

RATTLESNAKE RAIN

By Kimberley Griffiths Little

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Dawn was creeping across the sky when Amulon's father shook him awake. "Son, the day has come. It is time to run for the snakes."

Amulon shot up in bed, feeling as if a rattlesnake were tickling his stomach. Today he was going to be a true Snake Runner and help gather the snakes that would bring the summer rains from the Rain Gods.

While his mother baked corn cakes on the hearth over red-hot coals, Amulon hung up his sleeping mat. As he munched on a cake drizzled with honey, he couldn't stop thinking about the snakes that waited across the miles of empty desert. The runners had to find as many snakes as they could. More snakes meant more rain.

Amulon's father was a Snake Runner—one of the best runners in the village. It was in Amulon's blood to become one of the best runners, too.

After breakfast Amulon's father brought out two bundles. Inside each was a breechcloth made of deerskin. Yellow and black lines had been painted across the top and bottom of the soft leather. Across the middle wriggled a black-eyed snake. Pictures of thunderclouds and raindrops symbolized the rain the tribe needed if their crops were to grow in the hot, dry desert.

Amulon tied a leather breechcloth around his waist, then watched his father mix a special white paint in a bowl. Using a brush made from yucca leaves, Amulon's father painted bolts of lightning shooting down Amulon's legs and arms. The sharp-pointed leaves felt prickly on his skin, but he tried to stand patiently. Next his father drew jagged lightning bolts and a smattering of raindrops on his thighs. Finally, he painted Amulon's arms and hands white, then his chin and mouth, to show purity of heart.

"When it's time to hold the snakes in our arms, they'll know we are in harmony with the gods," his father said. "And if our hearts are pure, the poisonous snakes won't harm us."

A shiver of fear ran down Amulon's neck. Was his heart pure and courageous enough to prevent the snakes from sinking their fangs into him?

From the bundle of clothing, Amulon picked up several strings of seashells. Tying them to his wrists and ankles, he remembered the stories of faraway seas. He fastened a tortoise-shell rattle around his knee. It clattered like a rattlesnake's tail when he moved.

"I made this for you, son," his mother said, showing him a beautiful blue sash embroidered with black rain clouds, green frogs, and yellow snakes. She wrapped the cloth around Amulon's waist, tucking in the ends. His father stared at Amulon and nodded his approval.

Amulon's mother packed bread and dried deer meat into a sack because the runners wouldn't be back until nightfall. Last of all, Amulon tied a deerskin bag of water to his waist. He felt the weight of it, heavy and full, against his bare thigh.

"Now you are ready," his mother said, and she sprinkled sacred yellow cornmeal on his head and shoulders. The cornmeal blessed the day and brought good luck. A good corn harvest would fill their empty stores with food for the winter. Amulon's mother leaned close and whispered in his ear. "Run like the wind, my son—run with the gods."

Streaks of pink splashed the horizon as Amulon climbed down the steep cliff trail to join the rest of the runners on the desert floor. Running barefoot into the desert by his father's side, Amulon felt strong and powerful. He loved to run. His feet were so callused that he hardly felt the small stones and sharp-bladed grasses. As they passed the dry, wilting fields of corn and squash, Amulon knew the runners needed to catch more snakes than ever before. Never had the tribe needed rain more badly.

It wasn't until they had traveled far across the desert that Amulon's father finally stopped. The old Snake Runner knelt down and studied the ground of the wide, flat valley floor. Mountains rose in a silent circle around them. "This is a good place to look for snakes," he said.

Slithering tracks etched the sand. Amulon followed one that led to a hole in the dry earth. He raised his head to gaze across the desert and felt a tickle in his gut. There were snake holes everywhere!

Amulon squatted on the desert floor to wait and watch. Scrub brush rustled in the hot breeze as ants scurried over the rocks and shale. A lizard disappeared into the shade of a boulder. Under the blazing orange sun, sweat trickled down his face.

His father lifted a hand, and Amulon's heart jumped. The diamond-shaped head of a bullsnake poked up from one of the holes. Before Amulon could blink, his father reached forward and grabbed the snake behind its head.

"You got it!" Amulon cried.

His father stroked the snake with his fingers, calming it, then put the reptile into a leather sack. He placed a hand on Amulon's shoulder. "Now we'll find a snake for you."

Amulon crawled across the ground, silently following the snake tracks through the maze of holes. The sun scorched his skin. A faint breeze lifted the long sweaty hair from his neck. Once again, he sat and waited patiently. Suddenly, another snake popped up his head and slid out of its hole. Amulon's heart dropped. It was a rattlesnake!

The rattler was three feet long and had yellow and black markings. It zig-zagged across the shale like a bolt of lightning. Pausing, it lifted its tail and shook it rapidly. The soft rattle sounded hollow and eerie.

"Do not doubt your ability, my son," his father whispered. "It won't hurt you."

The rattlesnake raised its head as Amulon crept closer. Again, it shook its rattle in warning.

"You are a snake Runner," his father urged softly.

The black beady eyes of the serpent stared at Amulon. Its tongue darted out, testing the air, tasting him. Amulon thought he might faint with fear.

Before he could change his mind, Amulon grabbed the rattlesnake behind its mouth and scooped it up. As its long, smooth tail curled around his arm, Amulon stroked the snake gently with his stick of eagle feathers.

"Aiiiaahh!" he yelled in triumph.

A moment later Amulon heard a second "Aiiiaahh!" echoing across the desert. Another runner had caught a snake.

That night Amulon climbed down the ladder to the underground ceremonial chamber, the *kiva*. By the light of the fire, he could see the colorful murals that had been painted on the mud-brick walls of the circular room—pictures of the gods, and of animals, and of clouds and rain. Snake Runners filled the dimly lit room, but the most important creatures were the snakes coiled on the warm stone floor—dozens and dozens of bullsnakes, and garter snakes, and king snakes. Best of all, lots of rattlesnakes had been captured.

The medicine man nodded at Amulon. “You’re first snake—the powerful rattlesnake. The rattler knows whose heart is pure.”

Amulon couldn’t stop smiling as he fed his snake pinches of cornmeal. With the rest of the runners he sang soft chants to keep the snakes calm and happy, while drummers pounded a steady rhythm. At the end of the singing, Amulon placed the rattler into a clay pot he’d made especially for this night.

For four days the runners collected snakes—searching first to the north, then to the west, then south, and last of all, to the east. When snakes had been gathered from every direction, the snake dance ceremony took place.

Amulon dressed in his eagle-feathered headdress and ceremonial jewelry. His father painted lightning bolts on his legs for the last time. As Amulon walked across the village to the *kiva*, not a single rain cloud could be seen. The sky was a huge, empty, blue bowl. The sun shone too brightly. Surely the gods had not forgotten the tribe’s need for water.

After collecting his rattlesnake, Amulon lined up with the other runners in the village square. He felt the beat of the drummers vibrating in his bones, in his mind, and in his heart—a steady, pounding pulse. The snakes, which had been kept safe in the *kiva*, had been brought to a shelter made of cottonwood boughs, called a *kisi*, at the end of the square.

“The gods are in the earth,” the medicine man said. “Waiting, listening.”

Apprehension made sweat trickle down Amulon’s back. His throat was dry. Accompanied by the drums and chanting, the runners began to dance in a circle, stomping at the *kisi* to summon the gods. Four times they circled the *kisi*, and each time excitement grew as the crowd pressed forward. Young children clung to their

mother's skirts, watching with big, dark eyes. As Amulon lifted his feet and danced and whirled, his mother threw a shower of cornmeal over him, staining his arms yellow.

Now it was his turn to dance with his snake. Kneeling on the ground in front of the Kisi, Amulon spotted his yellow and black rattler. Uncoiling it from the mass of snakes, he picked it up and gently placed its smooth, muscular body into his mouth, while he held the snake's head and tail securely against his chest.

His heart thumped with fear, but the snake was so calm it was as if the animal knew him. The nights of songs and the feedings of sacred cornmeal had formed a bond between Amulon and the serpent that was almost magical. Amulon's father danced behind him, stroking the rattlesnake with eagle feathers to keep it calm.

A surge of pride rose in Amulon's heart as he followed in the footsteps of his ancestors. Since the beginning of time, Snake Runners had gathered snakes in memory of the feathered serpent god who had once visited the clan. Snakes symbolized lightning with their zigzag motion, but they also symbolized immortality, for each time they shed their skin, they seemed to take on a new life.

Once all the snakes had been danced around the village, the runners gathered for the last time. Protected by the circle of runners, the snakes wriggled and squirmed on a bed of cornmeal. Amulon's chest swelled as he looked at the group of men around him, their bodies decorated like his own. He was part of them now.

The Snake Priest said the final prayer and sprinkled the last of the sacred cornmeal. At the conclusion of his words, the Snake Clan runners whooped and shouted at the top of their lungs. Amulon rushed forward with the rest of the runners to scoop up his rattler.

People cheered as they raced through the village streets. Amulon joyfully held his snake aloft. He followed his father down the cliff trail. The runners again set off in all four directions, back into the desert to release the snakes who would take the message of rain to the underworld of the Rain Gods.

Amulon reached the maze of snake holes as the sun lowered in the distant sky. He released his rattle snake and watched it slither back to its underground home. For a moment he was touched by sadness. Would he ever see the rattlesnake again?

Looking up, Amulon saw his father smiling at him. “Come, my son, let’s return home to eat the feast your mother has prepared.”

Thoughts crowded Amulon’s mind. The lightning bolts on his arms seemed to pulse as if they’d come alive. Running beside his father, he swore he could feel the presence of ancient clansmen—the long line of runners that stretched back through time—running with them.

It was sunset, the hour of blue twilight. On top of the cliff, lights flickered from the village. Dozens of bonfires burned along the path to light the way home.

As Amulon climbed the steep walls of the cliff, a fierce blast of wind blew across the desert. Goose bumps prickled his arms and a surge of joy filled his chest. When he reached the top, he gazed up at the darkened heavens.

The sky boiled with thick, black rain clouds. A tremendous clap of thunder shook the air. Jagged bolts of lightning flashed.

As he raced down the streets for home, Amulon let out a whooping cry, “Aiiiaahh! The storm is here!”

The snakes had spoken to the gods. And the gods had listened.

Now the Rain Gods returned their own message, sending gusts of wind and booming thunder.

And that’s when the rain came.

Buckets and buckets of warm, beautiful rattlesnake rain.

Author’s Note

The village built on top of the 400-foot cliff described in this story, called Acoma Pueblo, actually exists and is located in New Mexico. “Pueblo” means “village” in Spanish, and this was how the sixteenth-century Spanish explorers and conquistadors described the way southwestern tribes dwelled in clusters of mud-brick homes, in contrast to the tent-dwelling people of the plains. The Acoma tribe nicknamed their village “Sky City” because it sits so high in the air.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, anthropologists studied the pueblo tribes and wrote detailed accounts of their culture and traditions. They provided the first

written records of the Snake Clan and the runners who gathered the snakes to bring rain.

The last Snake Clan ceremonies were recorded and photographed in the early 1900s. Since then the ceremonies have been closed to the general public and remain a mystery to this day.

Hundreds of years ago wars were fought between the conquistadors and the native tribes. Villages were burned, and their inhabitants enslaved. Many clans began to die out, including the Snake Clan. The last member of the Snake Clan at Acoma Pueblo died in the 1920s. It is believed that the only tribe with a Snake Clan still in existence is the Hopi in northeastern Arizona.