

## **“Daughter of the Winds”**

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Mahala was born of red earth and salt tears. The Four Winds gave her life and gifts for the mind, the hands, the heart and the spirit. Mahala dwelt in the Valley eating fruit from the trees and fish that eagles dropped in her lap. She ran with the deer in the forest and played with the rabbits at dusk.

One night Mahala had a dream. She watched Anona, her West Wind Mother, rampage across the sky. Anona danced over the western seas. Her long brown hair and frothy white robes became heavy with water. When she reached the land, she whirled in an ever tightening circle flinging the water away to the parched earth. With her came the buffalo and the elk and all the eaters of grass and grain to feed on the greenery that sprang from her step.

She whirled to a stop before Mahala and said in the language of the animals, "We wrought well, my sisters and I. You are quick, brave and loving. I give you my final gift. Gather the seeds and grains from the prairie. Bury them in the rich earth and let my gentle rain water them. When the plants grow tall and heavy with grain, gather them again. Eat the fruit of the prairie, but always save some for the planting.

"This gift I give to you and all who follow after that you might flourish and multiply. Cherish the land and the plants or you and yours will go hungry, suffer famine and disease. Now go to Cari, your East Wind Mother and claim your birthright from her. Go to the sea."

Anona gathered her skirts into a fierce tornado and ascended to the sky in a gray funnel cloud.

Mahala woke afraid. She curled closer to her animal friends and whimpered. She did not want to leave the safe Valley for the unknown beyond and she was puzzled by her mother's words. Who would "follow after?" What did Anona mean when she said "you and yours?"

A doe licked her face and said, "Seek the advice of the Tortoise. He will tell you true." Mahala left her nest of ferns and sought the old Tortoise who lived under a tree stump by the river.

He rested on wet green moss and snapped at flies with his horny snout as Mahala approached. His shell echoed the dappled greens and rich browns of the stream bottom in a morning ray of sunshine. She stood admiring his shell and wishing her skin and hair could be that beautiful.

"O Tortoise, old and wise, can you tell me true what is my destiny?"

"Of course not!" snapped the Tortoise. "We make our own destiny using our gifts to best advantage. Or not."

"My West Wind Mother haunts my dreams, O Tortoise. She bids me journey from this Valley to claim gifts from my Wind Mothers. She talks of others of my kind, but I fear to leave."

The Tortoise unlidded one eye and looked at Mahala. "The eagle must fly and the fish must swim. What does your heart tell you?"

"There is no one like me in the Valley. I would like to see these others, but I'm unsure. Where shall I go? How will I get on in the world?"

"Your mind is quick, your body is strong and your heart is warm. You will do well in the world. If you wish to follow your heart, climb the trail by the trout pool to the top of the plain. Travel toward the rising sun. It will guide you to your East Wind Mother."

Mahala took comfort from the old Tortoise's words and bowed low to acknowledge his wisdom, but he slept in the sun and did not see her.

She faded into the bracken and started to walk downstream. A squirrel scampered in the branches above her. A porcupine waddled on the trail behind her. A doe burst from the forest and flicked her white tail as she bounded down the trail. Mahala felt a weight lift from her shoulders as she made her decision and she sang as she ran to the trout pool. She sang to her mothers, the four winds; she sang to the warm sun and the sparkling water; she sang to the animals, her friends; and she sang for her coming journey.

At the trout pool, the deer, the rabbits and the eagles all gathered to bid her good-bye. The King Stag came from the forest and tossed his antlered head before Mahala. "Follow me. I can show you the way for three days then you must make your own way, Little One." Mahala followed the King Stag up the path to the edge of the plain. They ran for three days.

In the evenings, Mahala gathered the grains Anona had shown her and dug roots from the prairie to feed herself and the stag. He told her of his wanderings and the story about the contest between the coyote and the owl for the mouse that got away. Mahala laughed and began to enjoy her journey.

On the morning of the fourth day the King Stag bowed low and wished Mahala a safe journey. He reared, twisted to face the back trail and trumpeted his good-bye. As Mahala watched him spring away, a tear tracked through the dust on her cheek. When the stag disappeared over the horizon, she took a deep breath and started running toward the rising sun.

The next morning she climbed over a sand dune and stopped. Her eyes widened at the sight of the restless ocean heaving against the earth. The fresh wind was tainted with the scent of rotting seaweed and empty mussel shells. A smoky volcano belched on the horizon.

Mahala spied a sea otter sitting on a rocky shelf just below her. She watched, fascinated, as the creature used a stone to break the mussel shells and eat the sweet meat. She had never seen an animal use a tool before.

"Well, Little One," the animal said, staring with round curious eyes, "what do you want? Quit standing there trying to catch flies with your open mouth."

"Good morning, Mistress Otter. May I sit with you?" Mahala made herself as comfortable as she could on a rock slicked with seaweed. "A friend of mine does that."

"Shell mussels?"

"No, catches flies with his open mouth."

The otter cackled and exposed sharp teeth. "Smart One, are you? Well, what brings you to my rock?"

"I am searching for Cari, my East Wind Mother. Anona, my West Wind Mother sent me to claim my birthright."

"Ah, looking for the Changeable One, are you?" The otter pulled a salmon-colored conch shell dappled with delicate browns from under her pile of mussels. "This will get her attention. She left it with me for a Special One."

Mahala watched as the magical shell disappeared into the clutter. "Oh, please, Mistress Otter, let me call my mother with your shell."

"You must first answer me a riddle, child, to be sure you are a worthy daughter."

Mahala thought of her warm Valley and her animal friends then shook her head. She had made her decision when she started on the journey. "What is your riddle, Mistress Otter?"

"What girdles the earth, pillows the air and contains the fire? Tell me true and the shell is yours." The otter popped another mussel while she waited.

Mahala cupped her hand under her chin. A small crease appeared briefly between her brows, and then a smile dawned over her face.

"The sea, Mistress Otter!" Mahala flung her arms wide to indicate the foamy waves crashing on the shore. "The sea covers the earth and holds the air away from her surface. The sea douses the fiery volcano."

"Right, my child." The voice turned to bubbly laughter as the otter melted into seawater and ran sparkling down the rock leaving the conch shell glistening on a bed of seaweed.

Mahala picked up the shell, faced into the east wind and blew a mighty blast that was heard by the whales in the depth of the ocean. Whirlwinds formed on the horizon, moving ever faster toward the shore. Mahala's hair whipped about her arms.

Cari approached, riding a dolphin. Her eyes changed with the colors of the sea as clouds and storms disturbed the surface. Her hair, braided and twined with shells and pearls, was the color of foam touched by the dying rays of sunlight. Fronds of seaweed dripped from her shoulders and hips. She brought the crab, the salmon and the whale.

Mahala clutched the slippery rock till the eye of the storm engulfed her with its calmness. She looked up to see her Mother smiling.

"We wrought well, my sisters and I. Now, my child, I give you my final gift. The gift of human language. You will pass this gift on to all that follow. But do not abuse this gift. If you speak untrue, human will not be able to understand human. Language will twist, turn and take on many meanings. People will scatter and lose their knowledge of one another."

Cari threaded the conch shell onto a gold wire and placed it over Mahala's head. The shell shrank to the size of a walnut and nestled in the hollow between the girl's breasts sending a warm glow over her body.

"Thank you, Mother." Her human voice came out clear as crystal with an undertone of wind chimes. "You are most wise. Please tell me how am I to use this gift. I know only the animals of the Valley and now the animals of the sea."

Cari tilted Mahala's chin with a finger and looked into her eyes. "The dolphin must play and the salmon must return to its stream. What does your heart tell you, my child?"

"I need to find others of my kind. But where should I go? How will I find them?"

"You must go to my sister, Istas, the North Wind for her gift. My friend the Whale will take you to the icy shore. Then you must travel two days along the frozen river. You will do well my daughter. Keep your courage." Cari gathered up her breezes and whirled back out to sea, leaving the Great Blue Whale playing in the waves.

Mahala danced on the rock and sang a joyful song to her East Wind Mother. When the wind no longer carried the tune, Mahala called the Whale and leaped from the rock to the back of the Great Blue.

He swam north toward the icy shore. The Great Blue traveled through islands covered with seals and terns, around barren rocks, and passed coasts of great forest. He sang his songs to the other whales and told Mahala stories about the King Crab and his racing sea horses.

Finally he came to a land of ice and rainbow lights. The Great Blue swam close to the face of a frozen river. Mahala patted the whale and thanked him for the ride. He blew a shimmery spout from his blow hole.

She climbed the cliff of ice to the top, then started to run down the middle of the frozen river. She ran for two days till she came to the edge of a dark pine forest.

A great Silver-tipped Bear sat by an open hole in the ice of a small stream that fed the frozen river. As Mahala watched from behind a broad trunk, the bear reached into the stream and flipped out a trout. The fish flopped on the shore. Mahala's mouth watered. She hadn't eaten anything for days.

She crept through the edge of the forest, trying to keep a thin shelter of trees between her and the bear. When she got close enough to see the bear's sharp white teeth and long black claws, she shivered with more than the cold. Mahala finally emerged from the trees.

"Master Bear, would you share some of your fish?" Mahala asked in the language of the animals. The bear turned his head to look at the bedraggled girl. "Why should I feed you, Little One? I am large and this fish is small. I will go hungry if I feed you."

Mahala nodded her head. "You are right, Master Bear. That is a small fish. You will go hungry even if you do eat it. Share it with me and at least one of us will be satisfied."

A deep rumbling noise started in the bear's chest. Mahala stepped back, poised to run, when a loud laugh erupted from the bear's open mouth. He shook all over holding his huge stomach with his hairy arms. "You are a brave Little One to beg dinner of a hungry bear. Why are you here?"

"I'm here to find Istas, my North Wind Mother."

"Ah, so you're the One. Come closer, my child." The bear reached out with a claw and gently lifted the conch shell on its chain for a closer look. He exposed his sharp teeth in a grin. "If you can ride me for the time it takes for that shadow to cover this rock, I will know that you are a worthy daughter to Istas. Then I will give you the fish and tell you how to find your Mother."

Mahala measured the distance the shadow had to move as a hand's width. She was unsure if she could hold on that long but she had to ride the bear or continue the search for others like herself without the help of her Mothers.

"I accept, Master Bear." She leaped to the back of the Silver-tipped Bear and curled her fingers in his furry pelt. The bear reared, tossing his head to the sky.

Mahala held on.

He started to run, a fast rocky gait. He went faster and faster till the trees blurred by Mahala's face. Her fingers became numb, but she still held on.

At a towering deadfall, the bear leaped into the air and became a huge white eagle, screaming his challenge. Mahala clung to his back like a burr. He flew higher and higher, till Mahala's breath frosted her face and turned her black hair stiff in the wind.

She still held on.

Finally he looped upside down and dove for the bright spot in the forest where the rock was almost covered by the shadow. At the last minute he pulled out of the dive and settled next to the hole in

the stream. The eagle fanned his wings and turned into a swirl of ice crystals, dumping Mahala on her backside two breaths after the shadow covered the rock.

Laughter tinkled from the ice crystals. "The fish is yours, Little One. Strike the rocks together to call your Mother."

Mahala shaking from the ride, walked over to the fish and saw two stones lying beside it. One was gray, smooth and silky to the touch. The other had colored lights flashing from its depths. She picked up the rocks and struck them together. A spark streaked across the sky reaching to a rainbow of lights on the northern horizon.

A snow storm brewed and blotted out the lights shimmering in the north. Istas, Mahala's fierce North Wind Mother came out of the blizzard riding a Black She-wolf. Her hair was short and spiked with frost; her eyes the color of ice on the frozen river. Her breath bowed the trees and crowned earth's breasts with snow. She wore the skins of the wolverine and was followed by beasts who fed on the warm blood and bodies of their fellow creatures.

Mahala stood tall before her savage mother.

"We wrought well, my sisters and I," Istas said in the language of the humans. She nodded and a smile warmed her stark face.

"You have strength and courage, my Little One. Now you will have my final gift, the gift of fire. You and yours will forever be protected from the cold. Use the stones to create the warmth you need to cook your grains and warm your blood. This you will pass on to all who follow. But beware, fire is a dangerous friend. Tend it well or it will become your enemy and destroy all you hold dear."

"Thank you, Mother," Mahala bowed low, "you are most wise. But my friends the animals fear the fire. They run from the sky fire that blasts the trees. How will this gift help them?"

Istas put a frosty hand on Mahala's head. "The wolf must hunt and the bear must sleep in the winter. What does your heart tell you, my child?"

"I must seek others of my kind to share my gifts, but where will I find them?"

"Go to my sister, Chitsa, the South Wind. She will help you find them. My friend the Wolf will take you to the headwaters of the Father River. Travel down the river to the jungle. Be of good heart, my daughter."

The Black She-wolf stood as tall as Mahala's waist. Istas harnessed the great beast to a travois made of two willow poles and a moose hide. Mahala bowed to her Snow Mother, picked up the nearly forgotten fish, and sat down on the hide. The Wolf ran through the forest for four days. At night, Mahala built fires to keep warm and roast the nuts she found under the trees. But the Wolf slept beyond the light and shared no stories with her

On the evening of the fourth day, the Wolf stopped by a rushing stream and shrugged out of the harness. Mahala thanked the beast for her help. The Wolf nuzzled Mahala's face then faded into the forest.

Mahala traveled along the bank of the river feeling very much alone. Her Mothers were distant and the gifts they gave were of no use to the creatures of the valley, sea or forest. She was beginning to despair of ever meeting others like herself. Her pace slowed as she became more and more sad.

Mahala continued along a faint path winding its way among marshy hammocks. The air got heavy and the heat made her drowsy. Quiet surrounded her like a pool. Bird calls and monkey chatter stopped as she approached and started up again after she passed. High in a tree she heard a cat cough. She looked closely, but could not see the animal lying along a liana-draped branch.

By late afternoon, Mahala reached an open area dominated by the largest tree she had ever seen. She could hear rain sweeping through the branches, but it was dry under the tree. She dropped her travois and cried herself to sleep on the moose hide.

The jungle animals drew closer to watch the stranger. Rainbow-colored birds perched in the branches of the Mother Root Tree. A jewel-decorated snake twined about the trunk. Two spotted cats peered from the bushes surrounding the clearing.

A golden monkey with a white cap and black mask approached Mahala. It put out a paw and pulled a few loose black hairs from her head, then scampered back into the tree.

When Mahala woke the next morning, the animals were gone. She stretched, gathered her stones and started to look for water. She followed a path to the edge of a mighty river. She could barely see the far shore, shrouded in mist.

Mahala stepped quickly back into the jungle as she spied movement. She spread the ferns and looked more closely from behind her shelter. On the near shore another like herself rolled to his side in sleep. Mahala's heart leapt. His body was long with hair as glossy as hers and skin as ruddy. His sleeping face was turned toward her. His nose was noble as an eagle's beak and his chin was as strong as a wolf's jaw. Around his wrist, he wore a thin braid of black hair. Her heart raced and breath quickened with anticipation and fear.

Another movement caught her eye. From the river crawled a lizard, twice her size. It waddled its way toward the sleeping man, long open jaws showing sharp teeth. Mahala shouted, but the man did not wake and the lizard did not stop.

She drew her rocks and started a fire in some dead ferns along the path. Mahala picked up a flaming branch, ran at the lizard and thrust the torch at its eyes. The creature bellowed in pain and snapped at the branch, yanking it from her hand. The beast spotted its prey again and increased its speed to reach the sleeping man.

Mahala jumped on the lizard's back, wrapped an arm around its neck and pulled the head back till its snout pointed straight into the air. She tore the sharp conch shell from her neck and slashed the

creature across the throat. Blood fountained, staining the sandy shore. The beast bellowed a final time and died.

Mahala knelt on the torn soil and sang a prayer for the creature's spirit. Her heart was heavy. Her joy and fear at finding another human was tempered by the grief of the animal's death.

Tears rolled down her cheeks as she walked slowly up to the sleeping man. She stood over him and two tears dropped on his eyes. They opened. His eyes were a deep brown like the prairie earth with drops of sunshine sparkling in their depths. He reached out in wonder to stroke her leg. She took his hand and pulled him to his feet. He smiled and hugged her close.

"My name is Haron," he said in the language of the humans. "I thought there were no others like me in this world."

A warm feeling spread from the pit of Mahala's stomach, through her chest and to her face. She was not alone.

A gentle breeze wafted from the south bringing the scent of flowers. Chitsa, her gentle South Wind Mother appeared walking with bright-plumed birds perched on her shoulders and jeweled lizards twined about her limbs. A pair of spotted cats paced at her heels, a golden monkey scampered ahead.

Mahala stared at her South Wind Mother. Her hair was dark as the shadows under the rain forests. It curled like the many-hued flowers she used to adorn her body. Her skin was the color of the rich black earth. Long eyelashes sheltered doe-soft eyes. Mahala had never seen anything so beautiful.

Chitsa stopped beside the body of the giant lizard and passed her hand over the wounds. The beast dissolved into a fine mist and skirled out over the river. She walked to the woman and man.

"We wrought well, my sisters and I." Her warm smile brought an answering one to Mahala's face. "You have shown great courage to protect someone you do not know. You have shown respect and properly mourned the crocodile's death. For that, my child, I give you my final gift. The gift of love. This man shall be your mate. You will care for one another and all who follow after will share your body and blood."

She took the bracelet from the man's wrist, joined their hands and tied the braided hair around their thumbs.

"Stay true to one another or this gift will turn to bitter hatred. Sister will turn against sister. Brother will war against brother. Guard this gift well." Chitsa kissed both her children.

Mahala embraced her gentle Mother with a fierce hug. "Thank you, Mother, you are most wise. But where do we go now? What do we do?"

"The bird must sing and the snake must shed its skin. What does your heart tell you, my child?" Before Mahala could answer, Chitsa turned into a swirl of flower petals and gusted down the trail.

Mahala took her mate back to the Valley and taught him all her gifts. They lived happily planting and harvesting the fruits of the prairie. They cooked their grains and roots, made fire-hardened clay vessels to store their water, and kept warm when Istars blew in from the north. They made many children.

And those that came after? Ah, that is another story.

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*Author's note: One night, a long time ago, while sleeping in a strange room, I had a dream. Four tornados crossed a flat prairie. As they drew closer, the wide funnels slipped down and became four women in long dresses that billowed from their whirling forms. I woke with that image stuck in my head. The four Wind Mothers were born, but where did they come from and what was the world they inhabited? I immediately started writing my own creation myth, hopefully in a style and rhythm that sounds like a folk tale. "Daughter of the Winds" became one of my favorite stories, but was extremely difficult to place. I tried marketing it as a children's book, but the language was too advanced and the editors weren't looking for an original creation myth when every culture in the world had their own. All the traditional fantasy markets sent it back with "love the images and the writing, but..." It wasn't until the explosion of web magazines that I sold "Daughter." Thank you Song of the Siren, for giving my orphan story a home.*