm days. But a weapon that increased her efficiency as a hunter also increased her daily allotment of fish, and any such tool was to be cherished and not given up lightly.

The fourth and final thing you must know about the Girl is that she woke as we were discussing panpipes. In her final moments of sleep, her body had come to understand that the canoe was very much in motion and therefore not at all tethered to the banks. It took her body time to relay this vital information to her brain, but in the amount of time it took for her to open her eyes, she had surged upright into a sitting position, grasping her paddle. Though it isn't easy to move rapidly in a canoe of that size without tipping it on its side, even the Girl's unconscious movements were tailored for life on the water, and the canoe no longer had to remind her to move mindfully by wobbling to and fro.

The Wheel Diver brought the einbaum to a halt, using an eddy to keep the vessel in place, and began to assess its contents.

"Oh Beare, what have you done?" she asked softly, calling the einbaum by the name she had given it on a particularly joyful fishing expedition two days after she finished making it.

Already she knew that the paddle had not been lost. In her relief, she found it difficult to put the oar aside, though she knew it was safe. The soft sighs and quivering gray fur in the stern just behind her indicated Tupã was none the worse for their unintended journey. The chinchilla's effects were all present and included a bed of leaves she remade for him every third day, a small pile of fruit she'd gathered for him the night before the storm, and a sphere made of twigs and waterproofed with spruce gum, which functioned as an escape hatch in the event that the einbaum tipped.

She ran restless fingers through the pack, which she kept lodged beneath her head while she slept. There was a nice pile of skirts and vests, as well as her trusty blowgun; a quiver of darts, none of which had been tipped in poison; a flagon filled with the sweet corn juice called api, which was the Girl's favorite beverage, best consumed hot; and several banana leaves containing dried fish and boiled quail eggs.

Nothing was missing. She paused to breathe, exhaling her fear in ragged scuds of air more satisfying than the handful of imprecations

she'd bothered to learn from tribespeople. Had she been separated from Beare!—

But there wasn't any benefit in mourning a canoe she hadn't yet lost.

She grasped her paddle with both hands and in a single, powerful stroke, freed the canoe from the small whirlpool and allowed herself to forget her mistakes of the night before. *Ko ang isang.* Down the river.



After half a day of punishing travel and no break for meals—aside from Tupā, who twice availed himself of his fruit and even sniffed delicately at the quail eggs though he had no intention of eating them—the Wheel Diver spied a tree burdened with wrinkled, yellow orbs she knew to be ripened passion fruit. The current was mild in that part of the River, and the Girl was having no difficulty maneuvering to the right bank when a small bubble appeared where she was about to dip her paddle.

She immediately stopped rowing and stared at the spot in the water where the disruption had occurred. The passion fruit continued to beckon, filling her head with memories of sweet, slightly tart flesh and the sticky seeds that would cling to her fingers and cheeks until she washed them away in the River. But that bubble—the secrets it might signify, the treasure it could betray—was more important than half a day's travel hunger.

For a quarter of an hour, nothing happened. Then, when the Girl's eyes had begun to weep from the glare of the water, three more bubbles appeared. Followed by a half dozen, and then another in such rapid succession that the Girl was forced to rely on the sleepy chinchilla to help her keep count. For the final test, she placed her palm flat on the smooth water. There was a slight quickening of the current there, a tug that tried to shoot her fingers forward.

It was a heartbeat in the water, but subtle, an effect neither you nor I would have noticed, but which was as glaring as a neon sign advertising free chicha to the Wheel Diver.

She knew for certain now, and her excitement revived her spirits

more rapidly than half a dozen of the golden fruits hanging from the shore could have done. Within minutes, the canoe was on the bank and the Girl was dragging it a good distance from the water. Ordinarily, she would have tied it to a tree, but the night's events weighed heavily on her mind, and she was feeling particularly protective toward Beare and his cargo.

Once she was satisfied the einbaum was safe, the Girl stripped off her clothes, affixed a thick belt around her waist, and made her way back to the River, leaving Tupã responsible for the security of the vessel. Just before entering the water, she had a change of heart and withdrew the machete from her belt. It had a 14.2-inch blade that was well worn and sharp, and it fitted into the Girl's hand almost as naturally as a paddle.

The Girl preferred to make her first dive with both hands free, but there had been a camo croc sunning himself on the right bank just before the last bend in the River. He was at least twenty-two feet long and resplendent in white petals, which could have suggested any number of flowers, but the Girl's sharp nose had detected a definite whiff of pineapple as she'd paddled past his stronghold.

The Girl chuckled appreciatively, for it was a rare and desperately creative camo croc who took the time to imitate a flower's odor; in this case, the flower was the bloom belonging to the giant water lily, which blossomed by night rather than day. Still, any crocodile who put the amount of effort and ingenuity into his camouflage that this one had deserved a spare fish or two as a show of appreciation. By offering these snacks freely, the Girl was both encouraging an artist and dissuading a predator from attempting to flatter her by making her his next meal.

Three goodly sized fish should guarantee some peace of mind when she dove, and in a decent and fair world they might, but the land adjoining the River was neither decent nor fair. It was, however, honest. If something had teeth, it would probably try to bite, and if that fact surprised you, then your limbs were not long for this world.

She hoisted the machete into the air, tilting the blade so it caught the sunlight and would be sure to attract the attention of anything that might be lurking in or near the River. It was a precautionary measure; unlike the River's tribal warriors, the degree of care a crocodile put into

his ensemble usually fell in indirect proportion to his desire for a skirmish.

Then the Girl sprang from the muddy bank and dove cleanly into the water, leaving three sets of eyes watching the spot where she had disappeared. It was deeper and darker than the Wheel Diver anticipated, and she swam in small, searching circles while getting her feel for the water. After four minutes elapsed, she surfaced and treaded water for a minute or so before diving once more and feeling her way through the murk.

With each dive, she went a little deeper. The hand that did not carry the machete was bent slightly at the wrist, and her fingers were spread wide but tensed, as though about to grasp something. She relied on this barometer, along with the occasional brush of the current against her cheek, to direct her toward her treasure.

It was on her fourth pass that the Girl's fingers tingled at the sensation of the faint current she'd witnessed while still in her canoe. But more than one hundred feet underwater, the sensation was much more powerful—an unnatural and panic-inducing force to anyone not familiar with the art and profession of wheel diving. The Girl considered plunging immediately toward the source of the draft, but checked her impatience and returned, instead, to the surface for air.

A less experienced Wheel Diver—one not familiar with the habits and stubbornness of the whirlweed she sought—would have hastened toward the plant, assuming she was capable of finding it at all, for this one was more cunning than many the Girl had sought. But that approach assumed the whirlweed was something merely to be found and rapidly divested of its treasure; it afforded no time to show the plant proper respect.

She gave herself a few minutes and then, seemingly at random, shot downward as quickly as she could propel herself. This time she did not feel the current for she dove too quickly, both arms extended. Beneath the water, the Girl's body discovered its natural frequency, and had there been anyone beneath the River to witness the perfect arc of her posture, they would have the privilege of knowing the intensity and rightness that belong to a person fulfilling her purpose. There are many such people on the River. Not all of them; the River was no nirvana shrouded and

choking on the effluvia of its own self-admiration. For that, you'd have to travel 4,783 miles beyond the River, heading roughly north.

There was a gleam beckoning from the River bed. The Girl first encountered this pale white flare when she was seven years old, diving for catfish. She had mistaken it for moonlight and blundered to the surface in a panic.

Now she knew it for the seductive bewitchment of a mature whirlweed laden with fruit and eager to produce more. The Girl found the specimen she was searching for 147 feet below the water's surface; it was the most ordinary variety of whirlweed, nacreous and pale but with a pattern of rich purple spots thickest at the base. This particular species thrived in deep water; others craved light or autonomy and bobbed freely down the River, affixing themselves to whatever flotsam they took a liking to.

This plant boasted two dozen fully formed stalks, each more than four feet long and jutting in all directions, with about half as many immature growths. Most incredible of all, and the source of the plant's name, were the dozens of wheels spinning frantically, kicking miniature gusts of water in all directions. Each precious wheel was affixed to a stalk, some practically on top of one another, and though some plants produced the occasional defective wheel that could be easily twisted free, most respectable plants made Wheel Divers work for their treasure.

The Girl swam carefully around her prey, testing the strength and age of its stalks, determining where the wheels were ripest. The fact that a wheel was ripe did not necessarily mean it was easy to harvest. In many cases these wheels were the most stubborn, set in their ways and little inclined to assist a Wheel Diver who planned to swap the wheel for a fish supper and wrap skirt. But the Girl would not harvest an immature wheel; it was detrimental to the whirlweed, and there were very few warriors who would lower themselves to buy such wheels anyway.

Some Wheel Divers will tell you there's a trick to plucking a wheel from its plant. There was one Wheel Diver in particular, who briefly attached himself to the Orre tribe, and who confided that if you turn a wheel three times clockwise followed by once counterclockwise, the prize will simply pop off its stalk. The Orre eventually drove the fraud

from their territory with a promise that if he ever returned they would suffer certain portions of his anatomy to receive the same treatment.

The Girl knew there wasn't any trick or shortcut to harvesting a whirlweed's yield, and she distrusted anyone who claimed otherwise. But much worse did she despise the divers who lacked sufficient patience for their task and hacked away at entire stalks rather than dive repeatedly to claim individual wheels. No stalk would grow where another had been destroyed, and on countless dives the Girl had discovered maimed and listless monstrosities with only a single stalk and wheels that tried to spin but could raise no current, however small. However hard these plants tried to survive, they would never touch their former glory, and the Girl could not bring herself to divest such specimens of whatever wheels the savage who had razed them left behind.

It would have been easy. The Girl was a nomad who never traveled the same section of River twice. There would be no one to accuse her if she harvested whirlweed dishonorably, no personal consequences whatsoever. But the River had given her many things, and she was as much its dependent as the giant otters and pink dolphins and ravenous camo crocs who cavorted and hunted there. And though she had never suffered the enrichment of a formal education, she recognized that the River wasn't simply the part you happened to occupy at any given point.

When the Girl was finally satisfied with her examination of the specimen, she cautiously pitted her blade against the base of the bud of one of the wheels and began to saw, rocking the sharp edge as it advanced in the hope that the wheel would pop off the stalk. She had been underwater for eight minutes and wanted air, but she refused to make for the horizon high above her without a single wheel. Knowing that haste and blades make poor companions, the Girl maintained her moderate pace, but pitched the blade more urgently until the top corner of the wheel twisted forward. She grasped the wheel in the same hand that clutched the machete and kicked upward with all of her strength.

Rather than tread water as she had done between dives, the Girl swam to shore with the last of her strength, gasping as she hoisted herself up the steep bank where she had stored her canoe. She sprawled on the long, soft grass beside the canoe and examined her jewel. It was a fairly

standard wheel, bone-white in coloring—not quite a perfect circle, but as close as a wheel from a whirlweed was likely to come. It would require very little shaping from the warrior who eventually wielded it.

The Girl didn't need to measure the wheel to know that it stood 62 millimeters tall and 38 millimeters wide; it was slightly thinner than the standard battle wheel, but there were many warriors who preferred the increased maneuverability of these smaller wheels, so the Girl was not much concerned about fetching a fair price. Most importantly, the wheel was healthy and sturdy, with no discoloration or brittle edges to indicate it would collapse at the first test of strength. In a pinch, it could be battle-ready without any adjustment. The Girl was pleased with the day's labors and decided to leave the bulk of the harvesting for tomorrow.

"That is a fine wheel."

The clear and surprisingly gentle voice came from the direction of the einbaum's stern, and the surprise of it would have panicked the Girl if she weren't already exhausted from paddling and diving and worrying. The Girl evaluated the time it would take to shove Beare into the River and tightly grasped the machete in her left hand. Now properly prepared for flight or fight—or both—she looked cautiously over her shoulder and found herself eye level with a pair of silver roller skates.

The Girl relaxed marginally. The wheeled warriors were strictly forbidden by their own code from attacking one of the hov, the wheelless, except in self-defense. The tribes' warriors were butcherly and disturbingly creative in battle, but they adhered to their rules as fervently as they divested enemies of noses and limbs.

What's more, whoever had spoken was still several feet away from the canoe, and appeared intent on maintaining what was considered a respectful distance. Touching a hov's einbaum was an invitation to quarrel, and though the Girl did not choose to fight except as a last resort, she had sufficient pride to defend her canoe.

"It may even be battle-ready if it is as strong as it looks," the warrior offered.

"It may be," replied the Girl, looping the wheel through a loose cord at her waist and stringing it around her neck. She turned—still clutching the machete, but holding it in a manner that was meant to

appear non-threatening. The warrior was wearing a white linen jumpsuit that gathered around her calves; she also bore a necklace of elaborate wood carvings resembling several animals that shared her tribe's territory. Her skin was pale with honey undertones, but her hair was dark and gathered in a single, long ponytail that fell the length of her back. She was balanced on her toes and held a javelin in one hand, but the Girl's attention was focused on a half-dozen throwing stars belted to the warrior's waist.

The warrior must have been a blocker, for she had clearly seen battle but lacked the self-importance of a Jammer. The Girl could not guess her tribe.

"I am Davina ente Dervil os Blodeuwedd."

The Girl roughly understood this introduction, for every tribe's naming customs, though similar, varied just enough to puzzle a stranger. Davina was trying to tell the stranger that she was the daughter of Dervil and derby wife of Blodeuwedd. The Girl understood the part about Dervil being Davina's mother, but she misinterpreted "os" as "mate of" rather than "derby wife of."

It was not a particularly ignorant mistake, for roughly half the tribes list derby wife before mate—and in some tribes the derby wife also functioned as a mate. The fear of improperly introducing one's self was one of the top five reasons outsiders avoided the River, along with the enormous multi-colored snakes that leapt from one end of the territory to another after a serious rain, the fact that the seasons sometimes felt like swapping places so summer and winter might last anywhere from a few hours to a few years, the unfriendliness of the tribes toward outsiders and entirely true reports of their violent clashes that sometimes wiped out an entire tribe, and the fact that there was no method of travel besides watercraft and roller skates.

"I'm the Wheel Diver."

"Just the Wheel Diver?" Davina asked with a smile, for she had met other hov and knew that many refused to take names. Still, she loved to tease and could not resist her playful nature, even when the subject of her teasing was armed with a machete and remained tensed in a hostile position.

“No ente. No os,” the Girl confirmed, weary but not offended. “If you don’t mind, what tribe do you belong to?”

Davina did not bother to hide her confusion or surprise.

“Mau. But how is it that you find yourself in our territory without knowing it?” She sounded suspicious—and with good reason. Few of the River hov made their way onto land unless they knew whose land they occupied and had good reason for being there. Many of the hov slept in einbaums and went days and sometimes even weeks without making contact with the land.

“My canoe broke from its mooring during the storm while I slept, and we traveled many miles before I woke.” It galled the Wheel Diver to make the admission, but lying to a blocker on a point that could be easily discredited was a potentially lethal mistake.

“We thought that was strange,” Davina revealed. “At first we could not agree whether you were simply one of the wheelless as you appeared to be or something more sinister. As soon as I saw you leap into the River, I knew you for a Wheel Diver, and I am happy for we have need of a healthy supply.”

“You were watching me.” The Girl wasn’t asking. She expected to be monitored when passing through a tribe’s land, and though she hadn’t been aware that she was crossing into occupied territory—owing to the fact that she had been asleep—it made perfect sense for blocker sentries to mark her progress through their land. Mostly, she said it because she was angry that the Mau had clearly considered the possibility that she was a Grabber, or possibly a spy from another tribe, but most likely a Grabber, the most despised life form of them all.

Still, the blocker standing before her, wearing her roller skates and her entes and her oses proudly, no longer believed her to be a Grabber or spy, or she would not have invited the Girl to barter wheels with her people. The Girl abhorred gatherings of any kind and knew she must sleep in a Mau village as a show of good faith until their commerce was at an end, but Tupã was sociable and loved to tarry in places with proper walls for him to bounce from when the mood was upon him. And it had been many months since the Girl had dealings with people of any tribe, and her provisions were low.

“I will hear your chief.” The Girl spoke formally, properly.

“It is not half a day’s walk,” Davina replied in kind, rapping her knuckles on her skates in a gesture that meant the Girl was now under her protection. “Your einbaum looks smooth of sailing.”

This was the polite method of asking whether the Girl wanted Davina’s assistance portaging Beare to the Mau stronghold. By acknowledging that the canoe was confident in the water, the land-dweller was reminding the River-runner of the vessel’s clumsiness on land. It was an exchange the Girl had been party to almost a dozen times, but she never got any better at making a timely answer.

She wanted the canoe within arm’s reach at all times, and yet if Davina helped her haul it inland, she would be dependent upon the Mau to determine the day and time of her departure. And should she wish to leave hastily, there would be little opportunity, unless she left Beare behind, which she would not countenance even under the direst of circumstances.

“How is the path?” asked the Girl to buy herself some time to answer. She was prepared for a report that mildly to outrageously overrated the quality of the route, for wheel warriors always count their tribe the wisest, their paths the clearest, and their wheels the swiftest—which, along with the legendary toughness of the warriors, had resulted in some unpleasant walks for the Girl, who usually had no choice but to take them at their word.

“It is the Way,” Davina said simply, and the Girl was so stunned to discover that she stood in proximity to the great, fabled highway that her mind released all concern for Beare’s well-being to grapple with this remarkable discovery. To comprehend what the Girl was feeling, you must imagine discovering that you are on the doorstep of a famous historical landmark that has shaped the fortunes and directed the travels of an entire people for long, prosperous years. The Way was almost as essential a fixture of the territory as the River, for though the River exceeded the Way in age by several thousand years, the Way was stunning, irrefutable evidence of the feats made possible through intertribal cooperation.

The Way was the only path through the wild territory, save the River,

and it formed a link between the tribes and their lands. And whatever battles brewed, however many warriors brooded darkly over their skates as they bound them tightly to their feet, and whichever Jammers fell to the glory and sorrow of the makali makali—the golden-wheeled, killed in sanctioned battle—each tribe sent its annual levy: two able-bodied workers per 100 people of wheel-battle age committed to full-time Way-building and maintenance. Thanks to the wisdom and long-term vision of the tribeswomen who authored the plan, in many parts of the land the Way strayed far from the River where it began.

These things the Girl knew because the stars had told her, and some warriors had corroborated their stories.

“I didn’t know it came this far north.”

“Until two summers ago it did not,” Davina said proudly. “This branch is so new that it does not yet exist on most maps. Strangers still find us, and it requires an adjustment in thinking and security, but for wheel-travel there is nothing can match it.” The blocker grinned so joyfully and truthfully that the Wheel Diver decided to obey a long-held and heart-pounding impulse.

She had neither set foot on nor seen the Way, and though she shrank in horror and fear from the towers and longhouses that stank of people and fire, the places where tribes gathered and left their mark on the land, the Way was a secret source of fascination. For it mirrored the River in many respects, and in her secret heart she longed to travel it.

“What of my einbaum? Will it be safe here?”

“As secure as anything can be in this land,” Davina promised, and the Girl was satisfied, for it was the most truthful guarantee anyone could make, and she now knew she would be traveling with a truth-speaker.

“The River may rise,” the warrior warned. “We should carry it from the water, but still not too close to the Way. We will conceal it beneath branches.”

These things they accomplished quickly, and while Davina was perfecting the canoe’s camouflage, the Girl put on her long yellow skirt with a slit deep up the side to enable comfortable movement, as well as a beautifully crafted felted vest she sometimes wore when she felt called upon to make an affecting first impression. Her moccasins were the only

footwear she ever wore, and they were soft and snug, extending almost as high as her knee when she knotted the simple straps. She'd traded them for a whopping two wheels—the rare silver kind that grew on dusk-purple stalks that appeared as no more than a shadow in the deepest parts of the River—and could never quite reconcile the decision beyond remembering the way the footwear lingered in her mind after her first dismissive glance. Red moccasins with turquoise beaded fish, and still she couldn't bring herself to regret the exchange.

It took less than a minute for the Girl to rapidly bundle her possessions and sling them over her shoulder, leaving nothing behind—not even her paddle. Tupā would ride on her shoulder until he became restless, at which point she would place him securely in his safety hatch as a precautionary measure against his hopping thoughtlessly into unfamiliar territory.

They walked through canebrake so thick that Tupā clung to the Girl's shoulder to avoid being knocked off by an unruly plant, and Davina had to angle her roller skates to avoid getting caught between the stalks. Her loose-fitting jumpsuit seemed to brush the pervasive canes aside, while the Wheel Diver's garments made a nuisance of themselves, grasping and clinging to every leaf and vine.

The Girl's mood soured with each step; she began to doubt the existence of the Way and felt vulnerable at being parted from Beare. They dodged haltingly around a coiled black snake who was thinking fondly of meadow voles and did not mark their passing with any particular interest—and wouldn't have considered attacking a warrior fitted with four shiny, round bludgeons at the bottom of each foot.

The blocker and guide hooked one of her wheels on a branch, and while she kicked and twisted her leg to free herself, looking more like a can-can dancer than a battle-tested warrior for a tribe generally recognized as one of the 10 deadliest on the River, the Wheel Diver withdrew the machete from her belt and began to take great, hostile swipes at the stalks directly before her.

The blocker took note of the fact that the hov she'd found sprawled on the bank of the River just an hour before was now hacking away the tribe's primary source of sugar and trade, and she quickened her pace,

stepping more lightly to avoid being ensnared again and thus affording the stranger more time to make mischief.

Davina did not pretend to know or understand the wheelless. To live alone, always rushing toward the vast, unknown ocean at the end of the great River was an incomprehensible hardship. But to go through the world nameless, so no one could recount your valorous deeds and victories, never to feel the tug of eager wheels beneath your feet, was an agony worse than exile.

When she was very young and encountered her first hov while patrolling the Mau's riverbank, Davina tried to offer her a name. This was before her kuzaliwa, her first battle, and she couldn't imagine that the adolescent's lack of designation was anything other than an oversight, and a source of great shame to what appeared to be an otherwise normal human being.

She only had enough time to bring up the fact that a good name was useful for many reasons, but that its chief purpose was to chill the blood and battle-fire of one's enemies, before the girl darted for the River and disappeared in the swift current, leaving Davina with a list of hard-sounding and alliterative noms de guerre clattering around her head.

Rhosyn was head trainer in those days and responsible for the Mau's Fresh Meat program, which Davina had only just begun. And when Davina returned from her patrol, it was Rhosyn who explained Davina's error in thinking.

The hov are wheelless and nameless by choice. To attempt to saddle one of the hov with a battle name was perceived as a grave assault on their autonomy, a method of falsely claiming something that did not belong to the tribe. In short—though the lecture Rhosyn delivered on the customs of the hov was anything but brief—Davina had not offered a gift to the young woman so much as she had attempted to rob her of something the hov girl valued more dearly than her einbaum. And though the lesson was a necessary one, Davina's cheeks were crimson with embarrassment long afterward. She never again offered a name to one of the hov.

But dodging through shoots with tips like pointed spears while trying to beat a path for the wary young woman behind her, Davina acknowledged for the first time the existence of a great void: the

difference between knowing the Girl scorned naming as a way of life and understanding why. The blocker stood at the brink of this void, which might be called the disproportion between mere tolerance and true empathy.

Long ago, she had accepted that the Wheel Diver was a necessary part of her world. Battle drove the tribes, and each battle was nothing more than a series of revolutions, each revolution nothing more than a sequence of steps, each step impossible without the skill of a Wheel Diver. Davina would not begrudge the Girl her strangeness even as she prized her handiwork.

“Strong must be the bellows that sustain such frequent and lasting sojourns beneath the water,” the blocker said.

“I didn’t realize there was this much sweet cane so close to the River,” the Girl observed, by way of maintaining polite conversation. She stowed the machete in her belt and almost regretted the damage she had done to the grass.

“Most of our lands are overrun with it. But we beat it back from the River so that those passing our lands don’t see it,” the blocker replied. “Grabbers love sweet cane almost as dearly as gold.”

The Girl nodded her agreement at the wisdom of this decision, which helped her remember that the tribes had never been her enemies. At times the warriors had inconvenienced and confounded her with their strange ways, and twice they had driven her from their lands with their attempts to stick her with unwanted names, but mostly they shared her understanding of the spirit of the River as sentient, sophisticated beyond even the reckoning of those who had lived there for thousands of years, and wondrously vulnerable. Davina was not her enemy.

The thicket that harried their progress was suddenly gone, replaced by a path that ran between two walls of cane. The grass had been cut precisely, leaving room for a track that could accommodate four warriors skating side by side, but nothing essential had been removed, so that the elbows of the skater on the periphery would glance the sharp stalks if she were not careful.

The floor was obsidian, the very darkest glass formed in the mayhem of volcanic eruptions and harvested at great risk by the Waymakers.

As the Girl took a few careful steps for a better view of the path as it carved its sinuous course through the cane, the stone gleamed with the understanding of its importance and purpose.

“It will be quick work now,” the blocker told the Girl. It was obvious from the fact that the Girl’s face had paused in an expression of wonder and delight that the Way had asserted its power over her, and the sentry was eager to return and exchange her responsibility for steaming choclo con queso.

She began the westward skate, much more slowly than she would have were she returning alone. The Girl was not slow, for a River-dweller and hov, but on the black Way a wheeled warrior was a deadly blur in a deadly land. The Wheel Diver jogged along beside her, keeping to the center of the road as best as she was able while balancing a pack on her back and chinchilla on her left shoulder.

Tupã was uneasy about the unnaturalness of the path, but he dearly loved speed and balanced delightedly on the Girl’s shoulders, happy to be clear of the stabbing branches and hungry serpents. They kept their respective counsels—the Girl glorying in the rare phenomenon of an experience that exceeds brightly-lit anticipation; the blocker savoring the prospect of a mug of hot api with her soup and gauging the odds that Lomman, her suitor, had made a batch of purple corn pudding, which she dearly loved; while Tupã’s thoughts gradually turned from adventure to dinner.