

Book 7: The Sacred Mountain

A Fan-Fiction Novel by Andy Black



The characters and theme of this FanFic novel belong to Jean Auel and it is not my intention to profit in any way from this work. Like many FanFic authors, I fell in love with the characters that Jean developed in her Earth's Children series, so I tried my hand at writing a 7th book.

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Forward:

I have tried to remain faithful to Jean Auel's original story concept; so you will encounter sex and violence, but somewhat less than in the original series of books. I felt that if I wanted to continue the story in a recognizable form I couldn't ignore what had come before or change the writing style beyond eliminating some repetition.

As you read this book - if you're familiar with the original storyline - you will notice that I have eliminated the overlong travelogues as well as the repeated use of the Mother's Prayer other than a few parts of it when it became essential to the story. The only other obvious change was that I reduced the title of; "The First among Those Who Serve the Great Earth Mother" to "First Zelandoni" since it has to be used so many times during the story and the longer title had always been a bit clunky in my opinion.

"The Sacred Mountain" is a book I have written in an effort to continue the storyline in the 'Earths Children' series. This book is set ten years in the future beyond the end of Jean Auel's sixth book. In my novel, I explore some of the issues brought up but not resolved in the original series of books and supply some answers to lingering questions.

Writing this novel was a year-long effort (mostly done on Saturdays and Sundays) and would not have happened if it weren't for ecfans.com, a forum for fans of the series and a place I went to in my disappointment with book six in the series. I received inspiration there to try my hand at writing a seventh book, which I have done.

I am grateful to my wife Carole and my brother Charles for their early readings and help with my story. Also my thanks to 'Attila', a Hungarian physician and a fan of the Earth's Children series, for correcting my inaccuracies.

Finally, I would like to gratefully acknowledge the editing and proofreading done in 2016 by Tom Masters, aka 'Tombones', also an EC fan. He proves the old adage that 'a book is only as good as its editor'. Tom volunteered his talents in editing the written word and my book has benefited greatly from his gracious gift. Thank you Tom.



'The Sacred Mountain' by Andy Black

Map by Tom Masters

Chapter 1: Death

Rubio crouched at the edge of the forest, waiting. He'd been there most of the day and now the sun was low on the horizon. He nervously shifted his position and wondered for the hundredth time when the Doniers would arrive.

At eleven summers, Rubio was old enough to be trusted with tasks of responsibility and this was an important one. As a member of Two Wolf Lodge, a summer place where his people from Old Valley Cave stayed when maintaining the sacred gathering place, he knew what his responsibilities were.

The sacred place his people maintained was situated at the highest point in the eastern hills and was recognized by the Zelandonii people as the Mother's Sacred Mountain. What made this tallest mountain special was what it held within. Hidden near the summit, facing away from the valley below, was a cave. This cave was considered one of the entrances into Mother Earth, but even more importantly, it was where important matters of the Spirit World were dealt with by their spiritual leaders. Deep within the cave proper was The Mother's Heart, the innermost sanctum of The Earth Mother. The Zelandonia called it 'Revelation Chamber'. Only Zelandonia and Acolytes could enter.

As son of the leader of Old Valley Cave, Rubio had been assigned as one of the three children to alert the elders who were maintaining the sacred site and laying in supplies in preparation for the Doniers arrival.

Two Wolf Lodge had been responsible for the care and maintenance of the sacred cave for as long as anyone could remember. The Sacred Cave was the ceremonial gathering place for the spiritual leaders of the Zelandonii people, and had been, for so long, that no one knew when they had first started to use it.

As he thought about these things, Rubio began to realize why the sacred place was so important to his people, why his Cave had taken such efforts to keep everything repaired and ready for use. This would be the place where the Zelandonia from all the Caves came to choose a new spiritual leader from among themselves. The old Zelandoni Who Was First had always been there, as far as Rubio was concerned, and when she died - making all this necessary - it made him realize that what he had always thought of as permanent, wasn't. That was a scary thought.

He'd heard that when his father was a young man there had been a Donier gathering to choose the First Zelandoni. It was her ashes that were now being carried back to be placed with those who had been First before her.

Rubio knew that the coming event would be one of the most important in his life. The people were without a spiritual leader and that was very unlucky. The one who had been First among the Zelandonia, and now walked the spirit world, had been dead for more than a full moon. That death, Rubio reflected, was why they were waiting for the bonfire beacon on the far side of the valley to be lit, showing that the Donier procession had reached that point. That would be his signal to run as fast as he could to alert the elders who were working on the mountain.

It suddenly came to the boy that this was what all the work was for. Important decisions and ceremonies would take place here that would affect all of them and he felt a flush of pride that the people of his cave were the ones who kept the sacred cave ready for important ceremonies such as this.

Everybody knew that there were troubles in the north and that conflict was on the rise. Rubio had heard the stories from traders visiting the valley. Since the First Zelandoni had become ill, things hadn't gone well for peace in the north, a peace that had always been present in the region before this time. But now big things were happening. All the Doniers from both the north and south holdings were journeying to Old Valley and Sacred Mountain to sanctify the ashes of their dead leader and to elect a new one.

Rubio shivered with excitement. He would be at the center of it all. Since he had not yet passed his eleventh summer, he was young enough to serve those spiritual leaders who would attend. There were eight children from Two Wolf Lodge that would serve because they knew the area and had been carefully trained in the necessary traditions as Donier Helpers. It was important that they had not reached puberty; as a mature person who was not Zelandoni would pollute the ceremonies with their untrained adult passions.

Rubio felt important, but he also felt the heavy responsibility of his position as leader of the Donier Helpers. He led the helpers while the Zelandoni were in meetings or performing ceremonies.

The boy shaded his eyes from the orange-red glare of the western sun as it touched the horizon. Was that smoke he saw? He perked up and stood, straining his eyes. He

couldn't be sure, but he knew as dusk fell that if it was a bonfire beacon on the other side of the valley, he would be able to see the flame as the sky grew darker.

Seeing the signal this late in the day would mean that the Donier procession would halt overnight and enter the sacred site the next day. He knew that this would be the best possible outcome. It would give Two Wolf Lodge one more evening to put everything in order and to leave the area at a convenient time for everyone.

-O-

As day turned into purple dusk, then finally into night, Rubio watched as a flicker of light sprang to life in the distance. He stood on his toes, straining to see across the valley, he wasn't sure if it was the bonfire beacon or not. He'd never actually seen a bonfire beacon before, at least not from this distance. He thought it must be one though. But what if some hunters were passing the head of the valley and had made a campfire?

The flame flared up brightly as if extra fuel had been added. It was now a large fire, bigger than anyone would make for a camp. Rubio immediately turned on his heel and began to race to his father and the elders.

They were coming! The Zelandonia were bringing their First Zelandoni's remains to help guide her spirit to the Spirit World. It was more than exciting now; it was frightening to have all those who dealt with spirits so close, soon to be among them for days and days. It was too much to think about so Rubio just concentrated on his footing as he ran. This was no time to trip and hurt himself when an event this important was on their doorstep.

-O-

Ayla was bone-weary as she slid from Summer Child's back. Her horse stood connected to an A-frame travois that had been colored red with sacred dyes. The group of Zelandonia and their Acolytes were stopping a little late in the day but they had all agreed to make it far enough that day so they could enter the sacred site the next morning and have most of the day to set up camp and rest in preparation for the difficult days to come.

Ayla loosened the straps of the travois to free her horse from its weight. The warm proximity of the animal made her reflect upon her past horse friends, those who she still missed so much. They had lived long and happy lives and she would always

remember them with fond feelings and regret for their loss. At one time her Whinney had been the only friend and companion she'd had to fill the gaping loneliness in her life. Whinney gave her two daughters, Gray and Summer Child and one son, Racer. Whinney now walked the Spirit World with Racer, her first and only son.

Thinking these sad thoughts, she looked down at the bundle loaded on the travois. All that was left of her teacher and friend were ashes in a jar of fired stone, now wrapped in a rawhide covering dyed red. Ayla meditated on her losses: Creb and Iza, her horses Whinney and Racer then Jondalar's mother, Marthona. Now her loss of First Zelandoni. Should she count Durc? She just didn't know...

It had been a difficult time for everyone as the First Zelandoni became ill and over time had wasted away. The first sign of her illness had been a rapid loss of weight. The people of the Ninth Cave had noticed the change in the First Zelandoni, but it was little commented on, after all, it was spring and many members of the cave lost some weight during the lean full moons of winter when fatty foods became scarce. But Ayla's instincts had told her that there was something more. Soon she was plying the First Zelandoni with her herbal medicines, using her prodigious knowledge of the healing arts.

The First Zelandoni had known she was ill, she had seen the same symptoms in others; people who she had nursed and she knew what the outcome of her illness would be. She allowed her colleague to ply her with medicines and as an accomplished healer herself, she used the opportunity to test her body's reaction to the younger woman's cures and to share her observations as any healer might under the same circumstances.

As the illness progressed, the First Zelandoni began to discuss the future with Ayla, trying to convince her to ready herself for the challenges that would come. Almost from the very beginning of her illness she had tried to convince the younger Donier that the important issue at hand, wasn't her health, but that Ayla should be ready for the challenges that would face the people after she was gone. "Times are becoming difficult and you are the answer, I'm sure of it." It was a refrain that Ayla would hear again and again, even from the First Zelandoni's deathbed.

Ayla hadn't wanted to hear that unrest in the north between the Clan and her adopted Zelandonii was becoming a problem. There had been reports of deaths on both sides. The First Zelandoni should have been the one to investigate the trouble and to work out a solution, but as she had become weaker, the journey was put off;

full moon after full moon had passed. It was finally decided that she would travel north in the summer, only by then she was too weak to make the journey.

The trouble was real, Ayla knew that. Even when she tried to ignore the implication, and constant pressure coming from her friend and leader, Ayla knew deep down inside that she must accept a more direct role in events. She had found that now, after the last time she used the Sacred Clan root, she could enter the Spirit World by drinking a mild absinthe tea. She now called it her Dreaming Tea as the tea often took her on 'Dream Journeys'.

These 'Dream Journeys' seemed to show her images of future events. At first she didn't know what the images meant, but when something would happen later that she had dreamed about, she understood that her dream image had predicted the event.

In the beginning, almost ten summers before, the First Zelandoni had tried to follow Ayla on a trance journey and had taken the Clan root too, but beyond a mild stimulation and heightened awareness, the effects on the older woman were unremarkable. Finally she had realized that this was a unique condition that only her young colleague could experience to its fullest, so she encouraged the younger woman to continue the practice and share the dream images with her.

Over the past winter Ayla had seen more and more violence in her Dream Tea-induced dreams. The images indicated that if nothing was done, more lives would be lost and the violence would escalate. She knew the truth of it, but knowing the truth didn't make her feel confident in her ability to convince the other Doniers that she should serve her people as the First Zelandoni.

"Mother?" Ayla looked up to see her daughter, Jonayla, dismounting her horse with a look of concern as she hurried to her mother's side. "Mother, are you all right? I know you're sad, but lately it seems that your mind has been in the Spirit World and not with us. I wish you had let Wolf come with us, you know how he always lifts your spirits."

"Sweetheart, you know that Wolf is just too old to make a journey of several days, it would be very hard on him. He was born more than eighteen summers ago, that's quite an exceptional age for a wolf. Besides, Jondalar and your brother need Wolf to look after them while we're gone, don't you think."

"I know all that, but I still miss him. I also know if he were here, he would make you happier," said Jonayla, who was Acolyte of the Zelandoni of the Ninth Cave and Ayla's self-assured daughter. "There would be no prohibition against it, like there is for my brother or for father. Wolf is almost considered Zelandoni."

"I have a lot on my mind just now Jonayla," Ayla said, to change the subject. "I'm not sure how I can live up to the First Zelandoni's expectations of me. I don't even see how I can convince the others that I should be their leader. I wasn't born to the Zelandonii people and that will be a big impediment that I can't really see a way around. I want to do what First Zelandoni urged me to do, I just worry." She smiled at her sixteen-year-old daughter, to soften her words. No reason to frighten Jonayla more than she already had.

"Mother, you know that you can do anything you put your mind to. Isn't that what Durcan and I have heard from the day we were born? I have complete confidence in you, I know you'll come up with a way to make the others see what's needed and I'm not just saying that because you're my mother, I'm saying it because I know it's the truth."

Ayla hugged her earnest young daughter. What was she worrying about? Jonayla was as fierce an advocate as anyone in the Donier procession. She didn't have to worry about frightening her or making her feel insecure. Ayla felt a little ashamed; she didn't need to worry about letting her deceased mentor down. The only thing she needed to worry about was not letting her people down. She would find a way.

"You're right of course," Ayla said. "I'm going to finish unhitching the travois and give Summer Child a rubdown; you should do the same for Gray. Then we can organize some food."

"Not necessary, the Donier of Third Cave at Two Rivers has taken charge of that task. Look." Jonayla pointed to the group of people in the clearing, all Doniers and Acolytes. Several Acolytes were bringing stones to form a hearth circle and several others were foraging for firewood while the Donier of the Third Cave oversaw the effort. It was a very domestic scene and it surprised Ayla at first. Domesticity wasn't something she was used to when it came to her fellow spiritual leaders; although since the First Zelandoni's passing her fellow Doniers had been quite subdued and had tried to be helpful to each other.

-O-

Now as the sole Donier of the Ninth Cave, Ayla was responsible for planning the procession to Sacred Mountain, situated at the eastern edge of Old Valley. She had been surprised when she had received runners from all the close caves that their Doniers wanted to join her. As this procession was the sole concern of the Zelandoni, and since the First Zelandoni had been their leader too, they felt they should join in and help. And besides, they said, there would be meetings to choose a new leader in a few days and the passing spirit ceremony anyway, so why not travel together.

The journey had started at dawn three days before. A trip that would normally be completed overnight on horseback was slowed by necessity. Travois slowed the horses and although the Doniers from Two Rivers, Little Valley and River Place had joined the procession from the start, other Doniers had traveled west and south to meet them on the trail so that as many of them as could, would arrive together. These meetings on the trail had slowed the procession further but had built solidarity of purpose.

Other Caves to the far north and far south were to meet them within a hand of time. Runners had been sent from Elder Hearth to all the outlying caves - as was their responsibility when an important meeting of the Zelandonia was to take place. It had always been tradition that Elder Hearth should send runners to inform the people of any meeting held on Sacred Mountain. When it came to guiding a First Zelandoni's spirit to the Spirit World and choosing a new First, the runners were especially important.

Ayla noticed that the procession had not run across any fresh human tracks to indicate that any group of people had traveled the river trail recently, so she was pretty sure that they would be the first group to reach Old Valley from the southern route. Ayla was especially relieved that there was no indication of other travelers; she wanted to arrive before the others if possible. She wasn't looking forward to the confrontations that would be sure to arise as she made her claim to the position of First Zelandoni; being first to arrive, would give her a small advantage.

Ayla was finishing up Summer Child's curry as the aroma of meat grilling on the cooking fire reached her. She'd been fasting all day and the enticing aromas made her mouth water. Over the next few days she would not eat much and knew that she shouldn't miss a meal now if she wanted to be in shape for the approaching rigors.

"Donier of the Ninth, sit here beside me," the Zelandoni of the Third Cave called as Ayla was packing the grooming implements away in her carry basket. As she found a place beside the elderly man she was handed a bone platter with succulent pieces of Roe Deer cut into chunks cooked with greens and a baked tuber.

"Thank you Zelandoni, the food you have prepared looks very tasty, we're all grateful to you for taking charge of setting up the campsite. Lately I seem to forget that I'm hungry until I smell food cooking," Ayla said, grateful for the food.

"I know," said the old man. "I think you should take better care of yourself, you have so much to do at the gathering. I'm counting on you to convince the others that you're the right choice for our new First Zelandoni. It's so important that we have a resourceful leader in these times. And if you don't eat and pay attention to your health you won't be strong enough to endure all the arguing and bickering that will go on at the gathering."

Ayla looked into the eyes of the man sitting next to her, "Why are you supporting me?" she asked. "You could just as easily be a candidate yourself. Why not you? I wasn't even born to the Zelandonii people."

"I'm too old; I don't have the stamina, or the desire for it. Besides, you're the right choice. I know that the Donier of Horsehead Rock as well as Elder Hearth have put themselves forward, but you're the obvious choice. You know the Clan better than anyone else, while at the same time, you're one of us. Who better to lead us? Who better to sort out this trouble in the north between the Clan and our Zelandonii brethren? I don't like the violence and I want it to stop."

Ayla noticed that the Third used the term Clan, rather than the more derogatory "flathead" when describing the people in the north. "I thank you Zelandoni," she said, meaning it. "I just hope you're right. I can't help but feel hesitant; it's all a bit overwhelming to me."

"Well, I suggest you keep that thought to yourself, it won't do to let the other Doniers know that you're not sure of your calling to lead us."

"I understand what you're saying, but I also believe that anyone who is so sure of their abilities that they have no doubts, might be more dangerous to the peace and well-being of the Zelandonii people, than someone willing to admit they don't have all the answers."

"See, that's why I'm behind you," said the Zelandoni of the Third Cave. "You have always talked sense and you've never pretended to be something more than you are. And frankly, who you are is pretty impressive. How old are you now Zelandoni?"

"I count thirty-six summers, I believe. And I will try to be circumspect with my innermost feelings around the others, but I would like to consider you a friend and advisor that I can trust and confide in. I know that if I am chosen I will have to make decisions and do things that I haven't had to do before and it would be very helpful to have someone to talk to."

"You can count on me for as long as I'm able. I've lived almost sixty summers now and I don't expect to go on forever, but I'll help you any way I can, especially through this," the Third offered.

"I'm glad," Ayla smiled at the old man. "I feel that we have been friends for a long time now. Even when I first arrived with Jondalar as a stranger, you were kind to me and you've been a great help to me since the First Zelandoni died. I very much appreciate your help, I think your sixty summers of experience are just what I need now." Ayla was sincere in this.

The elderly Zelandoni of the Third Cave had helped Ayla with the cremation, as was required by tradition when a First Zelandoni passed to the Spirit World. It had been done this way for as long as anyone could remember. Since the ceremonies for the passing of a First Zelandoni took more than a full moon phase, cremation was the only practical way to handle the remains. Also, those who were First among the Zelandonia were not actually buried like everyone else, but rested for all time in a special place of veneration, adding their accumulated power to the sacred Zelandonia gathering area.

"You know, I still remember when you first talked me into riding that horse of yours. And when you gave me a colt to train," the Third said, with a smile of remembrance. "It's hard to believe that little more than fifteen summers ago no one even knew horses could be trained or ridden. That reason alone should be enough to make you our new First Zelandoni. You have brought more to the Zelandonii people than anyone I can think of in my sixty summers on this earth. I mean this from my heart," said the Third.

At that moment Jonayla walked over. "May I sit with you, or are you talking about something private?" She asked her mother.

"Certainly daughter, sit." Ayla gestured Jonayla to sit beside her. "Jonayla, I'm glad you decided to become an Acolyte. It's good to have you with me now and it would not have been possible if you hadn't made that decision. That's what the Donier of the Third Cave and I were just discussing. Support; something I will need now more than ever."

Jonayla looked at the Donier of the Third Cave questioningly. "Yes, young Acolyte, I will support your mother. And further, I will support her vocally with the others. I can't imagine what would happen to the Zelandonii if we didn't make this wise woman the leader of the spiritual aspect of our lives. Bless her, but the First Zelandoni was ill for too long. Things have gone wrong in that time, things that should have been attended to. I think your mother is the only one with the wisdom and ability to put things right. With her guidance, everything will be resolved for the best."

The Donier of the Third Cave turned to Ayla, "I just hope we don't have too many candidates from the southern caves. I don't know what they will do. They might form a conclave of all six southern caves to support their own candidate. I think they were satisfied with our past spiritual leader, but I also think they would be happy to have someone from their area as First Zelandoni for a change."

"Well," Ayla said. "If that happens and they succeed, who's to say that it isn't for the best. All I can say is that I'll do my best to convince our fellow Doniers that I feel the calling to be the one to represent them. Even if I don't become First Zelandoni, maybe I can influence the person who does."

The Donier of the Third Cave again turned to Ayla, "No matter what happens, I think you should be the one to mediate between the Clan and the affected caves in the north." Having said that, the Third suggested that they turn in for the night.

Jonayla bedded down next to her mother, fervently wishing that she could do more to help, but as a new Acolyte, all she really could do was to offer loving support to her mother. To Jonayla, her mother was all that was good and strong and just in a person. There had never been a time in her life that she hadn't worshiped her mother for the exceptional human being that she was.

Chapter 2: Arrival

It had been a very busy morning for the Donier helpers. They needed to complete all the final tasks before the Zelandonia were to arrive. Rubio had been stacking firewood for more than an hour when his father instructed him to bathe and make himself ready. It was time for the adults of Two Wolf Lodge to leave. Only the children would remain behind to serve the Doniers.

Rubio watched as the adults mounted their horses to begin the trek back up Old Valley and toward their home. The boy walked to the stream and removed his one piece tunic. Standing naked in the stream, he shivered, not so much from the cold water trickling down his chest and legs, but from anticipation - and some fear – because those who were approaching would be powerful beings who spoke to the Spirits. He'd never met any of the Zelandonia personally before. He had seen them at Summer Meetings and he knew who the Zelandoni of his cave was, but had never had occasion to interact. Now to spend time in the presence of the entire Zelandonia was a bit intimidating.

As the adult members of the boy's Lodge disappeared around a rock outcropping in the distance, Rubio heard a shout of warning from Jamicon, another boy who had been assigned to announce the processions arrival. Rubio quickly dried himself and donned his ceremonial garb, a knee length tunic made from softened deer skin. It had no sleeves, only knotted rawhide tassels around the upper parts of the arm openings and the Sacred Mountain sign of three triangles painted with red ochre on the chest of the garment. All of the children wore the same garb.

Excitedly, Rubio ran to the outdoor fire surround and stood rigidly in front of the line of waiting children. He was the leader of the eight children who would serve the Doniers and their Acolytes during their stay. They were four boys, counting himself and four girls, all were eleven summers or younger as prescribed by tradition. They had been trained to aid in the coming rituals. It was an honor to be chosen to serve, but at that moment he felt only nervous fear.

The boy's eyes widened as the first horse and rider came into view on the trail below. It was the Donier they had all seen and knew about, the blonde woman who had brought the understanding and control of horses to the people, the one who commanded a wolf to do her bidding. Rubio had seen her before, but never in a situation where he would have to interact with her. He watched as another and then

another mounted Donier appeared. The children did not move as they observed the approaching Zelandonia procession. This was an important event and they wanted to remember everything about it so they would be able to tell their own children one day.

The Donier of the Ninth Cave trailed a travois painted with red ocher. The Zelandoni's Acolyte rode beside her. 'Mother and daughter,' Rubio thought, 'they look so much alike, one younger than the other but both sat strong and proud upon their horses.' They both had their blonde hair held from their faces by a leather throng around the forehead and they both shone with confidence as if it were second nature to them to lead others.

All the Doniers had streaks of stark white paint on their faces. Rubio knew that it was a mixture of chalk and bear fat smeared on their skin because he had made some of the mixture for the coming meetings. It was a sign of mourning and for Zelandonia to wear at funerals as a sign of respect for the departed. But it was still frightening to see. It seemed that the forests had gone silent as the procession neared the circle of stones. It was eerie.

As the column of Zelandonia and their Acolytes came into the surrounding area, the Zelandoni of the Ninth Cave directed her horse toward the children. Rubio had the urge to turn and run, but he held his position; his heart pounded in his chest. The blonde Donier came to a halt before them and slid effortlessly down from her horse as if she were lighter than the air itself. "Greetings young ones. Who is the leader among you?"

Rubio noticed that the Donier was looking at no one but him. He managed to croak, "I-I... am, Zelandoni." He never had to speak to a strange Zelandoni before and he wasn't sure what to do. This Zelandoni was well known even to those who had never met her. He looked up into gray-blue eyes, and then noticed the Donier mark on the left side of her forehead. It could be seen through the white streaks. It was simple compared to many, just a three sided square with the top left off and four diagonal lines slanting to the left, filling the open box. Everyone knew that those lines indicated her Clan totem - a Cave Lion claw mark which, he had been told, she had on her left thigh from a real cave lion attack.

After a long moment of silence the Donier spoke again. "And who are you young man?" She looked so tall and threatening to the boy.

"My name is Rubio, Zelandoni. I'm from Two Wolf Lodge of Old Valley Cave, son of Ramacol, leader of Two Wolf Lodge, brother to Kemordan who was leader before him." Then he quickly introduced the other children with proper ceremony as he had learned to do. He didn't want to shame his people and would try to contain his fear of these spirit talkers.

After the boy had introduced everyone, the tall blonde Donier of the Ninth Cave, reached out and took his hands in hers, "Greetings Rubio from Two Wolf Lodge of Old Valley Cave, son of Ramacol, leader of Two Wolf Lodge, brother to Kemordan, who was leader before him." Then she added, "...and leader of the Donier Helpers in his own right." Wide-eyed, the boy stared up at her; he had never had anyone add that last part to his kinship-ties and titles before. It made him feel proud, and grateful to this powerful Donier.

Then the blonde Donier looked up and surveyed the other children and in their turn, took each child's hands in greeting and recited their names and kinship-ties without making a mistake. Rubio stood, looking up at the beautiful woman, so golden, so overpowering, as she continued through the greeting ceremony as though she knew each of them personally.

Finally, the Zelandoni let go of the last child's hands and stepped back. Rubio realized that during the entire time, not one of the others with this Zelandoni had uttered a word or, it seemed, had made a noise of any kind. A moment later the children jumped in surprise as a loud drum began to beat a slow somber tattoo, a beat of mourning.

"Don't be alarmed children," the blonde Zelandoni said. "That is the Spirit Drum and it will be with us until the next day is done. You're familiar with the ceremony, aren't you?"

"Y-yes Zelandoni, it just startled me," Rubio said, embarrassed, not knowing that all the children standing behind him had jumped too, as surprised as he had been.

"Rubio, please take me to the Zelandoni Stone. I need to place The One Who Was First Zelandoni in her Spirit Place. Would you do that for me?"

Rubio had been listening to the Donier's voice, it sounded so strange, so unlike what he was used to. This must be what an 'other-worldly voice' sounded like. When you became so spiritual, you even talked differently than normal people. He looked up into the tall Donier's eyes and saw kindness and sadness in them and he instantly

wanted to do whatever he could for this spiritual leader. "Yes, Zelandoni, follow me and I will show you."

He watched as the blonde Donier stepped up to the travois and untied a large stoneware urn from the shelf that it sat on and lifted the obviously heavy object then turned to follow the boy. They walked past the Ceremonial opening to the Sacred Cave - the place that held Revelation Chamber deep inside its precincts. The young boy led the way past the cave entrance and along a short path to a natural terrace, the place where the Zelandoni Stone stood.

Ayla looked at the cave entrance with appreciation as they passed; it was obviously ancient and aesthetically pleasing to look at. The cave opening was broad, so wide that ten people could walk side by side through the opening. At some time in the distant past someone had chiseled Zelandoni symbols into the living rock around the cave opening. The rock had first been chiseled and smoothed for about two hand's width and then designs had been added. She had never seen anything quite like it before.

Rubio now stopped and then stepped aside, "This is the Zelandoni Stone. The urn goes there," he gestured to a flat topped pillar about 3 feet tall. It looked as though it had been carved into the cylindrical shape. Ayla noticed small pieces of debris, little chips and coarse dust in faded red colors on top of the stone and all around the base. She knew that those small bits were the remains of past Zelandoni burial ceremonies that stretched so far back in time that no one could say how long it had been.

She stepped forward and reverently placed the last remains of The One Who Was First Zelandoni squarely in the center of the stone pillar, then stood back and bowed her head in sad reflection as the Spirit Drum continued its slow somber beat in the background.

After quite some time, the boy becoming a bit restive from standing there silently watching the Donier, Ayla looked up into the sky, then down at the pillar. "I hope the people will accept what is to come, I hope that my life is enough to offer them and that I can give what is needed." She spoke as if she were talking to the urn or maybe The Earth Mother Herself, and Rubio wondered what she meant by it.

Then suddenly the Zelandoni turned to him with a sense of purpose in her voice, "Rubio, would you please help us get things organized? We expect the other Zelandoni from the north and south to arrive over the next two days and I would like

to rely on you to make everyone comfortable." Before he could answer, another voice was heard behind them.

"Zelandoni who is candidate, would you walk with me please?" Both the child and the blonde Zelandoni turned at the summons.

"Zelandoni of the Third Cave, have you met the Leader of the Donier Helpers?" Ayla said. She took the time to offer the boy a formal greeting to the Third Cave's Zelandoni. The old man, realizing the Ninth's intent, also took the time to greet the boy as befitted the leader of the children helpers. After the greeting was completed the boy hurried away to check that the fire had been started and that the food would be ready at hand when it was time to prepare the midday meal.

The two Doniers stood by the pillar in conference, it was obvious to everyone else that they did not want to be disturbed and the work of setting up camp went on quietly around them.

"It appears that we are the first to arrive, this is good, it couldn't be better if we had planned it," the Third commented.

Ayla looked at the older Donier and smiled, "It was planned, Donier of the Third Cave, that's why I didn't wait a day beyond the prescribed time to make the trek. I promised the First Zelandoni to do my best and I believed that being here first would place me in a position of advantage. I'm glad that you agree."

"Yes, I'm also glad that you saw that. What comes next will require all of your skills and hopefully the support of those who can see beyond their own ambitions," the Donier of the Third Cave responded.

Ayla thought for a moment, "I think ambition is a good thing, it makes one strive to become better, to be recognized, but in this case I agree with you, it is not about the individual, but the whole community we must think about for the foreseeable future."

"Donier!"

The two Doniers turned to see the First Acolyte of Elder Hearth hurrying toward them.

"Greetings Zelandoni of the Third Cave and Zelandoni of the Ninth Cave, my Zelandoni isn't far behind me; I was instructed to arrive ahead of our group to lay out a place of rest and reflection for my Zelandoni. We didn't want to be late to the gathering."

"No, you're right on time, we will probably have several more days to wait until the others arrive, especially from the far south," the Third responded, shooting a knowing glance at his colleague as if to say, 'see what I mean'.

-O-

It actually took four more days for all the groups from all the caves, including the six caves from south of Big River to arrive. As the Third had suspected, the southern caves had formed an alliance, putting forth their first Donier as a candidate.

It was unfortunate that Jonokol, who was Zelandoni of the Sacred White Cave near the Nineteenth Cave, was unwilling or unable to come. He would have been an ally, but his obsession with the Sacred White Cave was well known. He was so tied to his work that another Zelandoni had been assigned to serve the people of the Nineteenth Cave to free him to concentrate solely on his calling, though it was still a surprise when his fellow Zelandoni made a brief apology for his absence at the council. All of the other Zelandonia well enough to travel from the entire region, were now gathered in one place.

More than ever before, there was concern for the future and all the individual Doniers had their own agenda and alliances to put forward. The collective Zelandonia were able to contain their impatience and wait through the funeral ceremonies as well as the meditative Spirit Search and the sanctification of their past First Zelandoni's ashes before discussions about the future would take place.

After years of experience in dealing with people and thorny issues, the Doniers automatically fell into a pattern of meditation and prayer, even when there was turmoil all around them. To the casual observer it might look like a calm Spirit Passing Ceremony, but the underlying subtle body language told the true story.

-O-

The outward calm lasted only until the First Zelandoni's ashes were placed within the sacred circle of power, from where past Zelandoni leaders had entered the Spirit World before her. The Earth Mother's Chant was completed and the sacred signs

made and received. The silence afterward held through the ceremonial feast to celebrate the First Zelandoni, her life and service.

It held even until the procession passed into Revelation Chamber the next morning. The Zelandonia had filed through the candle lit cave and then down a passage into a smaller alcove, not a word was spoken but the tension in the air could have been cut with a knife. For the past few days all of the Doniers had talked to each other in aside conversations about their concerns and their hopes for the future and now all knew who would be candidates for the position of their First Zelandoni. Everyone had an opinion.

Voices began to rise as the heavy red dyed Mammoth hide drape was drawn over the inner chamber's entrance.

The Zelandoni of the Fifth Cave, Old Valley Holding, being from the host cave - and not wishing to be a candidate for leadership - had been unanimously accepted as ceremonial leader for the coming election of a new Zelandonia leader.

They looked around the chamber at one another as the Doniers seated themselves and their First Acolytes came to kneel behind them. The space was small compared to the outer cave area, maybe as long as 5 people lying head to feet and about the same in width. To lighten them, the walls had been freshly painted with a mixture of chalk and clay. The floor was paved with flat shale pieces that fit together as if fashioned to do so.

All the Doniers had recently been in the cave complex, many to meditate, while waiting for everyone to arrive. But on this day, the hearth fire was lit and earthenware lamps glowed around the walls. The chamber ceiling disappeared into the darkness so far above them that it appeared to have no limit, almost as if the Great Earth Mother might be gazing down upon the proceedings. The place had a distinctly 'other world' atmosphere. It was now time to begin.

The Donier of the Fifth Cave stood up and looked around at the gathered Zelandoni, making eye contact with each before reciting the Mother's Prayer, raising his voice when he came to the last stanza. As the Fifth ended his recital of the prayer, all the other Doniers were looking toward Ayla. Everyone knew who's calling had brought the knowledge of a man's role in conception to the people, and who had first recited the last stanza of the Mother's Prayer that dealt with the knowledge of conceiving children.

Ayla flushed, feeling uncomfortable with all eyes turned on her, but she was determined not to show it if possible. She had been preparing for this meeting since before her arrival. Every day since arriving, she had walked away from the camp to a secluded meadow and prepared her dreaming tea. Ayla would meditate during her dream state, asking The Mother to show her the way. Each day she had spent from late afternoon to dusk in her dream state and Ayla now believed that she understood what must be done. It would be up to the Great Earth Mother to show her the way, she just had to give of herself and trust that The Mother would provide when the time was right.

At first she hadn't understood what the images were telling her, but when she saw the same set of images in her mind's eye each time, she slowly began to understand what would happen, what must happen if she were to succeed to the position of First Zelandoni. Ayla wasn't sure if she wanted to follow her dream images, but deep down, she knew that she would try her best because that was what she always did. It was a drive inside her that made her strive to do what she thought was right, even when she wasn't sure that she would succeed, or even wanted to.

After each day's meditation and dream time, it was her habit to relax and commune with the natural world in her immediate surroundings. She would make bird calls and with a few scraps of trail seeds and nuts mixed with fat held out in her hand, she would entice the indigenous birds from the surrounding trees down to her outstretched fingers. This was something that Ayla had done all her life, beginning when she lived alone for several years in a valley all her own. It always made her mood lighter because it relaxed her to interact with nature's most delicate creatures.

Suddenly Ayla's thoughts were interrupted by chanting. She looked around the chamber to see everyone else swaying from side to side, slowly chanting the Zelandonia meditative words that were supposed to bring peace to the mind before a big decision. She knew that it wasn't working for her at that moment and doubted that anyone else who was a candidate this day would be relaxed by the traditional process.

The Fifth had been tapping a stick against a hollow log in rhythm with the chant, but suddenly stopped his beat and the chant ended abruptly in tune to his action. Silence descended.

After a time, the Fifth spoke, "Brothers and sisters, children of the Great Earth Mother, we are gathered here to decide who will lead us in these trying times. The

One Who Was First Among Us has left a hole in the fabric of our sacred society and our people look to us to fill this hole. It is our obligation to do our best to choose the right individual. Leadership is an art, it isn't happenstance; it isn't luck that makes a great leader. Whoever we choose to lead us must be able to read human nature and understand that any action taken will always have a reaction. Those who understand that one thing, and know how to use that knowledge, are the ones worthy of our consideration.

"I now ask all of the Zelandoni who are candidates to state their reasons for putting themselves forward as leader of the Zelandonia. Let us start with the candidate who has been a Donier the longest." The Fifth looked around the room for questions or comments. Hearing none, he continued. "We will hear from the Zelandoni of Horsehead Rock Cave first. He has been in service for almost twenty-four summers and was already established as a Donier when The One Who Was First was chosen almost a generation ago. He is a well-respected healer and spiritual leader and has the most experience of all the candidates here today. Then we will hear from the first Zelandoni who serves among the caves below Big River in the far south. She has been in service for eighteen summers and leads all those who serve the southern Zelandonii. She also is Zelandoni of Lance Rock Cave in her own right."

There were some slight movements from the other Doniers from the south as their first Zelandoni was introduced. These movements although subtle, were overt shows of support for their candidate.

The Fifth looked sternly at his fellow Doniers from the south, but continued without comment on their breach of etiquette. "Then we will hear from the Zelandoni from Elder Hearth. The Zelandoni of the Second Cave has been of service for more than sixteen summers. She is sister to Kimeran, leader of Elder Hearth and therefore has experience and special knowledge that a relationship like that affords."

The Fifth looked over the flickering flames from the center hearth at Ayla. "The final candidate is the Zelandoni of the Ninth Cave. This candidate was second Zelandoni to the First Zelandoni and both served the Ninth Cave. Although she has just taken the role of Zelandoni of the Ninth in her own right, she has had several opportunities over the past eleven summers to move and become Zelandoni of other holdings, but chose to remain with the Ninth Cave as second Zelandoni.

"I would be remiss if I did not mention that this candidate has brought important knowledge to our people. The obvious things are the new knowledge from the Great Earth Mother showing a man's true role in the conception of life. This knowledge

has changed the face of our society. Also, the knowledge that humans can train and use the labor of horses has transformed our daily lives, and is anyone willing to give up their fire stones? All of these things are very impressive and must be considered when making a decision about this candidate.

"Normally the Zelandoni of the Ninth Cave would be considered too young and inexperienced in comparison to those who have much more experience and would be discouraged from putting herself forward as a candidate. Since our last leader was also younger than normally encouraged and turned out to be a good leader, it has been agreed by the majority here, that the Ninth should be given a hearing in respect for all the gifts of knowledge she has brought to the Zelandonii people."

Many of the Zelandonia in the chamber were looking at Ayla again and not all with admiration; there were several dissatisfied looks, but also many nods of agreement.

The Fifth concluded, "I will remind you all that although the southern caves have a leader, we are all agreed that as a whole, the Zelandonii people look to an overall leader for both the northern and southern communities. This has always been the practice and for good reason, it holds our people together. If it comes to pass that someone from the south should be elected as First Zelandoni, then we will also elect a First for the northern caves for immediate communication and consultation among the people in the area as the south has done in the past. Is this all agreed among us?" The Fifth looked around at the others and again made eye contact with each Donier present and received a nod of assent from each.

Finally, the Fifth took his place in the ring of Doniers, gesturing for the Donier from the Seventh Cave to stand and speak.

Chapter 3: The Candidates

The Zelandoni of the Seventh Cave stood and looked around at his fellow Doniers. He felt less sure of himself than he had before arriving at the gathering. Even though he had the most seniority of anyone there, he knew in his heart that he wasn't anything exceptional, that he had no special talents other than a sympathetic personality and he could generally read people pretty well.

He had begun to question his ability to challenge the Zelandoni from the Ninth Cave the second night after his arrival when he had wanted to get away from everyone else and think. He had walked east, away from the group of Doniers and their Acolytes and the young children. After a few minutes he stumbled upon the blonde Donier from the Ninth Cave sitting cross-legged at the north end of a meadow. She sat there with her eyes closed and it was obvious that she was meditating.

At first he thought of turning away, but he stood there thinking about everything this woman had brought to the Zelandonii. If half of what he'd heard about her was true, there should be no question that she should lead them. But he wasn't willing to accept everything that was said about her. He knew that many people exaggerated and he wasn't willing to step aside for a less experienced, younger competitor. Why should he, hadn't he served longer than anyone else? It was his turn by right to lead the others.

He caught movement out of the corner of his eye. The blonde Donier's horse was moving toward her and soon was nuzzling her shoulder with its nose. She opened her eyes and said something he couldn't make out from where he stood. Then she was reaching up to pat the horse's nose. Soon she was rising up to stand next to the beast, taking its head in her hands and placing herself close to its face, hugging it.

The Seventh had heard about the younger Donier's ability with animals and how she had an affinity with them, and it was interesting to see her treat an animal like it was a friend. She then turned and walked away from the horse and it went back to grazing on the late spring grasses. Next he saw her looking up at the trees that surrounded the meadow.

He knew he should either announce himself or turn and leave, but he still stood stealthily in the shadows of the trees and watched the woman walk into the center of the meadow. A shiver ran down his spine and his eyes widened.

The woman was holding her hand out and began to whistle like a bird. The sound she made sounded so real and he was shocked to see that several birds fluttered down from the surrounding trees to rest on her hand as she looked at them, still whistling as if she too were a bird and they could understand what she said in bird song. He felt what he was watching was a powerful expression of the younger Donier's abilities to control nature. Anyone who could call birds, horses and wolves to do their bidding was more powerful than anyone he'd ever known. At seeing this, he turned quickly and walked silently back to the main camp.

Ever since that experience, the Seventh had subconsciously realized that he wasn't really in the same league as the Donier of the Ninth Cave. He was willing to withdraw if the others were as impressive as she, but had to save face here and now, so he named his experience and how many souls he was responsible for and how many years he had served the people.

By the time he was done speaking to the gathering, he felt better about himself, after all, he had accomplished things, even if he couldn't call animals and offer great gifts to the people.

As Ayla listened to the Seventh speak, she was sure that he wasn't being sincere, there was something missing in his body language, he wasn't showing conviction in his movements and his eyes showed no commitment to his words. She looked across the hearth at the First from the south, who looked back at her with a knowing smile. 'She feels the same,' Ayla thought. 'It's not just me who thinks the Seventh doesn't really care if he is chosen.'

Then the First from the south was standing. Moving into the center of the chamber by the open hearth, and she began to speak, "I honor the Seventh for his service to the Zelandonii and I also honor my fellow Zelandonia, both those seeking the position of leader and those who will decide.

"Time and experience is an important factor when choosing a leader, and I'm sure that the Seventh has more than enough of both. I know that the Donier of Elder Hearth is endowed with great intelligence as well as experience and would also make a good leader. And our most unusual Zelandoni, who is one of the youngest and most inexperienced Doniers to ever put herself forward as leader, I'm sure she might be a fine example to us all."

The Third grunted, annoyed at the southerner's slight to his colleague of the Ninth Cave. He glanced over at the blonde Donier, but saw no reaction to the southerner's statement. The Third looked back at the speaker a little more critically now, noticing the self-satisfied expression on her face as she spoke. The supreme confidence, the almost condescending tone of her words.

"The reason I have put myself forward for the burden of First Zelandoni, is that I know exactly what it takes to hold a people together in good and not so good times. I've been performing the task of First for the caves in the south for ten summers already and I'm confident that taking responsibility for the northern Zelandonia and the Zelandonii people as a whole would not strain my abilities.

"I feel that I am the most qualified to shoulder the tasks that loom before us. The unrest in the north caused by the animal tribes that threaten us will need to be dealt with decisively. I am willing to make the difficult choices that may become necessary in exterminating the threat to our people."

Ayla's eyes had opened wide at these last remarks, her gray irises dilated in anger, but she held herself in. Feeling the tension from her daughter kneeling behind her, Ayla reached back and squeezed Jonayla's arm to indicate that she should remain silent too.

The Donier of the south spoke for a while longer, then concluded her speech and took her place in front of her kneeling Acolyte.

Now it was the Second's turn to speak. She rose to her feet and silently walked to the center of the chamber. The older blonde Donier began to speak, "I am glad that the first of the southerners and the Donier of Lance Cave mentioned experience. Although she has ten summers of experience as First in the south, I too have many summers of experience including leadership in our councils. I have led not only Elder Hearth, but also Horsehead Rock and Bear Hill holdings. I know the northern area better than the Zelandoni candidate from the south since I have always lived here. My experience in leadership is second to none.

"I have traveled both in the north and in the south extensively and I have seen all the caves throughout the lands of the Zelandonii. I believe with my experience and knowledge of all the people, I would serve my brothers and sisters of the Zelandonia with more distinction than anyone else seeking the position of leader among us.

"I will leave it at that for now as we will be speaking further in the days to come. Just remember that who you chose as your leader will be making the decisions for us all. There are more caves in the north than in the south and the troubles with the flatheads," and at that she looked at Ayla, "or the Clan as we now know them, will be the main issue for anyone accepting the responsibility of First Zelandoni. That is all I have to say for now."

Ayla rose from a seated position, throwing her arms out in front of her and standing from a cross-legged position in one smooth motion. She knew exactly what she had to say and felt complete calm as she stood in front of the others.

"I consider you my sisters and brothers, all," she said earnestly. "I was a stranger to the Zelandonii long ago, but I was adopted as one of you and that was one of the most important moments in my life. My mate, Jondalar, is the son of the former leader of the Ninth Cave, and his brother is now the leader. I am forever grateful for their love and support and only wish to give back to the Zelandonii a little of what I have been given.

"Jondalar and I have brought two wonderful children into being, the Acolyte Jonayla, who you see here and my son, Durcan, both of whom are singular accomplishments in themselves. Now, as far as trying to convince you that I should be the leader of the Zelandonia, I will not do that."

There was a collective intake of breath; the southern leader was heard to mumble, "What is she playing at?"

"I am here, waiting to be convinced by one of my colleagues, that they should be First among us. If one of the other candidates convinces me that they can perform the task of First Zelandoni better than I think I am able to myself, then I will vote for them. I'm hopeful that one of them will - over the next few days - convince me that they are the better candidate because it will be a fearsome responsibility being First Zelandoni in the days to come. I am not anxious to take that task to my bosom, not unless I believe with all my heart that it must be me."

Without another word, Ayla resumed her position in front of her Acolyte.

The cave was filled with total silence. Many mouths hung open in shock. Ayla looked at those around her, knowing that she was taking a big chance dealing in this way with these, the most sophisticated members of the Zelandonii community. She also

knew that to break out from the group of candidates, she had to follow her dream images to the end and what she had just said was part of what she felt must be said.

As the sputtering and indignation began to mount, the Donier of the Fifth Cave rose to his feet and commanded silence. "During this, our first meeting, it is the right and responsibility of each candidate to speak their mind. It is not the right or responsibility of individual Doniers to contest what has been said.

"Everyone may speak their mind at the next meeting, which will be open to all Zelandonia to ask questions and to make their opinions known. That will take place tomorrow morning. We should spend this afternoon in meditation and reflection and come to the Chamber refreshed and ready for meaningful dialog tomorrow."

The Fifth turned and strode toward the opening of the chamber and stood just inside the arch, ushering everyone out. He gave Ayla a wink as she passed by him. Both Ayla and her daughter were grateful for that show of kindness.

Chapter 4: The Mother Speaks

After leaving the cave, most of the Zelandonia gathered in groups, each talking in quiet conversations. Without speaking, Ayla signed to her daughter to follow her. Jonayla, Durcan and even Jondalar were very conversant in Clan sign language now. Over the years since her arrival in the land of the Zelandonii and especially since becoming a Zelandoni, Ayla had found that talking the Clan way was very useful. The people she needed to discuss ideas with privately were generally her family and close friends, most of who had learned at least some of the sign language.

The two women walked to the corral and tied riding blankets onto their horses then cantered away from the gathering area. Jonayla knew that something was on her mother's mind, something more than just the meeting. All her life she had been able to tell when something was bothering her mother, it was the way she held herself, the way she moved that betrayed her inner feelings to her daughter. Anyone not as close to her wouldn't be able to pick up the signs. To the casual observer, the Donier of the Ninth Cave was as serene and confident as always.

Mother and daughter urged their horses into a gallop for a few minutes and then let them slow and find their own way forward. Finally they came to an open meadow with a small pool that had a serene stream filling it, but with no apparent outlet.

Ayla dismounted lightly from Summer Child's back and signed for her daughter to follow her to the pool. Jonayla slid from Grey's back and stood silently with her mother. Looking into the depths of the water before them Ayla asked, "Do you see the stream filling the pool Jonayla?"

"Yes, mother."

"Do you see anything else?" her mother asked quietly.

Jonayla looked thoughtful for a moment, bringing her left hand to her chin in concentration, and then nodded. "Yes, the stream sends water into the pool, but none comes out."

Ayla crouched down next to the small pool and ran her fingers along the surface of the water. "Yes, much like the ways of the Zelandoni. You see one thing on the surface, but there is more than meets the eye below the depths. We know that the

pool must be releasing its water into the ground below the surface, but we can't see the process... Just so the Zelandoni.

"All of the Doniers are intelligent people and knowledgeable in the ways of human nature. They expect hidden things to be going on around them all the time, they suspect that anything unexplained is a trick of the eye, or that they just are unable to see the process, as in this pool of water."

Then suddenly Ayla stood and looked up into the sky, frowning. She had a feeling, a disquieting, disorienting feeling that somehow seemed vaguely familiar. Ayla turned toward Jonayla, "Daughter, do you feel strange in any way? The wildlife around us seems subdued and I feel tension in the air. I don't mean tension from the meetings, but right now, right here, in this place."

"I was thinking how nice it was to be away from the tension of the meeting and to be here with you. But now that you mention it, it does seem quiet for this time of day. I don't even hear bird song," the younger woman replied, looking around the area, noticing the unnatural silence for the first time.

"I have experienced this feeling before and my recent dreams have all pointed toward the realization that the Mother will speak tomorrow. She will make a decision and it will be up to the Zelandonia to understand her."

"After the Mother speaks, will you be First Zelandoni mother?" Jonayla asked.

"I don't know. The Mother will speak and the Zelandonia will decide. I will play my part, but the people have their own choice to make and sometimes... Well, we'll just have to see what happens tomorrow."

After another hour of solitude and meditation, they mounted their horses and rode back to the gathering area, wanting to make it back before dark.

-O-

Ayla slept poorly that night, waking every so often from her dreams. Her body was tense and her head ached but she remained in her bedroll. Her dream had been specific; what would happen, she was sure, would occur in the morning hours. What she wasn't sure of... would it happen tomorrow? What if the Mother had spoken to her of another morning and not this one?

'Let it be,' she thought for the hundredth time. 'If the Mother wants me to be First Zelandoni, she will speak this coming morning. If not, then all I've done is to misinterpret the dreams she sent me. It might even be a relief if she doesn't speak in the morning. Then I can withdraw my candidacy and return home to Jondalar and Durcan and the Ninth Cave.'

In her mind's eye Ayla could see her mate and her son standing in a field not far from the Ninth Cave. Jondalar had named their son Durcan to honor her sacrifice when she returned with him to his people in the west. In doing so, he had acknowledged that she would never see her Clan son again.

Ayla felt relief as she put herself in the hands of the Mother, coming to the realization that events would take their course by the Mother's choosing and not her own. With that thought, Ayla slipped into a deep slumber, not to waken until dawn's first light.

-O-

"Zelandoni?"

Ayla opened her eyes. It was the boy she had met when she had first arrived. "Rubio, good morning." As she rose into a sitting position everything came rushing back to her. Her emotions and the tension of the day before, almost overwhelming her for a moment.

"Zelandoni, are you feeling ill?" the boy asked with concern. The Donier had looked so pleasant when she had first greeted him, then suddenly like someone with an upset stomach; her mood had changed.

"No, I mean yes, I'm fine. What can I do for you Rubio?" The tall blonde Donier asked, as she stood to greet the morning.

"I just need to clean your hearth area and refill the water bag but I didn't want to if you wanted to continue to rest."

"That's fine Rubio, thank you. It's past time that I got up, I didn't sleep all that well last night, that's the only reason I can think of for sleeping so late. Did you see my Acolyte?"

"Yes Zelandoni, she went to the stream a little while ago to wash."

"Thank you Rubio. I think I'll join her and wash some of this sleepiness away." Ayla smiled at the boy as she gathered her things and then turned and walked down to the stream bank.

"Good morning Jonayla, daughter of my heart." Ayla cheerily greeted her daughter who was just drying her face and arms, completing her morning ablutions.

"Greetings mother," Jonayla smiled at her mother. "You were restless last night. I hope you got enough sleep. You look tired."

"That's true, I do feel tired, as though I had too much Barma after a celebration feast. All I need is a quick dip in the stream and I'll feel much better." Ayla untied her tunic fastenings and pulled it over her head. Then she pulled the ties loose on her leggings and pulled them off.

Jonayla watched as her mother stepped naked into the stream and knelt down to cover her body with cold clear water from the neck down and then dunking her head under too. Jonayla was used to seeing her mother wash in a stream no matter how cold it might be, and many times they would bathe together.

Jonayla had grown up with her mother telling her that to be clean was healthy for the body, a ritual worth doing that kept her fit. As the daughter watched the mother bathe, it was obvious that there must be some truth to the idea, because her mother, even at thirty-six summers had the smooth healthy complexion of a woman many summers younger. Jonayla could only hope that she would look as lovely as her mother when she reached the same age.

Soon mother and daughter were walking side by side up the slight incline to the mouth of Sacred Mountain's opening and then down the gallery to Revelation Chamber. The other Doniers and their Acolytes were streaming in too. There was a ripple of excitement among many, looking forward to the wordplay that everyone expected as the Doniers began to examine the candidates for the position of First Zelandoni.

As the last few of the assembly found their places around the central hearth within the chamber, the Donier of the Fifth Cave stood to begin the day's meeting. They all chanted the Earth Mother's prayer and then the Fifth opened the meeting to general questions.

Ayla took this opportunity to stand and ask for their attention. The Donier who was first among the southern caves said cuttingly, "So you've decided to try to convince the Zelandonia of your fitness to lead after all?" One of the Acolytes behind the Donier from the south sniggered at this remark, believing that the blonde Zelandoni had dealt herself a damaging blow by asking for support after having been so dismissive earlier.

This was the moment, and Ayla knew it. Either the Mother would speak for her or remain silent and have her step aside.

"Zelandoni who is first among the southern caves, in a way you are right, but I will not actually speak for myself. I have meditated deeply and the Mother has spoken to me. Today She will speak and everyone will hear Her voice."

Ayla paused, looking around the chamber at her fellow Doniers. She had their undivided attention now, the cave was deathly silent. Everyone there knew that this was a very serious statement. To speak for the Great Earth Mother was one thing, but to tell everyone present that the Mother would speak for all to hear was something only heard of in legends. The southern Donier couldn't understand why her rival would commit herself like this, but maintained her silence, waiting to see what would be said next.

"When the Mother speaks, all the earth will tremble," Ayla continued. "She will make the earth shake this day to make Her will known. When she has spoken, you must decide what was meant... and make your choice. There is no reason to sit in deliberation once the Mother has spoken.

"I have said what the Mother instructed me to say. But one more thing I must say and I hope that everyone will take heed. I am only human and cannot tell you the exact moment the Mother will speak, but I do know that it would be foolish for us to remain in a cave when she does speak. Those who believe that the Mother can speak to Her children in this world, as she does in the next, will follow me outside to await Her words. Those who don't believe may stay here."

Ayla signed to her daughter to follow her out of the cave. All the Doniers knew that something strange and unusual was happening but the more experienced among them were more skeptical than the younger less seasoned ones. Everyone noted the absolute assurance in the Ninth's manner and voice, and that, at the very least, the Zelandoni of Ninth Cave believed what she had said.

Within a short time all the Doniers and their Acolytes were out of the cave, standing in the open, talking among themselves. The Donier from Elder Hearth and fellow candidate asked in a loud voice for all to hear, "Donier of the Ninth, can you give us some idea when the Mother will speak? I understand that you can't be sure exactly when she will, but do you have any idea at all?"

"Yes, Zelandoni of Elder Hearth. It will be this morning when the sun is well above the hills to the east. The Mother will speak and the earth will tremble." Ayla was feeling sick to her stomach now, she was pretty sure this was how she had felt some ten summers ago when the earth shook at the Summer Meeting. She remembered feeling the same sensations before that event. In fact, every time the earth was about to tremble, Ayla had felt this sickness.

"Zelandoni, you don't look well," one of the southern Acolytes said. It may have been the same one who sniggered when the first of the southern caves had asked her if she had changed her mind about trying to convince them that she should be First Zelandoni.

Ayla turned to look at the young man, and he looked back at her. At this close range he could see something deep within her eyes, something ancient, almost primeval; not all-together human he decided and recoiled. Being this close to the blonde Zelandoni, he thought she might really be speaking as the Mother's voice on earth.

The young man stepped back, "Zelandoni, I apologize for any disrespect shown earlier. I hope you are well." He stepped further back and looked at the ground. The other Donier's saw the interaction between the Donier and the southern Acolyte and wondered at it.

Ayla stood closest to the cave, looking at it with her back to the people. Without taking her gaze away from the sacred cave opening and not looking at what her hands were doing, she pulled out a small container filled with chalk and fresh animal fat; closing her eyes she began to rub it onto her face. She rubbed the stark-white mixture onto her flesh until her face was fully covered.

Then she reached into her pouch once more and brought out another small container. Still never looking away from the cave entrance, she began to paint lines on her face with red ocher paste. A circle around each eye, then a crow's foot at the outside of each circle, represented by three splayed lines, then a final line from the center of her forehead down over her nose, across her closed lips and down the

chin. As she completed these movements she discarded each container in the dirt at her feet, as if forgotten.

Standing silent, everyone was watching as the blonde Donier - her back still turned to them - raised her arms and began to speak in sign language. She moved her arms and feet in flowing motions as if in a strange dream-dance, never looking around and humming a soft repetitive moan, a sound that seemed familiar but not recognized. Even those who had never seen her use the Clan signs before, knew what they were seeing, they had heard about it at one time or another.

Jonayla fell to her knees, tears flowing down her cheeks. What was happening to her mother? What strange and terrible Spirit had taken control of the one she loved? This was not the mother she'd known all her life, the smiling confident mother and friend. This was a strange apparition standing before her.

Then Jonayla's eyes flew wide open as her mother swung around to face the huddled Zelandonia in a hunter's crouch and screamed, "Listen! Listen to the Great Earth Mother Speak! Hear Her now!"

Ayla's face, stark white now with red painted lines and circles, was shocking to see. The Zelandoni used white chalk on their faces during some rituals but this, the strange markings in red ocher, was unheard of. Was there meaning in the marks? She now stood with an incredibly penetrating look in her eyes, as if staring into another world, legs in a wide stance, arms flung wide.

At that moment, the gathered people heard the first rumblings of the Mother. At first it was just a sound, like a grumbling deep down within the earth, muffled but immense. Then little pebbles began to trickle down the slopes on either side of the cave opening. Then suddenly the earth shook violently, knocking most of the people to the ground. A moan of despair and fear rose from the collective throats of the gathered Zelandonia and their Acolytes. This earthquake was different than anything they had ever experienced before. It was as if the Mother was announcing herself. No one had ever associated the earth moving as a message from the Mother. Only the blonde Donier had done so.

The Earth Mother had spoken for her and no matter what decision was made by the gathered Doniers now, she had done all she was able. She had lived up to her promise to the one who had previously been First Zelandoni, as well as to the Mother herself.

The earth shook but Ayla stood boldly. She could see the others falling to their knees and praying, fear and shock written on their faces. Rocks came tumbling down the mountainside in mass as dust swirled in the air. Trees were slanting left then right, up then down. Many trees fell to the earth.

Ayla staggered slightly as something cannoned into her at ankle level. Still confused, not quite remembering what had happened or even what she had said before, she tried desperately to gather her thoughts. She knew that she must speak one more time before she could rest.

As the earth's rumbling slowed and the fearful sounds of destruction began to settle down around her, Ayla began to focus on those who knelt or sat on the ground in front of her, still moaning softly in fear. She shook her head as if to clear her vision. Then she looked at her daughter who was sprawled on the ground looking at her, wild-eyed with horror. She then looked around her at the faces of all the others. Everyone, even the self-satisfied southern Donier was looking at her in horror and fear now.

What made the Doniers most frightened now was that the Zelandoni of the Ninth Cave had predicted it. She had said that the Mother would speak and here the Donier was, standing before them with her arms raised, and with the crumbling cave entrance in the background. Even in their fear, everyone realized that if they hadn't been warned, if they hadn't exited the cave when the Ninth told them to, there would have been many injured and many deaths as well.

'No, that isn't what they should be feeling, they shouldn't fear me,' she thought in despair. Gathering her strength, she spoke, "Zelandoni, I did not make this happen, I only delivered the message that the Great Earth Mother commanded of me." Then Ayla looked again at her daughter and noticed that her shocked gaze was focused at her feet.

Ayla looked down. At first what she saw didn't register, it made no sense. Then with a wail of grief she dropped to her knees to hug the great furry beast that had collapsed at her feet. Wolf! Wolf was here to protect her on The Sacred Mountain. How... why... had he come?

Ayla was in totally black despair, numb to everything and everyone. "Mother! Mother! Please mother, speak to me!" Jonayla was shrieking in equal despair, shaking her mother by the shoulders, trying to get a response.

Ayla finally heard the dismay in her daughter's voice and it brought her back from compete and totally black numbness. She looked up into her daughter's tear stained face and spoke in something just more audible than a whisper, "Wolf knew that the Mother would speak and that the earth would shake and he came to me. He came to us, wanting to protect us. Wolf was too old, he shouldn't have run all that way. Oh Wolf!"

Ayla hugged Wolf to herself tightly. Had the Earth Mother wanted Wolf to be with Her in the Spirit World? Was that why he was here? Over the past several years Wolf had begun to shrink in size. He was much older than any wolf would have normally been and as he began to live beyond his normal lifespan his body began to lose muscle mass and corresponding weight. Ayla knew that age had weakened him and that was the main reason she left him behind with Jondalar and Durcan.

She gently closed Wolf's eyes and knew that he had loved her as much as she had loved him. Overwhelmed with grief, tears streaming from her eyes, Ayla signed Jonayla to bring the horses and a travois as quickly as possible. She wanted to get away from everyone and be alone with her daughter and Wolf, she wanted to grieve out of the sight of those who couldn't understand her loss.

Jonayla came to a rapid halt at the edge of the assembled Zelandonii. Ayla signaled her to hold Grey and Summer Child steady. Ayla then picked up the emaciated Wolf and walked in somber fashion to the travois. Grief stricken, Ayla didn't notice that dusty smoke was still billowing out of the mouth of the cave behind her. She didn't even notice when many of the Zelandonia that she passed began to make the secret hand sign given when meeting the First Zelandoni who served the Mother.

What Ayla was seeing at that moment, the only thing she was seeing, were the times she and Jondalar and the children had been happy and Wolf had been alive and they had all been young and carefree.

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Wolf was cradled in the center of the travois as Zelandoni and Acolyte rode slowly away. Mother and daughter wandered aimlessly for hours. It was late afternoon

before Jonayla was able to convince her mother it was time to stop. They finally circled back to the secluded meadow with the small pool they had visited the day before.

Ayla slid off Summer Child and stumbled. She looked down at the furry body of her faithful companion cradled in the travois. Tears welled anew as she untied the rawhide thongs and, with her daughter's help, lifted Wolf's still body to carry him to a grassy area at the edge of the pool.

Jonayla knelt beside her mother and Wolf. Both were stroking Wolf's fur as they had done countless times in the past. She turned her tear stained face to her mother. "I will miss Wolf, he was always my protector. I can't imagine life without him in it."

"Yes, but I think he will always remain with us, even as he walks in the Spirit World. I think his life force was more than just an animal's, he was in some way a manifestation of the Earth Mother Herself. At least that is what I believe. I know that I will see him again in the Spirit World when it's my time to cross over - and I look forward to that time. Even now, with Wolf still in my arms, I miss him so," tears ran down her cheeks as she spoke.

Mother and daughter sat cross-legged beside their faithful friend until dusk descended. Then the two built a funeral pyre and cremated Wolf's body in a ceremony usually reserved only for one who was First Zelandoni.

Both women felt that Wolf belonged to the Zelandonia and that he was specially loved by the Great Earth Mother, therefore the special ceremony seemed appropriate and right to them.

Chapter 5: Chosen

In the morning, Ayla and her daughter quietly chanted The Great Earth Mother's Prayer as they put Wolf's ashes into a carry basket to take back with them. They agreed that they would privately sprinkle his ashes in a protective circle around those of the previous First Zelandoni. Jonayla was the one who had come up with the idea and Ayla immediately realized how right that would be, Wolf had always been a protector.

It was tradition to encircle the First Donier's remains with river-washed pebbles of a certain size and color to ward off harmful spirits, so why not include Wolf's ashes as extra protection. The suggestion had a perfect symmetry to it, and it felt so right that Ayla was determined to do it.

They bathed in the pool, washing the dirt and sweat of the day before from their bodies. When Ayla saw her reflection in the water she stopped and stared. "Who painted my face?" she asked in a tense voice.

"You did mother," Jonayla responded, a bit mystified by the question.

"I did? When? I don't remember doing it."

"It was when you were warning everyone that the Mother was about to speak. You were in front of the cave and you stood there facing it and painted the symbols after painting your face white. What do those symbols mean? Do you know?"

"Yes." Ayla stopped washing and looked at her daughter, "White symbolizes the purity of the Spirit World, the red ocher lines were those that the Mog-ur of the Clan painted on their faces during their most sacred ceremonies. The red ochre represents the blood of all living creatures... I'm not sure why I painted them on my face, I don't remember doing it."

When they had completed their morning ablutions, the two women mounted their horses and began the ride back to the gathering place with Wolf's ashes securely sequestered in a carry basket at Summer Child's flank.

They remained silent, each thinking their own thoughts until the gathering place came into view. They could see people moving around; it looked like there were

more people than just Zelandoni. Maybe people from Two Wolf Lodge had come after the earth had trembled to see if everything was alright.

Ayla brought Summer Child to halt. "I've been thinking about the symbols that I painted on my face yesterday. I still don't remember doing it. I can only think that the Mother commanded me to do it. It makes me think that she wanted the Zelandonia to see the sign of the Mog-ur, which is a sign of respect for the Cave Bear Ursus, the Clan's most important spirit.

"I'm beginning to think that The Earth Mother and the Cave Bear spirit are one and the same. Why else would the Mother command me to paint Mog-ur Cave Bear signs on my face?" She twisted around on her horse to look at her child, "If you think about it, both the Clan and the Zelandonii acknowledge a higher power and set their standards for everyday life to it. Both worship and respect many of the same things so why not a Supreme Spirit, but just called by different names?

"Daughter, I think I know what I have to do. I've been thinking about this for a long time, but now I'm sure; I have to make the Zelandonia understand that we're all earth's children, our people and the Clan, no matter what they decide at this gathering, I won't rest until I make them understand."

Jonayla wasn't sure that she understood. She had never actually met a member of the Clan, at least not one that was fully Clan. But she knew her mother's views on the subject, she'd grown up hearing about them and she did believe that the people who had saved her mother's life were people in their own right. She urged her horse to a trot beside her mother's as they rode to the area in front of the cave that was so full of hurrying people.

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As the two women rode into the camp all activity stopped, everyone moved to make way for them, opening a path to the outside hearth area. Ayla knew exactly what she must do now. Although she hadn't shared her dream with her daughter, the Mother had come to her again in the night and gave her another dream image. It seemed that more and more the dreams came to her without any help from the Absinthe tea. It just seemed to happen when she needed guidance.

Ayla drew up at the circle of stones that formed the outdoor hearth and Clan-signed Jonayla to go quietly to their individual hearth and to remain there until she could join her. Her daughter nodded her understanding of the request and pulled Gray

around to trot to their tent and hearth area. To the others watching, it looked like the Donier of the Ninth Cave had, by some mystical means, commanded her Acolyte to do her bidding. The younger woman, who looked so much like her mother, had nodded her acceptance of some command. The people who had witnessed this interaction between mother and daughter believed that some other-worldly communication had taken place between the two, not recognizing the signs for what they were.

Ayla looked around her and not seeing the person she sought, asked out loud, "Where is the Zelandoni who is first among the southern holdings?"

The Donier of the Fifth Cave stood from his work mending a rip in a sleeping tent and said, "Zelandoni who will be First among us all, the Zelandoni from Lance Rock Cave is down beside the stream."

If Ayla heard the title that the Fifth had used in addressing her, she didn't indicate she had. She just dismounted and walked down through the people toward the relatively deserted place beside the stream where the Donier from the south stood. Ayla knew they would not be overheard from this distance.

The southern Donier had seen Ayla and her daughter ride into camp. She had also heard her call out the question and had seen the Fifth point her out. She thought bitterly, 'Why can't she just be happy that she's won, why does she have to rub it in like this?'

Then suddenly her rival was standing in front of her looking into her eyes. "Donier who is first among the southern holdings, I have something I must tell you." Ayla held out her hands to the other woman as if in welcome, still looking into the southerner's eyes. Nervously, the Donier, not knowing what to expect, reached out and took the outstretched hands in hers.

A slight shock of energy passed between them as their fingers touched. Then the Donier from the south was gazing into the gray eyes that were so close to hers. As they stood there the southerner began to see images in her mind, images that she'd never even imagined before. She tried to draw her hands away from this seemingly powerful woman, but they were gripped tightly and she could not.

The images were of pleasant places, warm and comfortable. Feelings of encouragement and safety pulsed through her mind and body. The southern Donier gasped as she felt the power emanating from the woman standing in front of

her. The First from the south had thought of her as just another ordinary Zelandoni, with not as much experience in life as those older and wiser. Now she wondered why she had ever thought that.

Looking again at the tall blonde Donier, she envisioned those strange red marks upon her face as if they flashed, there one moment - gone the next. She felt dizzy and wanted to close her eyes, she wanted to look away, but could not.

Suddenly images of violence and pain flashed through her mind. Not her pain, but that of others in pain and fear... and suffering. Then day and night skies began to flash before her eyes, making her dizzy. The only thing holding her up was the strong hands that gripped hers so tightly.

All at once the flashing day and night skies came to a crashing halt and it was dark. Now visions of fire in a hearth and people gathered around singing the Mother's Song. Oddly, it wasn't in a language that she understood. The people didn't look like the people she was used to and there was this woman, the Donier of the ninth cave, standing at the head of the group with her arms held wide.

The images and thoughts that crashed in and out of her mind were making her physically ill, but now she didn't want to let go of the First Zelandoni's hands, she no longer cared about herself, or her ambitions. All she wanted now was to hear and see what was being offered to her. She knew instinctively that this was a gift from the Mother and that it was a singular honor. Somehow, amazingly, she was being shown what was to come in the future, she was sure of it.

Lightning flashed and the images in her mind faded to black. The Donier from the southern holdings went limp and was collapsing. The First Zelandoni eased her to the grass and sat cross-legged beside her. Pulling a cup from her pouch she reached over to the stream and filled it with water. Then she dipped her fingers into the water and sprinkled it on to the prostrate Donier's face until her eyes fluttered open.

Ayla gestured that the southerner should sit up and she gave her a fresh cup of water, saying, "Drink, it will refresh you."

The southern Donier did drink and she did feel better. It was strange how much better she felt just by drinking water at the First Zelandoni's command.

"Think about that water you are drinking," Ayla said. "It is taken by you as sustenance and it gives you life. Without it you cannot live. So it is with the Mother's Love. You must begin to think about what everyone needs, all the people, not just what you need."

Ayla felt like she was somehow outside of her own body now, as if the Mother was speaking through her. "I care not about a title, if it pleases you, you can have the title of First Zelandoni. When I had lived maybe five summers, I was given the name Ayla by the people who rescued me from death and I know that it wasn't the name I had known before. I'm convinced that the Mother gave me that name and I will keep it close and not reject it like other Zelandoni.

"But what I do care about, is my obligation to serve the Mother, my fellow Zelandonia and the Zelandonii people. Only by leading the people to peace and well-being under the Mother's gaze will I fulfill Her wishes. To me, that is what is important and I don't need or want titles.

"All I ask... No... what I demand from you, is that you not hinder me in my work for our people. If you don't want to help, at least don't work against me." With that, Ayla stood and reached down to help the Donier to her feet then turned to walk back to her individual hearth.

"Wait!" The southern Zelandoni voiced with urgency. "What just happened here? Please! Please tell me."

Ayla turned and looked into the other Donier's troubled eyes, "The Mother spoke to you, couldn't you tell?" Then she turned back and walked away.

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From that moment forward, everyone knew that the Zelandoni of the Ninth Cave would be First Zelandoni and would be chosen by unanimous consent. Her ability to receive communication from The Great Earth Mother was like nothing they had ever experienced before. There were no Zelandoni who doubted this, they all knew what they had experienced was genuine and that no tricks had been portrayed. They were all grateful, even the Donier of Lance Rock, who had decided to add her vote to the others for the new First Zelandoni. She was also determined to meet with the northern Zelandonia more often. The Donier's from the southern holdings were more than ever interested in what was taking place with their northern brethren,

they knew that there were great things stirring, they had seen the evidence with their own eyes and they wanted to be part of it.

The election and investiture ceremonies were completed in continued unanimity as the new First Zelandoni received the ivory chest plaque that was the outward sign of her office. Ayla looked down at the plaque she held in her hands. The familiar symbols representing the moon names for the passing years were etched on one side, while on the other, the surface was left blank. It was hard to believe that the First before her, who had once worn this ornament, was really gone. Ayla was determined to wear it with distinction and do her best to follow her old friend's example.

After the investiture ceremony, everyone began to discuss their departure and to make plans for another gathering to discuss the northern issues. The new First Zelandoni suggested that she travel north before returning to her home cave to see for herself what the situation was and to report back to the other Zelandonia and their Cave Leaders using runners. Everyone agreed with this plan and discussions turned to the upcoming Summer Meeting.

For Ayla's part, she just wanted to get away on her own with her daughter and think about what had happened here. It had all been such a blur to her - the Mother speaking so vividly through her. Ayla had been leaving her Clan beliefs behind, little by little, as she became caught up in the daily life of the Zelandonii, being a mother to her children and a mate to Jondalar. Now she knew that there was a message that needed to be shared, that people, no matter how different, were all The Earth Mother's children and should be respected and treated with fairness and understanding.

The problem as she saw it now, was how to make everyone understand what was obvious to her. It would be a lifetime's work, she knew, but work that she would dedicate herself to and if the Mother supported her, she would succeed in the end.

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The night before their departure, Ayla had taken time to meet with the other Doniers and assure them that she would meet with them again soon after her return from the north. She also wanted to stop at Hill Top Holding for personal reasons that she kept to herself.

Ayla invited the southern Doniers to meet her at the Ninth Cave in seven days to discuss the future and to get to know them better. As they traveled south to their own caves, the southern Zelandoni would be stopping at each northern community for a day to meet with the Doniers and the leaders of each cave. This was suggested as a way to become better acquainted with their northern brethren, and was requested of them by their new First Zelandoni.

Ayla enlisted the Zelandoni of the Third Cave to help by sending word ahead to Joharran, the leader of the Ninth Cave about what had transpired on Sacred Mountain and to expect a visit from the southern Doniers.

When the meetings and discussions were over and all the others had left, Ayla and her daughter stood together in the silvery moonbeams that illuminated the final resting place of the one who had been First Zelandoni before her. Both women quietly recited the Mother's Prayer and sprinkled all but one small pouch of Wolf's ashes in a circle around the previous First's Élan mark. Wolf would protect their old spiritual leader and in turn he would be protected by all the caring spirits that resided there. Both women wept as the last of Wolf's ashes fell upon the stone pillar.

After some time, mother and daughter walked arm in arm away from the terrace. Jonayla said impulsively, "I am going to find a baby wolf and bring him up. I just can't imagine living without a wonderful animal friend like Wolf."

"You know," Ayla said, "another wolf might not be like our Wolf. Like people, wolf pups would likely each be of their own nature. But you're right, you should get your own pup. I'm not sure that I could ever love another wolf like I did Wolf, but I wouldn't mind having one around if you decide to find one of your own."

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Dawn broke early the next morning. The smell of campfires and aroma of cooked food scented the cool mountain air as Ayla and her daughter packed their things for the brief trip north. Ayla stopped for a moment as she pulled a small pouch from her things. "Jonayla, I want to stop at the Nineteenth Cave and visit with Jonokol, or I should say, the Zelandoni of the White Cave. I wish he could have been here, but I understand his need to complete the first wall of the White Cave before next summer's meeting. Still, I need to talk to him about this." She held the small pouch out in the palm of her hand.

Jonayla already knew what her mother meant. "You mean since Wolf found the White Cave part of his essence should reside there... for all time? I think that is fitting mother, I'm grateful that you thought of it. It's sort of a final show of our respect for his courageous and faithful soul and I've been feeling like things weren't finished. Thank you mother, this will help me accept his passing."

"Yes, it will help me too," Ayla said as she turned back to her tasks.

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The sun was up above the mountain's peak before mother and daughter were ready to depart. Ayla had to say farewell to the few Doniers who still remained in camp. Before taking their leave from the sacred site, she sought out the people of Old Valley Cave and Two Wolf Lodge who had hurried to them when the Mother had spoken.

These same people had remained to clear away the rubble and repair some of the outside structures that had been damaged or had collapsed. Ayla had been able to get to know them over shared meals and she liked the leader and his mate - and of course Rubio, their son.

At first there had been awkward moments, none of them were comfortable around the new First Zelandoni. They had all seen her return to the ceremonial area and her interaction with the Donier from the south. They were in awe of her and her reputation. After a meal and meeting her pretty and seemingly normal daughter, they soon took to her pleasant and self-effacing manner and she became an honorary member of their cave.

The new First Zelandoni had secured future help from Old Valley in the way of mature hunters for her planned trek to the north later in the season. At some point, once the causes for the unrest in the northern area had been determined, it might be necessary to return to settle disputes and mete out justice. Ayla would like to have Ramacol and a few of his people join in the task. Ramacol was just the level-headed type that Ayla admired and knew she could rely upon.

Farewells made, Ayla rose from her cross-legged sitting position beside the Old Valley campfire in her usual smooth motion that always made those around her notice her agility. She mounted Summer Child and Jonayla followed her, mounting Gray. Looking at her friends, Ayla said with meaning in her voice, "I look forward to seeing each of you again. I appreciate the help you and your children have given and

will do all I can to live up to your trust in me. Farewell and may The Great Earth Mother watch over you." The blonde Donier who was now First Zelandoni and her Acolyte turned their horses toward the north and began to trot away.

Rubio, Jamicon and the other children watched them grow smaller as the distance between them lengthened. All of the children now worshiped the strange and wonderfully exotic Donier. They had seen her when the Mother had spoken... and after. Each and every one of them wanted to become Zelandoni now. To learn from someone like her, to maybe even speak with The Great Earth Mother as she had done...

Chapter 6: In Search of Ayla

Jondalar and Durcan stayed up all night worrying. Wolf's strange behavior the day before, his howling and then his disappearance had concerned them greatly. When the animal had run frantically around Jondalar's legs as if trying to get him to follow, he didn't understand what Wolf wanted. Why would Wolf suddenly go into a frenzy of activity like that? Their son Durcan was safe at home and there hadn't seemed to be anything wrong at the Ninth Cave.

Jondalar could only surmise that Wolf had sensed that Ayla or Jonayla or both were in some kind of danger. He had an immediate urge to ride out then and there, to make sure that his mate and their daughter were safe. He couldn't just run after Wolf without making arrangements. Someone would have to be notified, someone would have to watch over Durcan while he was looking for Ayla and Jonayla. Besides, Wolf might be back by dark, making the trip unnecessary.

As day turned to night and Wolf had still not returned, Jondalar began to have a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. What if Wolf somehow knew that Ayla or Jonayla were hurt or... worse? What if Wolf had raced off toward the Zelandonia gathering? He must have. There was no other explanation for his strange behavior. Jondalar didn't think that Wolf could make it that far, not at his great age. The animal wasn't moving all that well and Sacred Mountain was well over a day away by horse.

Jondalar called his son to his side. "I think we should find your mother and sister, they may need us. I can't explain why Wolf acted the way he did and I'll feel a lot better when I see that they are alright." Since Durcan had his own horse, Lightning, he and his son would both search for the rest of their family... all three of them.

"Since you're supposed to be caring for your sister's horses while she's gone I think you should see Jaradal and ask him if he will take the responsibility until we return. Offer him a like service since caring for nine horses is a bit of work. I will speak to Jaradal's father too. Go right now, I think we should leave first thing in the morning and I want to get that settled. I'd leave now, but it's dark and we couldn't make any real progress."

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As a pink dawn rose over the hills to the east, the darkness slowly faded on the far side of the valley. Jondalar and Durcan were making their careful descent down the steep path from the Ninth Cave. They were mounted and carrying with them provisions for several days travel. It would be impossible to track Wolf, but Jondalar knew that his daughter and mate would head by the shortest route to Old Valley. He was determined to see that they were unharmed, no matter what taboos there might be against intruding on ceremonial rites. The way Wolf had acted the day before made Jondalar afraid of what he might find there and that fear drove him on.

They made good time the first day, following along the bank of The River and heading north. The Zelandoni's sacred site was at Old Valley and that was where Jondalar expected to find Ayla, Jonayla and Wolf. It was very late in the day, almost dark by the time they stopped. They made camp that night in the vicinity of Reflection Rock, less than half a day south of Old Valley. Durcan had used his spearthrower to good effect and had taken down a Capon in flight which was plucked, gutted and over a roasting fire within an hour of their making camp.

Jondalar watched his young son moving around the campsite, setting their sleeping furs out and arranging their gear. He was proud of his son. Durcan was a real help to the family and he had a real sense of responsibility. Like his mother, he practiced with the sling and spearthrower continuously to become a credible hunter even before he reached puberty. Jondalar reflected that he himself hadn't worked that hard at anything when he was his son's age.

Durcan looked a little like each parent. He would be tall; it was obvious from the height he had already attained. Unlike his sister who had Jondalar's eye-coloring, Durcan's were slate gray, much like his mother's, only darker, and he had Ayla's darker blonde hair too, but his face was the mirror image of his father at the same age.

As they sat eating the fowl that Durcan had cooked, the boy asked, "Father, what do you think happened to make Wolf leave us like that? I know you said that something must have happened to make him act the way he did, but you didn't say what you thought it might be."

"I didn't say, because I don't know Durc. Wolf has always been a harbinger of things that will happen; even when your mother and I were on our way back along the Great Mother River, returning home from the east, Wolf had known things that we couldn't even guess at. He once warned us of a great flood that would have drowned us all, including Whinney and Racer. If he hadn't warned us we would have

died. I think this situation is much like that and I want to find out what he was trying to tell me."

-O-

Tired from pushing so hard the day before, both father and son slept until dawn. Once up, they broke camp quickly and ate travel cakes while mounted on their horses, moving on before the sun had even crested the surrounding hills.

As they rode toward the north, Durcan broke the silence, "Father, doesn't it seem unusually quiet this morning? I don't hear any birds and I don't see anything moving along the river."

"Yes, now that you mention it, it is very quiet. That's strange," Jondalar responded to his son's question, but with only half his attention. He was worried about Ayla and Jonayla and Wolf as well.

Then suddenly there was a sound like thunder only deeper and it came from the ground, not the sky. His horse stumbled and whinnied in fear. Jondalar pulled on the reins to halt the horse and slid off its back. The earth was moving, shaking under his feet and his heart was beating as if he were facing a cave lion.

Durcan yelped in fright. He had never experienced anything like this before and to have the solid earth beneath his feet shiver and shake was beyond his understanding. "What is happening? What is happening Father?"

"This is called an earthquake. I have felt one before, many years ago. Just get down and hold Lightning's halter and soothe him, he's as frightened as you are." Jondalar patted his horse's muzzle to reassure him as he spoke.

Where they were at the earth's shaking wasn't violent enough to fell trees, but it did continue for a few minutes. During this they heard a loud singular noise, like a brief rumbling of deep thunder. The sky was clear. It couldn't have been thunder. Then the shaking slowed and finally stopped. All was deathly silent. Jondalar looked down toward the river they had been following and noticed that it was running slower and that the water level was less than before but he didn't know what it meant so said nothing.

As they hurried north the reduced flow of the river became more noticeable and Durcan pointed it out. "Father, what's happening to the river? Should it be running dry? I thought this river ran all year long."

With a worried tone in his voice Jondalar answered, "Yes it should. I've never seen the river do this before, it's like the water has dried up suddenly. I can't imagine why this would happen."

It became obvious what had happened as they rounded the curve of the river. At the head of Old Valley they could see what looked like a solid rock wall. Apparently the earth's movement had broken a huge slab from the eastern side of the rock outcroppings at the head of the valley's opening. It had tumbled over as one huge rampart, to completely block the river's flow, which accounted for the rumbling thunder they'd heard.

As they watched in amazement, it occurred to Jondalar that their way north was now blocked. If they couldn't find a way through, they would have to backtrack and take the ridge route, which could also be broken or blocked. Who could tell?

"Durc, we'll ride a little way farther to see if there is a way around, but if not, we'll have to turn back and go to the west then travel along the ridge route to get around the fall." Jondalar hoped the ridge route would still be passable.

"That will take a long time father," Durcan said. "I hope there's still a way through. I'm really worried about mother and Jonayla now. Maybe the earth moving was what Wolf was trying to tell us about. I can't see how anyone or anything, other than the Mother, could know something like that before it even happened."

"I understand your feelings son, but like I've said, I've seen Wolf do just that, time and time again. The more I think about it the more I think that Wolf may be a kind of Zelandoni of the animal world. The things he knows and the things he's done, point to it. Let's just hope that everyone north of that rock wall is unhurt."

After trying several false trails, father and son gave up and retraced their path, riding back to the Reflection Rock area and up the slope to the ridge trail. By the time they had reached the area above the blocked river, it was almost dark and they had to make camp again. It would be too dangerous in the dark to continue on the ridge path. Especially, not knowing what might have shifted from the earth's shaking.

That second night, there was very little talk, they were both increasingly worried about the members of their family. They didn't want to speculate about what might have happened at Sacred Mountain and the Zelandonia gathering place. It was well up the side of the mountain and could have been a dangerous place to be when the earth shook. They turned in early so they could continue their journey as soon as dawn gave enough light to safely follow the ridge path again.

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As the sun rose above the horizon, they had already set out and within a very short time had a bird's eye view of what had caused the river flow to stop. Still traversing the path on horseback, they looked down and saw a large lake forming behind the tall rock rampart. The rock cliff had sheared off the eastern wall of the valley and now lay across the river blocking it completely. The water already filled the area behind the rampart for hundreds of strides.

Now, almost a full day after the rock fall, the water from the river had reached the top of the rampart and was just beginning to cascade over the top of the huge jagged slabs, creating many gushing waterfalls along its length. The noise was loud and the sight was awe inspiring. To see the landscape change like this overnight made them both feel small and vulnerable. People seemed puny next to something this majestic. This rock fall would change the way the Zelandonii would travel north and south along the river from now on.

Father and Son rode on, occasionally looking down at the newly formed lake, but never letting their urgent mission leave their thoughts.

It took all that day to get past the lake. The path they followed was also damaged and several times they had to dismount and lead the horses further up the slope and through bracken and shrubs that hindered their way. By the third evening both of them were tired, frustrated and more worried than ever.

-O-

They arrived at the Zelandonia gathering place on the morning of the fourth day to an almost deserted campsite. As they rode into the clearing Jondalar hailed a tall muscular man, "Greetings friend, it looks as if the Zelandonia gathering is over. We are in search of the Zelandoni of the Ninth Cave. Do you know her?"

"Yes, of course I do, she is now called the First Zelandoni."

"Oh! Well, yes, I guess I'm not surprised at that. My name is Jondalar and this is my son, Durcan."

"Greetings Jondalar and Durcan, we've met before, I'm Ramacol, leader of Old Valley and also Two Wolf Lodge."

"Yes, of course, I'm sorry Ramacol. I've been so worried about my mate since the earth moved. Can you tell me where everyone went? I had expected the gathering to continue for a few more days," Jondalar said, ignoring what would normally have been his traditional response to the other's greeting. He was too flustered and concerned about Ayla to worry about politeness.

Ramacol didn't seem offended and responded, "Well, when the Mother spoke and the earth shook, there was a large rock slide in the valley that stopped The River from flowing. It obliterated the river path and many of the Doniers took the eastern trails to skirt that area. Since the Mother had made the choice obvious to all the Zelandonia as to who should be First among them, they all packed up and left. Only the people of our cave remain here."

Ramacol continued, "The First Zelandoni and her Acolyte have headed up to Hilltop Holding, the Nineteenth Cave, to check into the cause of the rumors of violence further north. She said that it would only be a short visit, but that she needed to see what was going on with her own eyes before making any decisions about what might be done about it. The First Zelandoni also enlisted our help, if she needs it, to deal with the problem when she returns," he said proudly.

"There was something else she mentioned," he paused for a moment, thinking. "But with everything that's been going on here I can't remember what it was. My son will remember. He almost worships the First Zelandoni; she made quite an impression on the children, actually on all of us." He looked up toward the cave opening and yelled, "Rubio, come here boy!"

A young boy came running from the mouth of the cave that was just visible from where Jondalar sat upon his horse. As he saw the boy, Jondalar also noticed the opening of the sacred cave and the mysterious carvings chiseled into the rock lintel. It looked very ancient; a shiver of nervous fear went through his body. He didn't really want to be this close to things associated with the Spirit World, but it was necessary. He needed to find his mate, his daughter and Wolf.

The young boy skidded to a halt before his father. 'A fine looking boy,' Jondalar thought. He looked about the same age as his son Durcan, and similar in many ways. "Yes father?" the boy asked, slightly out of breath looking up at the tall muscular leader.

"Rubio, this man and his son search for the First Zelandoni. I seem to recall you telling me that she headed north to the Nineteenth Cave and that they were also going some other place. Did I remember that correctly?"

"Yes father, that's what the First Zelandoni told me. She said that she was going to Hilltop Holding to see if she could find out about the rumors of unrest and then to the Sacred White Cave to pray for Wolf, to help him find his way to the Spirit World," the young boy said.

Jondalar and Durc looked to each other then back to Rubio. "Are you telling us that Wolf is dead?" Durc said with trepidation.

Rubio looked uncomfortable. He suddenly realized who the big blonde man was. He was the First Zelandoni's mate, he'd seen him many times during the Summer Meetings, but never from this close. Rubio's face flushed as he realized that he'd just imparted bad news to the pair. "Y-yes, I'm sorry," he stuttered, "he came to the First Zelandoni as the Mother spoke and it appeared that She took Wolf while She was speaking. Everyone saw it. I-I'm sorry..." his voice trailed away.

"Oh Doni! Ayla will be distraught, we must still find her! Fill the water bags at the stream," he instructed his son. Jondalar turned toward the leader of Old Valley, "Ramacol, do you think you could spare some travel food so we won't have to stop along the way to hunt? It took us two days longer than we planned to get here because of the rock fall and we're running short on provisions. We must find Ayla as soon as possible, the loss of Wolf will be very hard on her."

Ramacol replied instantly, "Rubio, fetch two days rations for two from the stores." Rubio was already running toward the stores, anticipating her father's instructions. Then Ramacol turned back to Jondalar, "I guess you're used to the wolf and your mysterious Zelandoni mate. I must say that she is most impressive. She instills much confidence in the people around her. For the first time in years I feel that something will actually be done to stop the violence in the north and bring peace to that area before it reaches further south."

"Yes, but the loss of Wolf will be a real blow to her. Wolf is as much a part of our family as a child would be to you. I grieve for his passing as if he were a child of my hearth. I only hope that Ayla is coping with the loss."

Ramacol was surprised that the big man, brother to a leader and son of a leader, kept referring to his mate as "Ayla" considering that she was Zelandoni and now First among the Zelandonia, but he didn't comment on it.

Rubio and Durcan arrived back at almost the same moment; Durcan placing the full water bags into their carry baskets and Rubio handing up the food to the tall blonde man.

Rubio stared back wide-eyed as Jondalar thanked him. Then as the two adults made their farewells, Rubio looked at the boy sitting on the pony next to his father and said, "You must lead an exciting life," the boy said with obvious excitement and envy in his voice. "To be the son of She who speaks for the Mother. That would be something!" the boy virtually wriggled with excitement and admiration, so much so that his father felt momentary jealousy at his son's obvious hero worship.

Jondalar thanked the leader and his son for the supplies and information and then the two travelers turned their horses and hurried back down the trail leading to The River and on toward Hilltop Holding and the Sacred White Cave.

Chapter 7: Hilltop Rock Holding

Ayla stretched to ease the cramp in her back from the long day's ride. Both mother and daughter were weary. The distance from Lance Rock to Hilltop was not the problem. The rough terrain, made rougher by the earthquake, made going slow a necessity. They had really wanted to make Hilltop Holding before dark, but since it was almost dusk, they began to look for a campsite. Ayla spotted a place beside a runoff stream that seemed a likely spot for the night.

"Jonayla, Let's stop here for the night. We're still about a morning's ride from Hilltop and I don't think it would be wise to try to make it tonight in the dark."

"I agree mother, I was hoping we would stop soon. I like it being just us on a trail like this. It's nice being away from all the other Zelandoni and Acolytes for a while. I just wish that father and Durc could be with us too. It's been too long since we were all together and away from the distractions that seem to take so much of your time as Zelandoni." She hesitated, but then continued, "I guess that will only become more so, now that you lead the Zelandonia."

"Yes, I suppose so," Ayla said with a sigh. "It is nice to be away from all the problems for a bit, just the two of us. What I wish is that Wolf was still among us in more than just spirit. I miss him so."

"I do too. He was such a good friend to me growing up. I always looked for him when I was playing and I always felt safe when he was near."

"I hope Jonokol... I mean the Zelandoni of the White Cave... will do as I ask and allow us to place Wolf's essence in the Sacred White Cave. It just seems fitting that there be some small token of the spirit that discovered such a place as that."

Ayla dismounted and began to make camp, forming a rough campfire surround from several rocks, while Jonayla began to set out their sleeping furs. Then Ayla foraged for some wood for the campfire and quickly lit a fire to prepare the evening meal. They had easily fallen into the division of tasks. Jonayla would set up the gear while her mother built a fire and cooked the food. While the food was being prepared Jonayla would refill the water bags and unload both of the horses and begin their currying to remove any burrs and check for cuts, scratches and rough spots.

Mother and daughter worked as a team, as they all did. Teamwork was the only way to survive in their sometimes harsh climate. The secret to survival was division of labor. With shared labor, each was less tired than otherwise would be the case and that gave them more time for the esoteric pursuits such as artistic endeavor or enough time to create utilitarian items that were needed to make life more secure or enjoyable, something beyond just existence.

It was fully dark and well into the night before their tasks were completed and they were able to sit back and enjoy full stomachs and a cup of hot mountain mint tea. If the purpose of their trip hadn't been such a serious one, this interlude would have been one of the more enjoyable things they had experienced since the last Summer Meeting gathering when, as a family, they had taken a few days to get away and just be a family together. Having endured their First Zelandoni's illness and then her death, times had been tense and less than happy for so long it was hard to remember when they had been enjoyable and carefree.

As they sat by the cheery little fire with their hot fragrant tea, Jonayla looked at her mother and asked, "What will happen now? Now that you are First Zelandoni? There seems to be so much to do. You have to try to make peace in the north and I know that especially in the south many of the people have become dissatisfied with their voice in the decisions that affect all of the people... There's just so much to do, how are you going to do it all?"

"I'm going to do one thing at a time," Ayla replied. "Since I'm only one person I can only do what one person can do. I have already committed myself to a discussion with the southern Doniers, which means we will need to return to the Ninth Cave soon. We'll stay at Hilltop for a short time. I think since the southern Doniers and their Acolytes had to take the eastern route and will end up visiting at least four other caves before reaching the Ninth Cave, we should have at least five more days to accomplish what is necessary at Hilltop and travel home, probably with a day or two to spare."

"Well, considering everything that must be done I can't say I envy you," Jonayla said sincerely, "but I'll do everything I can to help you."

"I know you will and it's appreciated. You know it will soon be two years since you became an Acolyte. I have been wondering lately how you feel about it now. A lot has happened since you began the training. Do you still think you will want to become a Zelandoni someday?" Ayla asked, hoping that she would, but also hoping that she would still want to mate and have children too.

"I think that I want to continue with my training and I do want to do the moon phases next summer as planned, although I want to come with you when you go north this spring, so I might have to wait another year, or start in the winter. And yes, I think I do want to become a Zelandoni. I want to put to work some of the many things that you and Zelandoni who was First before you have taught me. I see how much difference you make to the world around us and I can't help but want to do the same," Jonayla replied.

"I'm glad that you feel contributing to the people is important, I only hope that you'll become mated to a good man and take the time to have children of your own. Are there any young men that you have interest in?" Ayla asked.

"Well, yes... there is a man that I have interest in. He is a friend of Matagan. I know everyone thinks that I'm not interested in having a mate; it isn't that, it's that I don't want just any man's child. I do want a child, actually more than one, but I want the children that are born to me to be my man's children, really his children! I want to know who the father of my children is," Jonayla said in a determined voice.

"The gift of knowledge does make one think about those things more than we did in the past," Ayla agreed. "So who is the young man that you're interested in as the father of your babies? Could it be Cambarre, that handsome young apprentice of Jondalar's?"

"Mother!" Jonayla replied, in an exasperated tone. "Yes it is Cambarre. We have noticed each other since he moved to the Ninth Cave last summer from Elder Hearth. When I'm around him he makes my heart beat faster, but I haven't spent much private time with him and he has other girls who pursue him. I know of at least one who shares pleasures with him and I'm getting old and he may not want me." This all came out in a rush of words as if it had been pent-up for some time.

"No, you're not old! If I remember right Cambarre was born eighteen summers ago, at least that is what Jondalar told me. You'll be seventeen at this Summer Meeting; and a good age to match his. And besides daughter, I was more than eighteen when I mated your father and he didn't think that I was too old."

"I know mother, but you're different, you have more confidence in yourself than I ever will and everyone says you're beautiful, even now when you have had three children they still say that. I'm plain and not anything special like you."

“You can’t really think you’re plain. You know that you’re beautiful, now you’re just fishing for complements,” Ayla reached across to her daughter and tickled her ribs, making her smile and squirm. “If you want that man as your mate you may have to tell him. Many men don’t see when a woman sends those signals, so sometimes you have to let subtlety go and just tell them how you feel.”

“I would die if he said he wasn’t interested in me after I told him that I loved him!” Jonayla wailed.

“I’ve always been proud of you daughter, remember the time you broke a bone in your leg when you fell off Gray. Within a hand of time you were up and riding again. You must have been fearful, but you showed no sign of it. Be fearless in this. If it is worth it, you will do it. If you don’t, then you don’t really love him and it wasn’t meant to be.” Ayla leaned over and kissed her daughter on the cheek. “No matter what you decide to do, I know it will be for the best. But someday, I hope you do have children. When I’m old, I want young children to play with.” She smiled impishly at her daughter.

“I’m glad we can talk about this mother. I haven’t been able to talk to anyone about it, not even Loral. I want to be with Cambarre and I would love to share pleasures with him and to give you our children to play with,” she smiled. “I’ll think about what to say to him,” Jonayla said, pausing for a moment to think. “I could see giving myself to Cambarre heart and soul, I really want to mother.”

Ayla leaned over to place a few more sticks on the fire, then said, “Well daughter, we should turn in, I want to get an early start tomorrow and we can discuss this more in the morning, if you want to.”

Both Ayla and Jonayla went to the horses to make sure they had access to water and grass. They were hobbled with lengths of rawhide thongs so they wouldn’t stray during the night, and it was always a good idea to make sure they would be content. There were plenty of grain-headed grasses and a small stream within easy reach. The two went to their furs and slept through the night, both feeling more content having shared their feelings with each other.

Ayla did lay awake for a while though, listening to her child’s breathing. It was times like this that she wondered if the gift of knowledge was really a gift. In the past, her daughter would have already experienced her first pleasures opening ceremony. But it had been decided almost four years ago now, to stop the ceremony. It turned out

that mothers didn't want their daughters to risk having a child with a man who would not make a hearth for her.

Now, because the Mother had told Her children about the importance of men in conceiving children, everything had changed and her daughter had to worry about things that used to be easy and pleasant. 'Some time's with knowledge there was a price to pay,' Ayla thought. 'Maybe I can talk to Jondalar about Cambarre?' Then she dismissed the idea. 'Let nature take its course, it worked out for me, it will work out for my daughter.' Ayla rolled over facing away from the fire and soon found sleep.

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As the early morning light glowed on the horizon, Ayla and her daughter were busy breaking camp and loading the carry baskets in preparation for the day's trek. They were on the trail as the sun rose to spread its glorious golden shafts of light over a misty valley.

The sun was slanting into late morning before the two women saw the smoke from Hilltop holding. Ayla paused to look up at a brilliant blue sky with hardly a cloud visible to the eye. The earth around them was green with all kinds of growing things bursting with life and she should have been rejoicing at the feelings that a new season brings, but the pain of Wolf's loss and the edgy feeling she now experienced as she approached the area of troubles blunted the vibrant colors and the joyous feelings she would have normally experienced at this time of year.

Ayla clicked her tongue and nudged Summer Child with her knees to start the horse forward again. Jonayla was feeling subdued as well and silently followed her mother up the gradual grade to Hilltop Holding.

-O-

It was obvious that something was going on at the cave. Both women could see people running back and forth and they could see people lying on the ground being tended to. Ayla urged Summer Child into a faster trot up the path they were following.

Within moments of their arrival, Ayla had dismounted with her medicine pouch in hand and was at the side of the closest person lying on the ground in front of the cave. She could tell instantly that the man had received a serious blow to the head, there was a large red swelling on the right temple and he was unconscious.

Ayla, as was usual for her in an emergency, took control. She ordered one of the women who had been tending the men on the ground to prepare resting places in the cave proper. "This man needs to have his head elevated and he needs to be covered and kept warm and restrained." She jumped up and went to another man close by who was unconscious and bleeding from a hole in his upper right chest. It looked like a spear had penetrated his flesh.

Ayla looked around and yelled to a passing man that she needed help with the injured man. The man stopped in his tracks and took notice of her for the first time and her of him. "Ah, Tormaden, this man is in shock, his mind is leaving his body and we only have a short time to reunite the two. Please get someone to take him inside right away and I need hot water to clean the wound."

Tormaden was the leader and he knew who she was immediately. What he hadn't known before this was that she was now First Zelandoni. The ivory plaque she wore proclaimed it. He immediately began to issue instructions and the unconscious man was lifted up by two men and carried to a place beside the main hearth and placed on furs spread out on the ground while someone else went to the hearth and began adding heated stones to a water container.

Within minutes the scene had been transformed from chaos into order and both injured men were being cared for. Ayla had instructed her daughter in medicine and the care of the ill since she was a small child. Jonayla knew what to do and had taken over the care of the man with the head injury. She had already made a poultice of wild hops and stavesacre root to be applied externally for an extended period of time on the head wound. The poultice was wrapped with woven fibers to hold it in place.

After cleaning the man's chest wound, Ayla quickly checked on her daughter's care of the unconscious man. Satisfied that Jonayla had done all there was to do, Ayla asked her to help with the other man's more serious wound. Once the flesh had been compromised, anything could happen. Fever could take a seemingly healthy man within days, sometimes even when the initial wound was small and insignificant.

Ayla knew that a careful cleaning and binding of the wound produced the best results. She felt that it had to do with washing away the bad spirits and covering the wound to keep more bad spirits away. This system seemed to be effective.

“Daughter, would you get some of the dried marigold petals and comfrey from my medicine bag?”

Jonayla knew what her mother was going to do with those ingredients. She would make a poultice to pack over the wound for the next several days, to help the healing process.

Ayla dipped the comfrey root in water to rinse it. Then she pounded it in to a pulp, mixing it with the hot marigold-petal solution left over from making the poultice and drizzled it directly onto the open wound, then packed the herb poultice into it. She wrapped the wound tightly with woven fibers to hold the poultice in place. Then she gave attention to the other scrapes and bruises, washing them with some boiled yellow-spined thistle blossoms solution to clean and soothe the abrasions.

After they had the men resting as comfortably as possible, Ayla turned to Tormaden and asked him to explain what had happened.

“These two were brought in by Brukeval and some of his hunters. They were looking for Flatheads and it looks like they found them.”

“Brukeval!” Ayla hadn’t heard that name in almost ten summers. “What is Brukeval doing here? Do you mean that he is hunting Clan people?”

“So it seems. I knew something was going on north of here with the ones you call the Clan, but none of us knew that Brukeval was involved. Apparently, according to him, there is a Shaman of the Chimudonii who has declared that the Clan people must leave his territory or die. And the Clan people don’t want to leave.”

“Did you talk further to Brukeval? Did he tell you why he went into the north?” Ayla asked. She had wondered for a long time what had happened to the man. She had always felt guilty about Brukeval’s abrupt departure from the Zelandonii; somehow she had offended him so much that he had just walked away from everyone he had known.

Tormaden answered the First, “No, we didn’t really talk but he brought these two hunters in and a bound flathead and then headed out again with his hunters. He said he would be back in a day or so and to care for his hunters and keep the flat... err, clan man tied up until he could come back.”

“You have a man of the Clan here? Where, I didn’t see him?”

“He was put in a storage pit so he couldn’t escape,” Tormaden said, becoming a little uncomfortable under the First Zelandoni’s hardening gaze.

“Take me to him now!” Ayla demanded.

“Yes, alright. We only did what they asked. I don’t know what is going on out there, but there were two hunters wounded, one with a spear thrust through him. I certainly didn’t want any flat... clan people walking around here unhindered.”

They walked briskly to the edge of the cave’s terrace and then down a short path to a log covering, placed over a pit dug chest high into the ground. This was a storage place, but not for food because it had been there for many years and no longer held the frozen properties of natural permafrost within its walls. Now it would normally hold hides for tents, grains and dried meats so they could be stored safely away from foraging animals.

When Tormaden rolled some of the log covering away, Ayla could see the crumpled form of a man who was a mixture of both her people and the Clan. “He’s a mixture, not only a man of the Clan, but part of us too. He’s unconscious and he is hurt. Bring him up so I can determine his injuries.”

“I don’t know... Brukeval told me to hold him captive...”

“Tormaden, do you want this man to die because you didn’t do anything to help him? Look down there, he isn’t moving.” Ayla pushed past Tormaden and jumped down beside the unconscious man. She placed her fingers against his neck where life’s beat was to be found. She could feel his beat, but he didn’t open his eyes and then she noticed a large lump on the top of his head. His arms and legs had been tied and one leg was twisted at an odd angle, Ayla knew that it must be broken.

“This man is unconscious, he has been hit hard on the head and he has a broken leg. How much trouble do you think he can cause in this condition Tormaden? Remove him from this pit, he needs to be treated.” She looked up at Tormaden and noted his look of reluctance. “Would you deny this man his life?” she said and stared up at him sternly.

Tormaden still hesitated then turned away and disappeared. In just a few moments there was another face looking over the edge of the pit, the open face of a young

man. "Can I help you Zelandoni?" He jumped down into the pit with her. "I am Kimadar, please let me help you."

Ayla looked at the young man gratefully and replied, "Thank you Kimadar, your help is welcome. Tormaden returned with a rope and then helped Ayla and Kimadar to get the inert Clan man out of the pit. Kimadar and Ayla came up from the pit next. Then Tormaden and Kimadar carried the unconscious man to the cave to be placed near the other wounded men.

In the light of day Ayla could tell that the Clan man was young, maybe the age of her own Clan son Durc. He was pretty beaten up. She could see cuts and bruises all over his body as if he'd been held down and beaten by more than one person.

She quickly went to work on the man, calling her daughter over to hold his shoulders. "I need to set the leg bones while he's still unconscious. Hold him under the armpits and pull away from me when I say." Ayla felt along the misshapen leg to find where the break was, then with a nod, her daughter pulled the man toward her, holding him tightly in her lap. Ayla counter-pulled against her daughter and brought the leg straight and then pulled with all her strength so that it stretched beyond the break, then she eased it back so that the bone ends touched. There was a satisfying sound as the two ends of the broken bone settled together.

Jonayla had never held a man of mixed essence before other than brief hugs from Echozar of the Lanzadonii, her hearth kin through her father. This man was different than Echozar, much hairier, and he had longer arms. He was very strong looking with bunched bicep muscles and a barrel chest. His face was different than her cousin's mate too, heavier brows and a hawk nose that looked almost like a snout, and a slightly sloped forehead.

When she was instructed to pull him from under his arms, she shivered for a moment; he looked very dangerous. No man of the Zelandonii would be able to stand up to this man in a one on one fight. His face looked dangerous too, like he might be vicious if angered.

Jonayla was brought back into the moment when her mother clan-signed that she could relax and that the bones were aligned and back in place.

Now that the bones were aligned, Ayla wasted no time in splinting the leg and cleaning the blood from his skin. Once the leg was secured to splints, she cleaned and wrapped his scalp, holding another poultice in place with some of the woven

fibers that she had been using for that purpose. The woven fiber was a good absorbent material that was easily tied into place or could be used to hold poultices in place when wrapped around the head or just as a good material for swabbing sores or wounds.

Tormaden had been hovering over them and now spoke, "Zelandoni, what should I do with this Clan man? If he gets better, I don't want him here because it will only cause trouble. If the Chimudonii don't come looking for him the Clan will. He can't stay here."

Ayla looked up at the worried leader of the Nineteenth Cave and realized that he was in a difficult position, caught between two warring factions. "Tormaden, where is the Zelandoni of the White Cave?"

"He is at the site working. He's always there, working and planning."

"Would you please send someone for him? I need to discuss this situation with him so we can come to some resolution that will solve your problem."

Tormaden sent a young hunter running down the trail to the cave with an urgent request for his Zelandoni to come as quickly as possible. He looked relieved that others would resolve his problem for him.

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"Zelandoni! Zelandoni!" The runner ran up to the entrance to The White Cave breathing hard. He stopped at the cave opening and peered into the dark interior, not wanting to enter. "Zelandoni, are you there?" The hunter was beginning to think that his Zelandoni was not in the cave, then he heard a muffled voice, "Yes, what is it?"

"The First Zelandoni and Tormaden have asked me to request that you come to them quickly."

The Donier of the Nineteenth Cave hurried into the light. "You said the First Zelandoni?"

"Yes, I said the First Zelandoni."

He asked no more questions but hurried toward the main holding, wondering who had been chosen as First Zelandoni and why they had come to Hilltop so soon after being chosen. Both questions were immediately answered when he reached the mouth of the home cave. As soon as he saw her kneeling beside a prostrate body on the ground, he realized that it was the Zelandoni of the Ninth Cave; he wasn't surprised by that. Even years ago when he'd first met her, he'd thought of her as Zelandoni, maybe even more than Zelandoni. He was glad that his fellow Doniers could see how right this woman was for the position of First among them.

"Zelandoni!" He hurried forward. Approaching, he noticed three men lying by the main outdoor hearth, bandaged and obviously in pain. "What has happened? Why wasn't I called Tormaden?"

Tormaden said defensively, "It all just happened, some men from across the river were hunting flatheads and were injured. The hunters left two wounded men and one injured prisoner. Then the First Zelandoni happened by and helped with the care of these men. You know that the Zelandoni who shares your responsibility here is away." Then as an afterthought he concluded, "I called for you as soon as I could."

The Donier hushed Tormaden with a simple 'Yes, yes', then spoke to the First Zelandoni, "I'm glad to see that you were chosen to lead us," he said, genuinely happy to see her. Ayla looked up into her old friend's face and saw his acceptance and friendship and was glad of it.

"Greetings Zelandoni," Ayla replied, "It seems that a lot of things have been happening in this area lately. We'd heard that there were men hunting Clan People in the north and now this, open violence crossing south of the river into Zelandonii land."

"Yes, we have been hearing stories about confrontations across the river to the north of us, but this is the first time we've become involved in it," the Donier said as he knelt down to have a closer look at the man the First Zelandoni was tending. "This is a man of the Clan. Where did he come from?" he asked.

"We don't really know where he came from other than from the north as Tormaden says. Which cave and where it is we don't know. Wherever it is, it is outside Zelandonii lands." Ayla looked at the cave leader, "You should treat people as you would want to be treated. This is a man, not an animal. I'm not sure that you would even treat an animal like that, throwing it in a hole, wounded and in pain."

"I am sorry Zelandoni. I'm sure that once things settled down I would have realized that. I have nothing against flat... Clan people..."

"Yes, I'm sure you're right Tormaden, forgive my temper, I realize it's not your fault." Ayla turned to the Donier at her side. "While my daughter watches over the wounded men, would you please walk with me? I have something I need to ask you."

"Of course," the Zelandoni of the White Cave replied, wondering what was on his leader's mind.

Chapter 8: The White Cave

After giving brief instructions to Jonayla for the immediate care of the wounded, Ayla and her fellow Zelandoni walked down the path that he'd just traversed. Ayla's instructions had been given more so those around her daughter wouldn't interfere with her efforts than for any actual need to instruct Jonayla.

As they reached the White Cave, Ayla noticed the opening had been enlarged quite a bit since her last visit to the site. There were chisel marks along the top and sides, making the opening more uniform than it had originally been. The Zelandoni led her into the cave and walked around the main cavern, pointing out the work that had already been done and talked about his plans for the other areas.

Ayla followed her friend around the chamber, feeling awe at the talent that was evident at every turn. On the west wall were two mammoth's at full run, you could almost imagine they were alive and caught in a web of time, ready to take the next leaping step, if time would only let them go. Farther back in one of the alcoves was a hunt scene. It showed a group of hunters using spearthrowers to take a herd of Bison. Ayla could almost feel the tension in the hunters as they gathered for the kill.

Now at the back of the chamber, the Zelandoni artist turned to face the cave opening and began to walk toward the mouth of the cave. As Ayla neared the entrance, she stopped in her tracks. Above the cave mouth, stretching the full length of the opening was a perfect image of a wolf, it was actually carved into the living rock. He was standing there on all four feet, with his head turned toward her, looking her in the eyes as if he could see her.

"That... that looks like Wolf!" Ayla said in a voice choked with emotion.

"It is Wolf, or at least it is the best representation of Wolf that I could make. I want to paint the relief, but haven't found the right moment to do it. He is the one who found this cave, without him, I wouldn't have been called to the Zelandoni."

"Zelandoni," Ayla began, "one of the reasons I came is to bring this." Ayla removed a pouch that was tied to her belt and held it out to the Zelandoni of the White Cave. "At Sacred Mountain, when I was chosen, and the Mother spoke to us - you might have felt her voice - the earth trembled."

"I did feel the earth move, several days ago. You mean..." his eyes widened. He would have to get the full story of what happened at the Zelandonia gathering before she left. This was just another strange and eerie event in this exceptional woman's life, not that he was really surprised that the Mother had spoken to her.

"Yes, that was the Mother making Her wishes known. But when the Mother gives something there is always a balance that must be achieved. The balance this time was the loss of Wolf. The Mother called Wolf to Her at the very moment that She spoke to the people. He died at my feet, after running for more than a day. He wanted to protect me as the earth moved," her voice broke with emotion. Clearing her throat she finished, "Only the Mother could have told him before it happened that the earth would move and that I would be chosen. She called him to me."

The Zelandoni of the White Cave was stunned. This was obviously a moment when the Spirit World had crossed over into this world. He had never heard anything like this happening in Zelandoni history. Something like this was only spoken of in legends.

Ayla continued with her story. "My daughter and I cremated Wolf's body as we do with a First Zelandoni. I'm not sure why we did that, except that it felt like the right thing to do. Jonayla and I performed a spirit ceremony and spread Wolf's ashes in a protective circle on the pebbles surrounding the ashes of our First Zelandoni who had just journeyed to the Spirit World." She paused for a moment, then concluded, "But, I kept some of his ashes..."

"You brought them here? These are Wolf's ashes?" The Zelandoni of the White Cave reached out to take the pouch. "This is a sign of almost perfect symmetry; the Mother speaks to me in this. I am so grateful to you Zelandoni, you are truly First among the Zelandoni.

"I know exactly what to do now. I will mix these ashes into the coloring that I've been thinking about for the wolf image above the entrance. It will make my hands and eyes perform the task truly in honor of 'The Wolf Who Was Zelandoni'. Doesn't that seem right; don't you think that this is a sign?"

"I don't know if it is or not, but I do know that I would feel such relief and happiness if you do as you propose. I think that my feeling of happiness might be a sign that it is the right thing to do. All I know is that I was guided to take away a bit of Wolf's essence and that I had to bring it here to this place and to you. If you think mixing Wolf's ashes in the coloring and painting his image with it is inspired by the Mother,

then so do I." Ayla realized that for the first time since Wolf's death, she felt acceptance, a feeling of calm, as if this was what needed to be done. She was grateful to the Zelandoni of the White Cave for his insight and willingness to honor Wolf.

"Will you be able to stay and watch me paint Wolf?"

"I don't know. I have to be back at the Ninth Cave in five days for a meeting with the southern Doniers, that would only give me three days at the most. How long will it take to paint the image?" Ayla hoped it could be done quickly.

"Probably more than three days, but you'll get a good idea what it will look like in just a day. If you'll keep an eye on the wounded men, I will begin on the image now," the Zelandoni artist said. Ayla noticed the eagerness that shone from his eyes.

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Over the next two days Ayla and her daughter spent their time between caring for the wounded men and visiting The White Cave. Everyone from the Nineteenth Cave was excited and curious about what was going on at The White Cave. Stories were circulating that their Donier had been suddenly called to make a great and important image within the cave. Zelandoni could not verify any story because he was working in solitude since his meeting with the First Zelandoni.

Everyone knew that The White Cave was an important spiritual place for all the Zelandonii people and it brought importance to their holding. Therefore, anything that went on at The White Cave affected everyone at the Nineteenth Cave. So as the days passed, speculation increased.

The day before they had to return south, Ayla decided to cook the evening meal for the Zelandoni of The White Cave. He had been working non-stop, trying to complete as much of the work as possible before she had to leave.

Both Ayla and her daughter rode away to hunt. It didn't take long before they came across nesting ptarmigan. "This is the perfect time of year for Creb's dish!" Ayla said excitedly. As she had done many times before, Ayla wanted to make that dish for a special friend. It always gave her pleasure to share the dish with special friends because it was special to her.

Jonayla loved the Clan dish too and had grown up with it as a seasonal treat, and spring was the time to make it just right. "I wish Wolf was here to find the nests for us. I love stuffed ptarmigan, it makes my mouth water just to think about it."

In short order the two women had downed six birds, enough for a small feast and they found all the nests filled with eggs. Jonayla candled the eggs and found all of them were fresh.

In the late afternoon, Ayla dug a small pit oven and lined it with rocks while her daughter plucked and cleaned the birds, preparing them for stuffing. Jonayla watched as her mother washed coltsfoot, nettles and pigweed and stuffed the bird's cavities with them, sprinkling in some herbs from her medicine bag, then nestling the fresh young eggs in the center of each cavity. She wrapped each bird in moistened hay that added a subtle flavor of its own. Then she placed the wrapped birds, one by one, in a circle by the glowing coals, covering the bundles with more wet hay and then earth. It would be only an hour or so before they had a tasty meal. Both Ayla and Jonayla were eager to taste the dish for the first time that season.

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Dusk purpled the hills to the east as Ayla called the Donier away from his task in The White Cave. He came from the cave as if startled by the lateness of the day. His mind had been so wrapped up in his effort that he had lost track of time.

Ayla urged the tired artist to seat himself by the fire and she and her daughter fussed over his comfort, bringing him a hide pad filled with hay to rest against and a soothing herb tea sweetened with dried linden flowers to relax him. The Zelandoni was served the ptarmigan by Jonayla who told him a bit about the history of the dish. She explained that it was a family favorite when all the ingredients were available, which was the case this time of year.

The Zelandoni wasn't sure about the recipe when he was first told that it was a favorite of a Mog-ur, from the Clan, but as soon as he bit into the tender bird and the flavorful juices were released he sighed in satisfaction, smacking his lips in appreciation. "This is really good. It's hard to believe that Clan people cook this way. I guess when you think about it, why wouldn't they have good tasting food?"

"You know, it's a good thing that you came to us when you did Zelandoni. I feel we've been thinking unfair thoughts about Clan people. It's obvious when you tell it, that they aren't animals. They wear clothes and what animal uses fire to cook their

food? I wonder why ever we thought of them as animals," the Zelandoni artist said, as he chewed lustily.

"The First Zelandoni before me said that the Zelandonii people had taken this area away from the Clan back in ancient times. She said that it might have been easier to think of them as less than people so that it made it alright to take their living places. Since then I have meditated long and hard on it, and that original explanation has the ring of truth about it.

"What I know is that the Clan is different than the Zelandonii, in that they can't change their way of living. The way they think about their surroundings, and what they do as a people, is set in stone. And because of that, I think eventually they are doomed and that makes me sad. During my time on this earth, I've experienced so much change that it sometimes makes my head spin. I enjoy finding out new things and experimenting with ideas, it makes life... interesting, fulfilling. The Clan people would not feel fulfilled, they can't understand the concept.

"But even if the Clan disappears from the earth someday, they are here, now, and are still children of The Great Earth Mother and though different from us, they are people and deserve to be recognized as people. I'm glad that you can see that too," she said, feeling grateful to him for his open-minded attitude.

When they finished their dinner, Jonayla made some cranberry evening tea and they settled back to enjoy full stomachs and a companionable friendship that comes from a long history of shared experiences and mutual thinking.

"Zelandoni," he began. "I know you have to leave for the Ninth Cave tomorrow, so I want to take this opportunity to say thank you again for everything you've done for me."

"You don't owe me any thanks," replied Ayla. "You serve the Mother as I do, and with your great talent as an artist, you give back more than most. If anyone should be giving thanks, it's me. Carving Wolf's image and then using his essence to bring his image to life has gone a long, long way in giving me peace of mind. I knew that Wolf was getting old but I couldn't imagine losing him, and when I did it was so abrupt and at a time when I couldn't fully express my real emotions."

"Yes, but I thank you anyway," the Zelandoni of The White Cave said. "We may be helping each other, but it doesn't lessen my gratitude to you. Most Zelandonia suffer when they are called. I know you did greatly. But all I've experienced is great joy in

my work. I admit that I wasn't serious about becoming a Zelandoni before The White Cave, but since, I have never looked back. This cave is part of me now. You and Wolf made that possible.

"In fact, I want you to know something that I have in my mind to do. The name of this cave isn't right. It was just a convenient description when it was found. I 'live' this cave and I know what it should be called. I plan to speak at this year's Summer Meeting and share my thoughts with all the Zelandoni, but I want you to know before anyone else, so you have time to think about it.

"I believe that the Mother has spoken to me in my dreams and since you came with the ashes I hear Her voice even louder and clearer in my head. This cave should be called 'The First Wolf Cave'. A wolf discovered it and the Mother put the image of a wolf in my head and made me carve it over the entrance. It seems obvious to me that this place," he waved his arm toward the entrance to the cave, "should be known by its finder, not by the color of its walls."

Ayla sat in silence for a long time. She would never have asked to name the cave after her good and noble friend, but to have this Zelandoni suggest it - the one person that the other Doniers would listen to because of his calling to the cave and to even suggest the term 'First' in the name of the cave, was such a powerful sign from the Mother. The Great Earth Mother was watching out for her, She was tending to Her child's pain, making it better, step by step.

Finally Ayla looked up, with tears of happiness in her eyes. Without saying a word, she reached across to her fellow Zelandoni, gripped his arm and squeezed; a tear trailing down her cheek. Her daughter watched silently and knew that what had passed between the two Doniers was substantial and just. It all felt right to her and she felt better because of what had been communicated here between her elders.

Chapter 9: Strife

The next morning, Ayla and her daughter made ready to leave. They were packed and had just returned from The White Cave after inspecting the work once more. The head and shoulders of the image had been painted in and Jonayla had exclaimed how much it looked like their Wolf. Even the special devoted look Wolf bestowed on his human pack leaders was captured by the talented artist.

Tormaden was grateful when the First Zelandoni had spoken of taking the still unconscious man of the Clan back with her to the Ninth Cave. Ayla knew that the man wouldn't fare well if left behind and she didn't want to leave him to the hunters from the north, but neither could she remain any longer at the Nineteenth Cave. The only alternative had been to take him with them. She could read the relief in the cave leader's eyes as she bid him farewell.

They tied the wounded man of the Clan securely onto the travois then Ayla and her daughter made one last inspection of the wounded hunters from the north, checking bandages and giving instructions to those assigned to care for them.

At first, the Chimudonii men from the north had been resentful of the care that Ayla and her daughter had given to the Clan man, but after several days in the company of the two attractive and competent women, their resentment had turned into gratefulness and curiosity.

The two injured hunters weren't used to women, especially attractive Zelandonii women, treating flatheads like people. But watching them work on the unconscious man, wrapping his injuries and cleaning his wounds, it was obvious that he was like them in many ways and so they were beginning to see him as a human being; a strange looking human being to be sure, but human all the same.

Ayla and her daughter had just reached their horses and were about to mount them when they heard a shout and turned to see a group of men walking rapidly toward them. The leader looked familiar to Ayla. The man in the lead was Brukeval! He looked older, he had a scar on his left cheek and his thinning hair was peppered with gray, but it was definitely Brukeval.

"What are you doing with that flathead!" he yelled as he hurried to the travois. "What are *YOU* doing here!" he looked hostilely at Ayla, moving aggressively toward her.

Jonayla moved to her mother's side and then stepped into the path of the advancing man. He didn't even look at her; he just shoved her to one side roughly. Jonayla fell and rolled, jumping up ready to confront the big angry man again.

"Daughter, no!" Ayla also signed for Jonayla to stop, adding an imperative so that her daughter knew that she meant it.

"Brukeval! Stop it *NOW!*" Ayla said with urgency. "For years I've wondered where you went. Seeing you so angry, I'm not surprised that you're responsible for this trouble. I prayed to the Mother, hoping that you would find peace wherever it was you had gone."

"Sure you have. I bet you just prayed and prayed for me. Everybody prays for Brukeval don't they? Don't waste my time pretending that you care about me, just hand over that flathead and once I collect my men we'll be on our way to do what you Zelandonii are too timid to do," Brukeval said with disdain.

Ayla moved in front of the large angry man to shield the unconscious form lying on the travois. "Brukeval, you have no authority here. I have been unanimously chosen by the Zelandonia as First Zelandoni! And you," she looked fiercely into his eyes, "are in Zelandonii lands and will not take anyone without our permission."

Brukeval shoved Ayla hard so that she fell over the travois. In that instant there was a banshee scream as Jonayla lunged forward landing on the large man's back, where she began to pummel him on both ears, trying to distract him from her mother.

The powerful and very angry man reached up, gripping the young woman's long hair and viciously yanked her over his shoulder, brutally throwing her to the ground. Ayla in shock, fumbled with her carry pouch for her sling and a stone, but before she could open the pouch, Brukeval grabbed it, ripping it from her hands. "You've always thought you were so superior, with all your tricks and all your friends. Well now you're just a weak woman, with nothing to say about anything!"

He stepped closer, towering over Ayla and raised his hand. "I'm going to teach you a lesson woman. When I get done with you, you'll know what it's like to be ugly, you'll have some idea how I've felt all my life." As Brukeval's hand rose in a fist to beat

down on Ayla's face she heard a "thunk" and a shriek of pain. Brukeval was suddenly gone from her view.

"Brukeval! Move away from Ayla! You other men, move away from her too. Move now or I will kill you!" Ayla looked behind her to see Jondalar sitting astride his horse with Durcan beside him on Lightning, his pony. She was relieved beyond measure to see her mate at that moment. No one had attacked her like this since her confrontation with the mad woman Attaroa of the S'Armunai, and that seemed like a lifetime ago.

"Did you hear me Brukeval? Move! NOW! If you don't move fast enough, my next spear will be sticking out from between your eyes instead of your hand!" Brukeval was hunched on the ground near Ayla, holding a bloody hand with his men standing nervously behind him. Backing away, Brukeval began scooting across the ground until two of his men grabbed him under the arms and dragged him, moving backwards about twenty feet. Ayla moved over to kneel beside her daughter who was still lying on the ground, stunned from the rough treatment she'd received.

Jondalar rode up to the travois and looked down at the unconscious man of the Clan and then to Ayla. "Is Jonayla alright?" he asked.

"Yes, just dazed, she'll recover," Ayla responded.

"What's the meaning of this Brukeval? Why did you attack my mate and my child?" Jondalar asked angrily.

"Your girl attacked me!" he responded loudly. "Take them away from here and keep out of our business. A business, that you Zelandonii should be taking care of yourselves, but are leaving to the people of the north."

"What are you talking about?" Jondalar asked, still holding his spearthrower ready, with extra spears bristling from a quiver slung over his shoulder.

"We're eliminating flatheads so we can settle the north unhindered. They raid us, steal our children and rape our women. No place is safe from them north of the river," Brukeval said, with a glowering stare. Ayla handed woven material to one of Brukeval's men and he wrapped Brukeval's hand with it.

"Brukeval, we all know how you feel about Clan people, but that doesn't give you the right to attack my mate and my daughter. If that ever happens again, I won't aim

at your hand. Now get out of here, beyond the river and out of our land. I think the Zelandonii will discuss what is to be done with you when they hear what you're up to here."

Brukeval stood and looked at the tall blonde man. "Jondalar, I've always liked you, you treated me well, but now you can count me as your enemy. We could fight you here and now and we would win, but I'm wounded and I have wounded men in that cave over there, so we'll just take our wounded and leave for now. But if I were you I'd keep looking over my shoulder."

Ayla jumped into the fray and responded; "I would do the same if I were you Brukeval. Jondalar is right, once the Zelandonii are informed about what you're doing up here, you may not like what we decide to do about it."

"You might be surprised what your people will say when they are informed," he sneered. "Not all of the Zelandonii are flathead lovers like you and her," he said gesturing toward Ayla who was helping her daughter to stand.

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Tormaden and several hunters stood by with their spearthrowers still ready. They had grabbed their weapons when Brukeval began pushing the women around and would have engaged the northerners if Jondalar hadn't already intervened.

The whole experience had been jarring and stressful, so Ayla was grateful when they were finally riding south and away from the Nineteenth Cave. She felt ashamed that she had been so easily overpowered and had been unable to protect her daughter who had a nasty bruise on her temple from Brukeval's brutal treatment of her.

"Jondalar, I was so afraid, I thought I was going to die before I'd even begun as First Zelandoni. Brukeval has changed out of all recognition," Ayla said as they looked at each other. Jondalar wouldn't admit out loud how frightened he'd been, seeing Brukeval standing over her with hate in his eyes.

He still remembered when Brukeval had been in love with Ayla, he'd known it even though no one ever spoke about it. It hadn't worried him, he knew that even if Ayla might have been attracted to a man who looked like Clan, he could trust her. But now that man's attraction had turned into hate.

Ayla was determined to be more on her guard in the future. From now on she would wear her sling wrapped around her head as she had once done when traveling from the east with Jondalar. She promised herself that she would never again let herself be unprepared to protect herself and her family.

Chapter 10: Man of the Clan

It was late afternoon when they reached the rock rampart that had created the new falls. It was now that Jondalar suggested they make camp for the night. "We have plenty of time, you don't need to arrive at the Ninth Cave for several more days and after what just happened at Hilltop Holding, it would be nice to take it easy and relax a bit on our journey back."

"Yes, that's a good idea Jondalar. I was already thinking about the meeting with the southern Zelandoni. The thought doesn't make me feel relaxed. I think sometimes not having to think about the problems of the people is just what I need," Ayla said, smiling at her mate, grateful for his suggestion.

"Mother, can I go see what's in those trees over there?" Durcan pointed toward a stand of trees. "Maybe I can hunt something for dinner."

They had travel rations, but fresh food wouldn't hurt. "Fine, but only if you go with your sister. I don't want anyone going out alone while we are still in this area."

Durcan reined his pony around and heeled it into a gallop toward the trees with Jonayla following closely behind him. Her spearthrower out of its holder, she was ready to hunt alongside her brother.

As their children hunted, Ayla and Jondalar found a level area beside a small brook that meandered back toward the river. This is where they setup camp. The falls in the distance created a soothing atmosphere. They were happy to be together and away from everyone else. Lately circumstances had drawn Ayla away from Jondalar and her children more than she would have liked.

Jondalar helped move the wounded man from the travois, to a spot near the campfire. He thought the man looked pretty beaten up. It looked like he had been struck over and over again, maybe even after he was unconscious.

Ayla came over to the man and held his head up then dipped her fingers in a cup of water to trickle some into his mouth. She was worried about him. In her experience if someone remained unconscious for too long, they might not awaken again. Ayla untied him from the travois to check his wounds. He would again be secured to the travois for his safety when travel resumed.

Placing his bandaged head on a makeshift pillow of rolled hides, Ayla turned to start a fire in the circle of stones that Jondalar had made. She struck the flint against the firestone causing a hot spark to land on the kindling and blew on the ember until a flame flared up. It was at that moment she heard a gasp from behind her and looked around at the prostrate man.

His dark brown eyes were wide open and he was looking at her with fear and consternation. Ayla stood and slowly walked over to him. She knelt down beside him, assuming the Clan woman's position when speaking to a Clan man. She sat in this position for some time before she felt the touch on her shoulder that indicated his willingness to allow her to speak to him.

Ayla looked up and signed, "This woman would ask the man of the Clan how he feels? You have been away in the Spirit World for several days. You were hit on the head and you have a broken leg." She knew that it was best to let the man know the extent of his injuries before he tried to move.

The man looked startled, and didn't respond to her query. Ayla tried again. "I am a medicine woman of the Clan, far to the east." She pointed eastward. "I hold the black stone of the Clan and can help you recover."

The man shrugged and signed, "It is nothing," referring to his injuries. "Where am I? Why have you brought me here?"

Ayla replied, "You were a captive of men who would have hurt you further and you needed to be away from them. My mate and I brought you away and we will care for you until you are able to travel on your own."

"How can you speak the proper language and how is it that you say you are a Medicine Woman, when you are one of the Others?" The man of the Clan signed, as he looked around at his surroundings.

"I was adopted by our Clan's Medicine Woman who was first among all the Medicine Women in the east. She taught me and her own daughter together. I made the sacred substance for the Mog-ur ceremonies." Ayla signed this, to show that she was an accomplished healer and not just casually knowledgeable.

"Ayla!" Jondalar hurried toward her with his arms full of firewood. "He's awake!"

The prostrate man was startled, looking around at the tall blonde man of the Others approaching him. His body tensed as he readied himself for confrontation.

"Jondalar, please drop the wood over there and speak to this man in Clan signs. Tell him that you're not here to threaten him and that we want to be his friend."

Jondalar did as Ayla asked. He dropped the wood beside the fire and signed to the man from where he stood that he meant him no harm. The man of the Clan could just barely make out his signs. They were little better than a child's signs. He was amazed that a man of the Others could speak a proper language at all. And this woman at his side, she spoke the sacred form of the Clan language flawlessly. He must think about what to do.

Ayla offered the wounded man water. She helped him up onto his elbows and held the water bag to his lips to let him drink. When he began to swallow too much, too fast, she pulled the water away and signed, "You must drink in little amounts at first, or you will be sick and throw up. Here, have a little more now." She held up the water bag again so he could have a few more swallows. "I will leave this with you so you can drink when you wish," she signed, placing the water bag within easy reach.

Ayla turned back to the campfire. The small pile of kindling had burned itself out. She rekindled the burnt out kindling then bent forward to strike the firestone again. She then blew on the live spark and quickly began to build the fire, adding twigs then some of the wood that Jondalar had brought.

"Ayla," Jondalar said, "you better explain to that man what you're doing. I don't think he knows about firestones and he's looking at you like you're from the Spirit World."

Ayla looked around at the man whose eyes were again wide with fright. "Oh, I didn't think," she said out loud.

Ayla signed, "I started the fire using these two special stones." She held them out for the man to take, but he wouldn't touch them. "This is flint, like what a knife or spearhead is made of." Then she held up the iron pyrite and said, "This is a firestone and when you hit the firestone with the flint it causes a spark. It isn't magic, it is a gift from Ursus and anyone can use them to start a fire," she said as she laid the stones on the ground by the water bag next to the man.

The man looked at the stones and then back at the woman. She looked strange, like all of the Others did, but she could speak correctly and she was obviously a Medicine Woman, he could tell this from the bindings on his damaged leg. None of this made any sense to him, but his Mog-ur had sent him south to try to find a leader among the Others and it appeared that he had done so. Now he was determined to try to accept her and what he was seeing. Before he left for the south his Mog-ur told him that since his spirt was a mixture between the Clan and the Others that he should be able to make himself understood better than anyone else in the Clan. His mother's mother had been forced by a man of the Others and had taken his spirt. He had been honored, finally to have something he could do better than anyone else. He was supposed to find a leader among these people and explain that there were men of the Others who were fighting and killing Clan people and that it must stop.

Until now it hadn't worked out that way. He had crossed paths with the killers and had been captured by them. He thought he would die then, but here he was in the midst of the Others, being cared for by a Medicine Woman of their kind, one who knew how to speak and seemed to know Clan ways. It was all so overwhelming.

Ayla could see the confusion in the man's eyes as he looked around the campsite, noting the horses and the travel gear spread out for their night's stay. She wanted to communicate with him, to find out more about him and his Clan, but she knew that she would have to be careful, and to move slowly. Clan people didn't like change and this must be like a person jumping into a lake and trying to live as a fish.

Suddenly, through the trees and away to their right, the children came galloping and whooping toward them with obvious delight at having found something to contribute for dinner. Ayla stood up and signaled firmly for quiet, telling them to take the horses to the far side of the campsite, adding the imperative so they knew it wasn't a casual request.

Both children pulled on their horse's reins and came to a halt about twenty strides away. They dismounted and each, holding a hare dangling by its feet, walked into the camp quietly.

Fire from rocks, children riding horses, and Others speaking Clan; this was all so amazing he HAD to be dreaming... but he wasn't. The man of the Clan had seen the children racing toward them, he had also noted that the woman had signed to them to be quiet and to take the horses away from the campsite. He was amazed to see youngsters on horseback. He'd once seen an adult man of the Others riding a horse but had never even imagined that their children would do so too.

He watched as the woman turned toward him and signed, "These are my children. The boy is called Durcan, who is named after the Clan legend of Durc and we call him Durc among the family, the girl is called Jonayla, after my mate and I. My mate's name is Jondalar and my name is Ayla, a name given to me by the Clan when I was very small, many years ago."

Ayla signed that she would know his name if he would share it.

"I am Groog," he said the 'name' out loud, as Ayla had done with her family names. Then he signed, "Speak your name again."

"A-y-l-a," she said slowly.

"Aaay-llaaa," he repeated very slowly, struggling to make the word the way she had.

"Yes, that's it, 'Ayla'," she signed to reassure him. This moment struck a chord deep within her, a memory of a time long ago when she had been a little girl and Creb and Iza had first pronounced the name. She was even more certain now that it wasn't the name her parents had given her, but she felt that it was a name that belonged to her, one that she would always cherish. Even now as Zelandoni she still thought of herself as 'Ayla' and encouraged Jondalar to continue to use her name. In her heart she would always be Ayla even though Doniers were supposed to give up their names.

Durcan and Jonayla had moved over by the campfire and were following the conversation between their mother and the man of the Clan. Both children understood a great deal of the Clan language. Many of the mannerisms and the body language were almost second nature to them because their mother had taught them the Clan way of talking from the time they were babies. The only difference between her ability and theirs was the fact that their presentation of the Clan language was sexless. Never having experienced the living arrangements and the mindset of Clan people, neither child could reproduce the submissive/aggressive nature of the language.

Ayla never really worried about whether or not her children understood the nuance between the sexes, but now as they tried to greet the Clan male, he had a hard time understanding their signing. He would look to Ayla as interpreter at first, but before they turned in that night he was beginning to understand their efforts more readily.

After all, they were making the correct signs, just not using the male/female postures.

As dusk descended around their campsite, they ate the rabbits that Durcan and Jonayla had taken during the day using their spearthowers. The children had skinned and dressed the meat and Ayla had cooked it. Groog took the food that was offered him and watched them begin to eat their portions before biting into his own.

The food tasted much like he was used to because Ayla hadn't added the herbs and spices that she normally would have, only some sea salt. Groog watched the family during the meal. They were all talking, using the Clan language and also the funny sounding language too. The Others were using their strange sounding language and signing what they said at the same time as a courtesy to him.

Maybe these Others would help him after all. Maybe staying with these people would be the best thing to do. At least the Medicine Woman could interpret for him and bring him to their leader who might do something about the killers in the north. Groog finished his food then signed that he would sleep. He then turned away from the fire and closed his eyes.

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Groog jerked awake. He looked up into the brilliant blue eyes of the girl of the Others. She was squatting beside him and must have just touched his shoulder to wake him. "Good morning sleepy head," the teenager signed. Groog wasn't sure if he should discipline her for such impertinent talk or if he should just keep his silence and send the girl away.

She didn't seem like any female he'd ever encountered. There was no subtlety about her. The way acted she could almost have been a male. Even so, it was obvious that she was female because she had a high voice, curved hips and breasts. He decided to keep silent and watch.

The girl had moved to the fire and was dishing out something into a wooden bowl. She nimbly moved back to him and handed him the bowl and smiled at him. To Groog that smile was a sign of challenge, but when he looked at the others he could see that they all made the same face to each other. He would just have to get used to the faces these Others made. Groog kept silent, he would have to be very careful, he thought to himself.

After eating the hot mushy grains mixed with berries that was handed to him by the young female, he signed to the blonde Medicine Woman, asking her where their journey was taking them.

"This woman is going home to the south, down this river for another day and a half," she responded in perfect Clan.

"Can you introduce me to your leader? I need to speak to a responsible leader of the Others."

"We have two leaders as you do, one for the caves and one for spiritual things, which do you want to talk to?" she asked.

"He who speaks for 'all' of the Others. That is the man I wish to speak to," Groog replied.

The woman made the challenge face again and said, "That would be me. I am Mog-ur who is first above all other Mog-urs of the Others."

"You cannot be. You are a woman!" He was angry now. How dare this woman lie to him about the Spirit World. What was he, a baby, that he would believe tall tales like this? "I do not believe you, you do not speak the truth," he signed showing agitation.

Ayla rocked back on her heels and thought for a moment. She shouldn't be surprised that Groog didn't believe her. The Clan would never make a woman their leader; it would be completely foreign to them. She turned to Jondalar who had been watching the two of them. He hadn't followed everything that passed between them, but he understood that the man did not believe that Ayla was the spiritual leader of the Zelandonii.

"Jondalar, I need you to sign to Groog who I am." She signed as she spoke so Groog would know what she had said and to show that she wasn't giving Jondalar any more information, but just asking him to sign in Clan.

Jondalar came over to the man of the Clan then squatted down beside him and signed, "Ayla is First among the Zelandoni," he had to say the word Zelandoni, since he couldn't sign a foreign word in Clan. "She is the spiritual leader of all the Zelandonii. She talks to the Spirit World for our people." He looked at his mate and asked, "Is that enough?"

It was obvious to Ayla that Groog was not convinced by what Jondalar had told him. She could see the doubt in his eyes and in his body language.

Without further discussion Ayla stooped to the fire and picked up some of the dark ash that surrounded the fireplace and stood in front of the Clan man and slowly began to mark her face with the ash. She traced a circle around one eye and then dipping a finger into the ash again, tracing another circle around the other eye. Then continuing to dip her finger into the ash as needed, she marked a crow's foot of three lines at the outside of each circle, then slowly, not taking her gaze off Groog, she traced a line of ash from the center of her forehead, down the bridge of her nose and over her lips and down the center of her chin. Once done she stood up, looking down at the man.

"I am Mog-ur who is first among the spiritual leaders of those you call the Others," she signed. "Yes, I am female, but among my people females can be powerful and share all responsibility with the males. We hunt, we use weapons, we build things and we talk to Ursus, the same as men do. I know that the Clan women do none of these things, but we are Zelandonii, not Clan. Do you understand Groog?"

Groog stared. He'd been staring at her from the moment he realized what she had been doing. Normally he would have consciously diverted his eyes but this was beyond anything 'normal'. He knew the marks were those of the Mog-ur even before she had completed them, and he was stunned. She had started fire without a friction stick, she rode on the backs of horses and she even knew the sacred name of Ursus. As he watched intently, he could find no insincerity in her body language.

The reason Groog had been chosen to find a leader among the Others was because he was of both Clan and the Others and not being fully Clan, their Mog-ur believed he would be able to understand them better than any other among them. That very well could have been the reason that Groog was able to consider the possibility that a female could be a spiritual leader after initially rejecting her claim out of hand. Groog did believe her. All he had seen and heard made him believe her. His luck was good, he thought, he had found the leader he sought and it was completely by chance. Groog then realized; he hadn't found the leader, the leader had found him.

This was an opportunity he would not throw away. He would stay with this female Mog-ur and learn what she could teach him of the Others. He would speak to her and convey the trouble the Clan was having with the violent men of the Others in the north. He would tell her about the hunting and killing of Clan people. He needed

to convey all of this - and soon - or the Clan would retaliate and that could only make things worse, or so his Mog-ur had told him.

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Jondalar had watched Ayla mark the design on her face using cold ashes from the fire and he had seen the reaction it caused in the man. The fear in Groog's eyes was unmistakable. "Ayla, what were you doing with the ash?" he finally asked, feeling a strange unease.

Without turning, Ayla responded to his question. "These are Mog-ur marks Jondalar and I think it's the only way to make him believe that I'm a leader, even if I am only a female. I can't think of any other way to convince him that he can talk to me about important matters."

"I've never seen those designs before. When did you see them? Groog is responding to them, that's for sure," Jondalar said.

"The Clan Mog-urs painted their faces with this design when they performed sacred ceremonies and they would wear them during rituals for Ursus. Everyone in the Clan has seen them, that's why I'm using them now. It feels right for some reason. I think the Mother is guiding me in some way. I've had these feelings lately, feelings that tell me what I should do," Ayla said this with a slight quiver in her voice as if she wasn't quite sure what she said was true.

"Well, if the look on his face is any indication, I think you've convinced him that you're a spiritual leader."

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A little while later, as they readied the horses to begin the day's journey, Ayla noticed with satisfaction that the flint striker and firestone were no longer on the ground beside Groog. Jondalar and Durcan helped the man onto the travois, while Ayla considered the ramification of the man's willingness to take the stones. It meant that he could accept new ideas. That was a good sign and very unusual.

They were soon on the trail again. Durcan took the lead, he had too much energy to follow along and needed to be first to see what was around the next bend. Also, he traveled light and therefore could take advantage of any opportunity that might arise to hunt along the way. Jonayla brought up the rear, because she was the older

of the two and was willing to keep an eye open for anything unusual that might be following behind them.

They left the river early in the day, rather than follow its meandering course and had taken the trail leading to South Face Holding. By late morning the main holding was visible. Stopping to switch the travois to Jondalar's horse for the remainder of the day, Ayla decided to ride up to the main cave of the three cave holding to meet briefly with their Zelandoni and Deanna, their leader.

Ayla felt that it was important to personally invite them to the Ninth Cave for a meeting to take place in two days' time. She wanted them to participate in a discussion about the situation in the north. She felt that having Denanna, (who had always been skeptical about the clan and its people), would be helpful in gauging the Zelandonii's overall response to her suggestions.

As Ayla came level with the terrace that jutted out below the main area of the many small cave openings that comprised the South Face Holding, she saw Denanna and her ancient Donier coming down steps that had been carved into the face of the cliff. They were coming down to meet her.

"Greetings First Zelandoni," Denanna called as Ayla approached. "We saw your family coming along the river bank and thought you might stop. Do you have time for some tea?"

"Greetings Denanna and Zelandoni," Ayla responded. "Yes, tea would be welcome. I don't have much time but wanted to stop here so that I could discuss some things with both of you; such that you might share with the co-leaders of the Twenty-Ninth Cave and their Zelandoni." Ayla dismounted and a boy about Durcan's age led Summer Child behind Ayla as the trio began to walk.

"Assuredly," Denanna said, with a lack of commitment in her voice. Ayla was then led to the visitor's cave at the base of the cliff. The area held many of the smaller caves that stored gathered firewood and building materials and comprised the work areas of the South Face Holding.

They settled beside the guest hearth as the Zelandoni of the Twenty-Ninth Cave heated water using stones that were nestled in the glowing coals. He picked up one at a time with the wooden tongs, quickly dipping each into a bowl of water to remove the ash and then dropped them into the hide water container sitting on a

raised flat stone to one side of the hearth. Soon the water was hot and the tea was made.

Ayla blew on the surface of her tea to cool it a bit, then spoke, "I know that runners were sent to invite all the leaders from the holdings along The River to a meeting at the Ninth Cave. I wanted to personally request your attendance Denanna and yours too Zelandoni," she nodded with respect to the old man. "I think it is essential that you attend. Will you be able to?" Ayla had heard what Brukeval had suggested during their confrontation and she needed to put to the test whether or not her people would support an intervention in the north.

Denanna, looked into her cup and then into the eyes of the new First Zelandoni and said, "Why would you want me to attend? I know what this meeting will be about and you know my feelings about flatheads. I make no apologies for my opinion that they are little more than animals. Nothing you have said has changed my mind on that subject. I mean no disrespect toward you, but just because YOU believe something doesn't mean that everyone must believe the same."

Ayla looked from the leader of the Twenty-Ninth Cave to her Zelandoni and back again. She had thought that Denanna wouldn't attend if she wasn't personally invited and this just proved that her thought had been correct. "I understand that you feel that way. That is exactly why I need you at the meeting. I don't want to have just people who agree with me. If there are people who do not agree, then they also need to be heard in any council that may affect the Zelandonii people as a whole. Won't you please consider attending?" Ayla waited for an answer.

Denanna was impressed that the new First Zelandoni was trying so hard to be fair. She wasn't sure if she herself would be this open to criticism if the situation were reversed. There was something very impressive about this younger woman, 'Even if I don't agree with her about flatheads, I am glad that the Zelandonia have chosen her to be their First,' Denanna thought. Out loud she replied, "Yes, I will attend and we will encourage our co-leaders and Zelandoni to attend also."

The discussion turned briefly to the Clan man seen on the travois as they approached. No one had missed the fact that they had a flathead with them. Denanna wanted to know why they were traveling with him. Ayla explained what had happened while she was at Hilltop Holding and that she felt if she left the helpless man there, Brukeval or one of his men would have killed him. Ayla explained that with her knowledge of his language, she hoped to find out, from his

point of view, what was happening and why the Clan were attacking the Chimudonii who lived in the north.

"At the very least we need to understand what is happening north of the river before heading into the fray. I don't believe we have ever had anything like this happen in the history of the Zelandonii. I don't want to make a mistake or take a side that might be in the wrong. No matter how you feel about Clan people, I'm sure you would want to know what is going on before we try to intervene. Right now, the problem is mainly at the border of the Zelandonii lands, but the violence has begun to spread. Tormaden, leader of the Nineteenth Cave, has asked for help and it is our responsibility to go to his aid," Ayla stated.

"I agree that we don't want this conflict to overflow into our lands and I am willing to listen to your council. We will be there the day after tomorrow," Deanna replied.

Ayla thanked the leader and her Zelandoni. Finishing her tea, she mounted her horse and left them using the gesture of farewell as she returned to her family and the man of the Clan to resume their journey south.

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That evening when camp was made and everyone had eaten their fill, Ayla decided to encourage the silent Groog to tell his story of how he had come to be captured by Brukeval and his men. She finished her portion of the hearty stew that Jonayla had made from yet another rabbit that her brother's sharp eyes had seen during the day's journey.

Ayla set her bowl aside and signaled to Groog, "This woman would ask Groog, how he came to be captured and beaten by the Chimudonii in the north." She spoke his name and that of the Chimudonii, so that the others noticed that she was signing to him. Jondalar and the children became silent and watched as the two conversed.

Groog, wanted to tell his story, it was just hard to overcome his natural reluctance to speak of important things to a female. But he knew that it must be done or he would fail his Mog-ur and his Clan. To make it easier to do, he addressed himself to the man, even though they all knew he was answering Ayla's question, "I was sent by my Mog-ur because I serve him and he thought since I was of mixed spirits it might be easier for me to communicate with the Others."

Ayla nodded, asking Jondalar to encourage him to continue. She knew he was formally addressing him and not her, but she didn't really mind. She was asking questions; she was getting answers. Jondalar made the signs asking the man to continue.

Groog looked relieved when he realized that the woman understood his dilemma and was willing to communicate through the man. He continued, "For two summers we have come under attack by men of the Others. This was done for no apparent reason that we could understand. It all started when our cave was suddenly attacked by the Others. We were forced to run away from our home, leaving everything behind. When we came back to retrieve our belongings we found that everything had been piled together and burned."

Groog was signing very fast now, his emotions rising to the surface. Jondalar could no longer understand him but just nodded and looked sympathetic, hoping that this expression of concern was the correct one to show under the circumstance. Ayla didn't miss a word.

Groog looked from the man to the woman and continued excitedly, "We were very angry when we realized what had happened. We had been attacked for no reason and all of our belongings were destroyed. Then, when we moved to a new cave and began to rebuild our supplies, we were attacked again." He gestured to Jonayla's spearthrower sitting on top of the gear beside her sleeping furs. "They killed Norgreb, one of our best hunters, using one of those things.

"We fought back then, we had no choice. They behaved like animals, unthinking and destructive for no reason. They were worse than animals, only wanting to kill us. So we finally left our new cave and moved farther away from them. But that didn't help because they followed us and attacked us again and again.

"We don't know what to do," Groog signed with frustration. "Over the past winter season we have lost three more hunters and two of our women to these killers. Now they hunt us even in the dead of winter. We will not continue to be killed without retaliation. If this continues, our leader will talk to other Clans and we will combine our strength and fight back, killing those who kill us."

Groog stopped with a sigh and looked at the fire burning in the hearth. The sky was fully dark now and the flames flickered across the Clan man's face. Jonayla could see his distress, she'd just listened to his story, understanding every word he had conveyed and she knew without a doubt that the Clan was serious about this. His

face was so foreign looking to her that she could understand why some of the Zelandonii thought the Clan weren't human.

Ayla looked at the man and signed, "I will be talking with our leaders soon and we will do something about this. Even though the Chimudonii are not of our people, they should not be attacking Clan or anyone else. I'm afraid the instigator is a Zelandonii. It was Brukeval and his men that attacked you. Brukeval is full of hate. He is a man who has a sickness in his mind for which there is no cure that I know of."

"Groog, I will bring your cause to our leaders a few days from now. This woman would ask you to participate in the meeting. My son or daughter will translate everything into your language so you will know what is being said. Is this acceptable to you?"

With a nod of agreement, Groog overcame thousands of years of societal conditioning. He had responded to a woman's request on a serious subject that affected the Clan. That one nod broke a tradition that had gone unbroken since the dawn of mankind. This was not lost on Ayla, even if the rest of her family didn't realize the significance of it.

Chapter 11: Anthill

Ayla was aware of the spectacle they made as she urged Summer Child up the path to the Ninth Cave's entrance. Groog was holding on to the travois nervously and many of the people stood around watching with surprise and consternation showing on their faces. The man being carried into their midst was not your usual person of mixed essence; he looked like a full-blooded flathead to most of them.

Jondalar, Jonayla and Durcan had dismounted in the corral to the south of the main cave and were walking back to meet Ayla at the cave entrance. Ayla was relieved to see Proleva coming toward her. Proleva was her friend and the mate of Joharran, the leader of the Ninth Cave. "Ayla, what is this?" When Proleva was agitated or taken by surprise she sometimes forgot to address her friend by her Zelandoni title.

"Proleva, it's good to see you. This man is of the Clan. I'm sorry," she smiled, "you probably already guessed that. It's a long story and I need to get him away from all the staring eyes." Ayla indicated all the people standing around them watching. "The Clan considers direct prolonged eye contact as rude and I'm sure that Groog is feeling very uncomfortable right now. I'll take him to my dwelling. I would appreciate it if you can find Joharran and ask him to come as soon as possible. If you came too, it would be appreciated."

Proleva looked at the strange man on the travois. He looked different from any of the mixed essence people that she'd seen before. He looked like he could be dangerous. His face was that of a brute, glowering, with large teeth and overhanging brooding brows. And those arms, huge muscled things, he looked like he could crush a rock using just his hands and without exerting much effort.

Lying virtually helpless on the travois, Groog could see the hostile stares coming from the Others and he felt vulnerable and that angered him; he didn't like to feel weak. When they had first rounded the hills to the north of this place, he had been awed by the number of people. He'd never seen anything like it before. As they approached, he could see people hurrying this way and that, like an anthill. It was hard to believe there were so many of the Others in this river valley. Two Clan meetings put together would not match the number of the Others in just this one cave!

It was frightening to realize that there were so many of these Others. And now he was in the middle of them and they were rudely staring at him with what looked like hostile intent. There was little he could do about it. With a broken leg he couldn't run and it would be impossible to defend himself against so many.

Groog was startled when the man called 'Jonlar' tapped him on the shoulder and signed that he wanted him to lie down on a hide that was stretched between two poles. He realized that 'Jonlar' wanted him to lie on the hide cover so that he and another man could carry him somewhere. At that moment Groog didn't really care where that might be, so long as it was away from all these rude eyes staring at him.

He lay still as 'Jonlar' and the strange man picked him up on the litter, one at his feet and one at his head and carried him further into the huge abri. It became darker and the overhanging ledge began to reach closer to the ground. Then they were moving another direction and suddenly Groog was brought through a curtained opening and set down on the ground. 'Jonlar' handed him a rolled up fur for a pillow. A single candle provided welcome light.

It was quiet here. Surrounding them was a knee high rock foundation, supporting pole frames with hide screens stretched between them rising taller than a Mammoth spear. These screens were blocking his view, but also blocking out those Others who had been so rude. Groog saw a flash and a flame. 'Jonlar' had started a fire in the hearth with his magic stones. Groog strained to see better, then was startled by a sudden noise at the curtain. It was only the boy child 'Durc', bringing in the carrying baskets and their other travel gear. As the boy passed by, he signed, "Greetings," and made the facial grimace that he now realized was the Others' sign of friendship.

Then the young female 'Jonayla' came into the enclosure, followed by the female Mog-ur. "You are safe here Groog," the female Mog-ur signed and gestured with a nod. "You will not be bothered by rude eyes in this dwelling. I apologize for the people staring at you, but in our society, looking directly at one another is not considered rude. We use screens made of stretched hides like these around us to have privacy from others."

Groog grunted his acceptance and nodded his head. At least this woman understood the proper ways. He would have to ask her how she knew so much about the correct way to act and how she had learned to speak properly. He was amazed by her abilities and could now readily believe that she was a powerful spiritual leader. He

was sure that his Mog-ur would agree with his assessment if he had the opportunity to meet her and see for himself what she could do.

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It was hard to tell what time of day it was while under the ledge with screens surrounding him, but Groog thought it was probably late afternoon now. They had eaten food earlier and the children had gone out some time ago as had the man 'Jonlar'. The female Mog-ur was keeling beside him again, this time rewinding his leg after having washed his wounds. She was gentle and had confident hands, just like a Clan Medicine Woman. She had replaced his soiled hide wrap with another and had helped him don a new loincloth. He felt freshened and relaxed.

It was when she was freshening his fur pillow that a broad shouldered man scratched at the curtained opening and stepped in. Ayla turned and greeted the man, "Joharran, thank you for coming! I was hoping to see you before it became too late in the day." Ayla gestured toward the man next to her, "This is Groog, a man of the Clan," she signed to Groog as she spoke the words. Then Ayla nodded toward Joharran, "Groog, this is Joharran, the leader of the Ninth Cave of the Zelandonii. He leads all of the people you see here.

"Groog is from the Clan across the river to the north of Hilltop Rock and he was heading south to find our leaders to lodge a complaint about some of our people and the Chimudonii. He says both are attacking them and even killing some of them." As Ayla talked, she continued to sign the same information to Groog so he would understand what she said.

Joharran frowned, "How do you know that he's telling the truth? You say some of our people are involved. It's hard to believe that a Zelandonii would be doing something like that. I know there are people who don't like the idea of having flat... Clan people around here." He looked at Groog. "But to hunt them like animals is not acceptable and it could end up causing violence south of the river if they decide to take revenge."

Ayla understood that Joharran was having doubts, she wouldn't have believed it either until she ran in to the situation personally. "There are two reasons that I believe Groog, she said and signed, looking between the two - so different - men. "First, I know that because of the Clan's way of speaking they can't tell a lie without it showing in some way to anyone else who speaks their sign language.

"They don't have a complete verbal language. They communicate mainly with gestures and motions, but their sign and body language are fully comprehensive and rich with nuance. Anyone who signs in Clan would be able to see a lie instantly.

"The second reason I believe Groog, is that I ran into Brukeval at Hilltop Rock. He had dropped off two men who were wounded and also Groog, who had been beaten unconscious. When I was leaving the holding to return south, Brukeval knocked me down and would have beaten me senseless if Jondalar hadn't stopped him."

"Brukeval! How dare he do something like that, and to a Zelandoni," Joharran said, incensed. Then, thinking for a moment, he continued more calmly, "Hmm, I always wondered where he'd gone. It makes sense that he would have gone north. The Summer Meeting was held near the Nineteenth Cave when he left and since no one ever saw him again, it would make sense. You say he knocked you down, why did he do that?" Joharran looked worried.

Ayla answered, "Because I was taking Groog with me. I found him at the bottom of a storage pit outside the nineteenth cave, unconscious and with bruises and cuts and a broken leg. Although I arrived shortly after Brukeval and his people had left, it didn't look like anyone was going to help him anytime soon.

"Tormaden said that they were coming back and that he would give them Groog if they asked because he didn't know the truth of what was going on and didn't want trouble. That's when I decided to bring Groog with me, and that's why Brukeval and his men were upset with me. I think they wanted him so they could make some kind of example of him. I have no doubt that they would have killed him."

Joharran was shocked, but he believed her, it made sense. He knew about Brukeval's attitude toward Flatheads and what he'd been told about the Clan not being able to lie with sign language. Even Jondalar had confirmed that they did not lie and he had also seen the evidence of it through Ayla's actions over the years and in her simple honesty.

Joharran nodded his acceptance, "Alright, so what do you suggest? Is this something for the Zelandonia to handle? I know it will be hard to get the leaders of the different caves to come together to solve this problem without the assistance of the First Zelandoni." He smiled tongue in cheek as he said this and then continued.

"By the way, I see you are now First Zelandoni." Joharran gestured to the ivory plaque that hung from her neck. "I would congratulate you, but having been a leader for almost twenty years, I'm not sure congratulations are the right offering to make. My responsibility is difficult at times, I wouldn't want yours." Joharran smiled to soften his harsh assessment.

Groog had understood most of what had been said because the woman Mog-ur had been almost unconsciously interpreting their conversation in Clan. He knew now without a doubt that this woman was on his side, on the Clan's side. He didn't really understand why that was, but he was grateful. He now believed without a doubt that she was a powerful person in her own right. If she could talk to a cave leader like this man as an equal, then she and her mate 'Jonlar' had told him the truth. Her body language and her ability to speak properly, in combination with everything else he had seen, told him that this female Mog-ur would be a leader no matter where she went.

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That evening as the family gathered for a meal, Groog watched them as they talked and laughed and ate. The smiles and laughter were something he was becoming used to. He even felt a little like smiling sometimes when the woman Ayla would say something that he understood from his life as a member of the Clan, things that only a Clan person would understand. She could say things in sign that made him feel comfortable with her, even if she was a female of the Others.

Maybe it was because he was of mixed essence, not completely Clan, that smiles were something that he was beginning to understand as a friendship expression and he found he liked the feeling of smiling and being smiled at, it made him feel less lonely somehow.

He noticed that there were similarities between his people and the Others. They ate together and interacted as a family, children looked to their parents for guidance and approval and parents looked after their children. These Others lived differently, but looking around the dwelling, he couldn't fault it. This room and the things in it were alien to him, but he was an intelligent person and could see some of the advantages to it.

Groog watched the children and realized that the boy and girl talked Clan well, once you got past the no-gender nuance in their signing. They almost always signed for him when they talked among themselves. 'Jonlar' didn't sign as much, but Groog

understood that he just wasn't as proficient in Clan language as the others. He thought that if the tables were turned, he wouldn't do as well as the man 'Jonlar' did.

What he noticed, and what made him decide to trust these people - literally with his life - was the obvious love that they showed for each other. Being Clan, he could read body language as part of his everyday life experience and their body language made it obvious that they were a family that cared greatly for each other. Groog felt they showed care for him as well.

As their conversation continued, Ayla would glance at him from time to time and Groog became aware that she was expressing a true liking for him, as if he were one of her family. The man, boy and girl were accepting of him too, but the female called Ayla looked at him as if he were the man of her hearth, not just a stranger. That was the final step in his abiding trust of this female Mog-ur. He had decided that he would follow her lead and do what she suggested without question from now on.

Chapter 12: High Rock

Jonayla had been looking for an opportunity to be alone with Cambarre so they would be able to talk uninterrupted. She'd seen him several times since their return from the north but never without his friends or some girl hovering around him. Especially Marilla. She was a year or two older than Jonayla and a world more grown up, at least in Jonayla's eyes. 'I hate her,' Jonayla thought to herself, for the hundredth time.

Luck was soon her friend. That morning, as she left the family dwelling, she chanced to see Cambarre mounting his horse and riding off alone. It looked like he was going hunting. He had his spearthrower strapped in front of the carry basket on his horse's flank within easy reach and a quiver of bird spears.

Jonayla didn't waste a moment. She sprinted down the trail toward the corral and Gray. Not taking the time to tie on the riding blanket, she vaulted onto her horse's back and was galloping after him, hair flying, bareback, leaning over Gray's shoulders, quickly closing the distance between them. As she grew closer she remembered herself and slowed her horse, sitting up straight and trying to slow her heartbeat. She didn't want to seem desperate.

Cambarre first heard, then saw Jonayla on her trotting horse. He was surprised that she seemed to be following him. He had tried on more than one occasion to strike up a friendship with her but she had always been formal with him, not letting him past her defenses.

For a sixteen-year-old girl she was impressive. The other girls seemed frivolous compared to her. However, her accomplishments were somewhat intimidating too. She could ride better than anyone else his age and her skill as a hunter eclipsed almost anyone twice her age. The one real conversation he'd had with her was about hunting and when he'd complemented her on her skill, all she had said was that if you practiced hard enough and long enough, anyone could be good at hunting. What kind of answer was that to a complement given?

Cambarre had been on his way to meet Marilla south of the Ninth Cave at the eastern edge of Gather Field. They'd made plans to meet and spend the afternoon pleasuring each other beside a little stream in a secluded place they had been to

before. He was early and he was also curious why Jonayla was riding directly to him. He slowed his horse, waiting for her.

"Greetings Cambarre!" Jonayla smiled at him. He noted that her smile was very appealing and wished she would do it more often. She had a wide mouth with even white teeth and when she smiled it seemed that the world was a brighter place.

"Greetings to you too Jonayla. Where are you heading?" he said, not wanting to ask if she had been following him. That wasn't the Zelandonii way, direct questions were considered rude and besides, he didn't want to embarrass her.

"I was following you, I wanted a moment to talk to you alone," she replied forthrightly, still smiling that lovely smile.

Now Cambarre was surprised. None of the women he associated with would have been so honest about their intent. What was she playing at? he wondered. "Well, you're here and I'm glad you are," was all he said, remaining silent as they rode slowly south along the trail. He would wait for her to speak, to see what was on her mind, but if he were honest with himself - he glanced her way and took in her erect body and shapely leg - he was very interested and would pass up a rendezvous with Marilla for the chance to share pleasures with Jonayla.

After riding side by side for some time Jonayla finally spoke. "It's just that I was wondering where you were heading. You looked like you were off to hunt and I thought I would join you... if you were um, going hunting... that is." Suddenly Jonayla wasn't sure what to say. She didn't want to admit her feelings for this man. She didn't really know how she felt about him, she just knew that she wanted to be close to him and that when she was, he excited her.

Cambarre noted that she was riding bareback and that she didn't have any hunting gear with her. "Well, I wasn't really going hunting; I was just going for a ride to get away from all the noise," he said, still not wanting her to feel embarrassed. "You're welcome to come with me if you want to. We can talk and get to know each other better."

Jonayla agreed, instantly felling happier than she'd been for several hands of time and it showed in her face, her eyes and her disposition. She couldn't know what the young man was thinking, that he was attracted to her for all of her qualities, not just because she was beautiful. She was the daughter of the First Zelandoni and she was

a member of the Ninth Cave's highest status family. These things would naturally make her very interesting to any single young man of the Zelandonii.

"Let's head down river to High Rock; that gives a really good view of the valley, it's a place few go this early in the hunting season and we can be alone there to talk," he suggested. Besides, it had the added advantage of being a mile farther south of Gather Field. He could always make excuses to Marilla later.

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It was a spectacular view, she hadn't been to High Rock for some time and had forgotten how grand the valley looked from this vantage point. It seemed you could see forever and ever from the huge cliff.

They were sitting side by side, and very close together, on a soft hide Cambarre had spread on the ground. They talked about her mother's recent elevation to First Zelandoni and the experience she and her mother had in the north. He told Jonayla that he had two horses that he was taking to the Summer Meeting to trade. He was enthusiastic about their abilities to aid a hunter. "They're very steady on their feet and able to give good bursts of speed when needed. One is dark brown all over and the other has the average brown coat with tan belly. I think the dark one is the better trained one."

As he talked, he took Jonayla's hand and held it in his.

Jonayla listened to Cambarre carefully. She wanted to make the right impression on him this time. She knew that the last time they had talked she had been stiff and unresponsive, but it was only because she had been nervous being so close to him then. Now she was determined to be herself - she hoped that would be enough.

"I love horses Cambarre, she enthused. "Even though I don't plan to trade them all, I'm bringing all nine of mine to the Summer Meeting. So far I have been catching young horses in surrounds, but soon I think I'll start to breed them. Someday I'd like to have a huge herd..." Jonayla realized that she was gushing like a little girl and fell silent.

The two young people looked out over the valley below in companionable silence for a while then began to talk about everyday things. The spring air and the green growing things made them feel excited just to be alive. Jonayla, being alone with the object of her desire, felt exceptionally happy and outgoing, giggling at his light-

hearted jokes and smiling up at his serious face as he talked about horses and his future plans. It felt so wonderful to be there like that.

Then his hand moved to her thigh and he began to lightly stroke her there. Cambarre continued to speak as if nothing had changed and at first Jonayla didn't know how to react. His gentle touch sent electric charges surging through her entire body and she was suddenly finding it hard to catch her breath. Then recomposing herself, she took his roaming hand in hers and held it.

Cambarre looked down at his hand now enfolded within hers and then into her amazingly blue eyes. "Jonayla, I've always been attracted to you, you're a beautiful woman, one that should let a man show how much he appreciates her. You're such an accomplished hunter and horse trainer, but there are other things that beautiful women should take time to enjoy." He moved toward her, suddenly holding her face with both hands and kissed her.

Jonayla closed her eyes as she felt the touch of his lips on hers. Her mind felt numb, her heart was racing and she felt her blood pulsing through her veins. Then a hand was on her leg again, then under her tunic, lifting it up, pulling it away and baring her breasts. He was leaning over and taking a nipple into his mouth. Pleasure filled her being.

Suddenly a refrain from the Mother's Prayer found its way through her excitement and pleasure. "The Mother was bearing. Her life She was sharing, because woman conceives when Pleasures are shared." As Cambarre began to untie the braided rawhide belt that secured her loincloth, Jonayla pushed him away. "Cambarre, no! I'm sorry, but no! I don't want any man's child until he's my mate. I want to know that my child is from my mate, like my parents. I'm sorry, I must go now."

"No... wait! Jonayla!" Cambarre called out as Jonayla ran to her horse, pulling her clothing back into place - tears blurring her vision. When she reached Gray she blindly jumped, catching her horse's mane to mount her in one smooth motion. Then pulling violently at Gray's reins she whirled the animal around and galloped back toward the Ninth Cave.

Cambarre watched Jonayla ride away with a sinking heart. He hadn't meant to frighten her. She was sixteen, but now his people no longer performed opening ceremonies for young women of the community and he thought that maybe, from what she'd just said, she was probably still unopened.

It had only been about ten summers since the Mother had given Her children the knowledge of conception. Even though this knowledge did make him feel more worthwhile as a man, Cambarre sometimes wished it were otherwise because this new knowledge, that a man's essence started a baby to grow in a woman, was sometimes an inconvenient knowledge.

He hadn't been old enough to participate, back when men would go with any woman to share pleasures during a Mother ceremony. But now, with the new knowledge, women were more reserved and most Zelandonii men accepted that they had an important part in the making of life and didn't want their mates to have another man's children.

He watched the dust rise from Jonayla's galloping horse as she disappeared in the distance, he mentally hit himself for having moved so fast. She was worth waiting for and he should have controlled his urges with her. After all, he could satisfy his urges any time he wanted to with any number of other women.

'Oh well,' he thought, 'there was still Marilla waiting for him at Gather Field. He would certainly give her something to remember today; he had a lot of pent up energy that he needed to work off and Marilla would be the recipient.' Cambarre's mind had already dismissed his failure with Jonayla and had moved on to Marilla and what they would do to each other. He folded the rawhide ground cover preparing to meet her. Only, as he mounted his horse, he couldn't quite get Jonayla's image out of his mind, those bright blue eyes, full of tears.

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Unknown to Jonayla - as she passed Gather Field, Marilla watched from behind a copse of trees and wondered why the daughter of the First Zelandoni looked so distraught as she galloped past her and up the river trail. 'Usually that one is very composed, almost snooty,' she thought to herself.

She was soon distracted as she heard another horse, this time at a slow walk coming from the same direction. It was Cambarre, why was he coming from the south? She would ask him what he knew about Zelandoni's daughter.

-O-

Jonayla pulled Gray to a halt far short of theabri that sheltered her home, wiping the last of the tears from her eyes. She was more upset by how she had reacted to

Cambarre's touching than the touching itself. She had wanted him to touch her and to kiss her, she had really wanted that. But she didn't want to risk a baby by a man who was not her mate. It was all so confusing, frustrating... and hard.

She dismounted and walked to the river's bank. Crouching down she put her fingers into the flowing water and thought about her future. What would she become if she never let men past her defenses? Would she end up being alone when she was her mother's age with no children of her own?

Just then Jonayla heard her name called and looked up to see Lorala, her hearth sibling, walking toward her along the path to the river's edge. She dipped her hands into the water and splashed it on her face, soothing her reddened eyes as she tried to forget what had transpired only moments before.

Lorala wasn't really related to her, but Jonayla's parents had pledged to care for her and her siblings a long time ago when she had been a small child, so Lorala and her older sister Lanoga had been like family as far back as she could remember. Lorala and her younger siblings now lived with her older sister Lanoga and her mate Lanidar who had a dwelling near his parent's hearth.

Lorala was closest to Jonayla's age and they had been childhood friends, like sisters really, learning together and experiencing life together, with Jonayla always the more outgoing; better at hunting and riding and things that took agility and concentration. Lorala never seemed to mind that her friend was more accomplished than she was; she just wanted to be near her and was happy for her when she excelled at something.

As the two girls grew into young women, they maintained their friendship and would from time to time wander away from the cave area and ride their horses up Wood River Valley for the day. When things were lazy and slow they would take a carry basket of food and stay away all day together by themselves.

It seemed a natural thing when Lorala had touched her the first time. They were alone one day and were at the age where - in the old days - they would have been old enough for the opening ceremony with a man, but since those ceremonies had stopped, and with the current belief that a man's essence mixing with a woman's, created babies... Young women now had to think about such things and it was hard not to be tempted by boys.

After that first time, both girls had become even closer friends, friends with a secret, friends who made many trips to Wooded Valley together. They had become secret lovers.

As Lorala neared her, it became obvious that Jonayla was upset, that she had been crying. Lorala hurried forward and grasped Jonayla's hands in hers. "What is the cause of those sad eyes? You've been crying!" Lorala exclaimed.

Jonayla had a momentary flash of resentment at Lorala's intrusion into her sadness but as Lorala hugged her close, her feelings toward her friend softened and she hugged her back, ending with her face buried in her friend's shoulder and a sobbing confession about what had happened and how she had foolishly reacted to Cambarre's advances.

She had reacted as a small child would have, frightened from a man's advances. As she stood there with Lorala caressing her hair and murmuring soothing things to calm her, Jonayla swore to herself that she would not act so stupidly and immaturely again, if she ever were in the same situation again.

Chapter 13: Revelations

"Jonayla, where have you been? Oh, greetings Lorala," Ayla said to the young woman who had come into the dwelling with her daughter.

"Lorala and I went exploring up Wood River Valley. I needed to get away from everything for a while and Lorala kept me company. Did you need me for something mother?" Jonayla asked.

"Yes, of course I did and you knew I would. But I guess it's been a busy few days, hasn't it. I hope you enjoyed yourselves, you two are good friends and it's nice to go riding with a friend," Ayla said, turning away to place a heating stone in the water container beside the hearth. She missed the look that passed between the two young women.

"Mother, what can I do to help?" Jonayla asked.

"As you know, the southern Doniers have arrived and I've given them the Zelandonia lodge to stay in while they're here. The Zelandoni and I hope the leaders from the Second and Third Caves will be here soon. I've also invited Denanna from the Twenty-Ninth Cave and her Zelandoni to attend. I've sent runners to the Eleventh and Fourteenth Caves asking their leaders and Doniers to attend as well.

"If everyone shows up, we'll be very busy accommodating them, so I'll need you to stay with Groog. Please try to answer any questions he might have about us. If you can tell him things about us that you think might be important - so he will have some idea about our people - that would really help me. He will probably be asked some questions by the cave leaders so the more he knows about us in advance, the better. I've just so much to do that I don't have the time to spend with him right now."

Ayla poured tea for the three of them and Groog, then continued her instructions. "Groog is an intelligent man but he comes from a very different background than ours. I need him as calm as possible so he can make a good impression at the meeting. I've talked to him quite a bit, but it would be good for him to be able to ask questions from someone other than me, and now I have to leave for the meeting. Will you do that for me?"

"Very well mother, I'll stay with him and talk with him. When do you think you'll need him at the meeting?"

"I don't know, but please come with him when he is called and if you would interpret for him I would appreciate it. I can do that, but I think it would be distracting to the others attending the meeting. If you were sitting across from him and speaking in Clan to him, it would be less of a distraction."

-O-

Ayla soon left and the two young women sat across from the Clan man. "Greetings Groog," Jonayla signed, speaking his name, which made Lorala giggle.

Groog looked at the other girl who sat beside Jonayla and wondered at the strange noise she had just made, then he turned to the female Mog-ur's daughter and returned her greeting.

He wondered how old Jonayla was. He had trouble deciding how old these Others were. They all looked young to him because they had less hair on their bodies than Clan people and that would normally mean they were very young, but he knew better than to think that. Although they were taller than Clan, they were also thinner, he thought, and obviously weaker too.

"How old are you?" he asked. He knew from his conversation with the female Mog-ur of the Others that he was supposed to learn as much as he could about these people and he wanted to do that, he felt it was important. Understanding how to gauge the age of the Others might be helpful in dealing with them.

"I'm almost seventeen summers, I was born during the Harvest Moon," Jonayla said, briefly looking back at the man of the Clan. It was hard not to shiver in fear at his fierce appearance, those big brown eyes that seemed to absorb the light, they were so dark and his muscular hairy body. Even though he'd been weakened by his rough handling by those men in the north, she was pretty sure he could fend off more than one Zelandonii man at a time if he wanted to.

"What is this about the moon and what is 'harvest'?" Groog asked in sign, not knowing what the word 'harvest' meant. The word Jonayla had spoken had no meaning in his language. The Clan used name cycles too but not tied to the seasons, theirs referred to the people and the age of a person or place. Each winter's beginning was the end of a cycle and the first one was called the birth time, then

there was the weaning time, when a child was weaned from its mother's breasts and so on, but he didn't understand what the moon would have to do with anything.

Groog's age was three gatherings, which meant that he was born shortly after a Clan Gathering and he had attended two others. Clan Gatherings were held every seventh summer, so Groog would be twenty-one summers old, in the Other's reckoning of time, although he didn't think of it that way.

"What about the moon?" Groog asked again. Jonayla knew that this man was different, but not knowing what a moon cycle was... well, she'd never actually thought about what a moon cycle was either. Even during her Acolyte training she hadn't been asked to explain it. She could, of course, but just hadn't thought about it before.

"Well, the Zelandonii people base our seasons on the moon's birth and death," she said, warming to the subject. "There are twelve full moons between when the snow falls and when the earth thaws and each moon cycle has a name.

"The first moon is called Warming Moon, (March). That is when the temperature begins to warm and the ground begins to thaw, earthworms appear, heralding the return of the smaller birds. This is the end of winter." She was reciting the descriptions she'd learned as an Acolyte.

"Then there is Grass Moon, (April). It is when the grass begins to sprout from the earth and plants and bushes begin to turn green. It is the earliest time that widespread flowers of the warmer weather begin to show.

"Following that is Flower Moon, (May). In most areas, grains, nuts and fruit begin to grow and flowers become abundant everywhere during this time and all traces of the cold time are gone except in the high mountain peaks.

"The Summer Moon comes next, (June). The name was given to this moon phase because about half way through this moon is the time that Summer Meetings begin and the people gather from the region to share their stories, find mates and trade goods.

"Buck Moon, (July), follows Summer Moon. It is normally the moon phase when new antlers of buck deer push out of their foreheads in coatings of velvety fur and rutting season begins. This is also when we begin to hunt bison, elk, deer and other large game for winter food stores.

"After Buck Moon there is Red Moon, (August). It is named so because during this time, as the Moon rises it appears reddish through the haze caused by dust in the air when rain does not fall.

"Harvest Moon, (September), is one of the most important times of the year and is named Harvest Moon because this is the time that gathering of grains and late fruits and vegetables is done. The next moon will usually also allow more gathering but Harvest Moon time might be all there is if the snows come early. This was my birth moon, when my mother brought me into the world.

"The Late Harvest Moon, (October), begets cooler temperatures and is the full moon that occurs closest to when day and night are equal in length. In two Late Harvest Moons out of three, the Harvest Moon comes earlier, (September), but in some years it occurs later so then we call it second full moon, or Late Harvest Moon.

"Fur Moon comes next, (November). It is the time to set traps before the ground freezes and the rivers freeze over, a last chance to build a supply of warm winter furs and to store meat.

"Then Cold Moon comes, (December). During this moon phase the winter cold has fastened its grip on the land and nights are at their longest and darkest. This was the moon phase in which my friend Lorala was born." Jonayla looked at her friend and made the face that Groog now knew was a sign of friendship for the Others.

Jonayla turned back to Groog and continued, "The Wolf Moon, (January), is the moon cycle when the snow is coldest and deepest, the wolf packs howl and are at their hungriest. This is a time when people don't venture away from their home caves if they can help it.

"And the last moon time before everything starts over again is The Snow Moon, (February). This is when the snow is the heaviest and we're all bound to our caves with travel and communication between the caves at a standstill. It is also considered the last moon before the weather begins to turn and winter becomes defeated by the sun. Although," Jonayla added, "many times Warming Moon can be just as cold as Wolf Moon. When Warming Moon appears again, we know that the earth's cycle is complete, that is why, no matter what time of year a Zelandonii person is born, we always count our age by how many summers we have lived."

All these moon cycles together are called a 'Year'. When a new cycle of moons begins, a new year begins with it."

"Do you understand about our moon cycles now Groog?" she signed.

Groog wondered to himself why these Others made so much out of these moons of theirs. The Clan had the same passing of time but did not need all these names and reasons for the passing of time, it was something they had known from infancy, they just "knew" what season it was and the required actions needed to insure their well-being.

Oh well, he thought, another strange thing that he would have to ponder. But at least he now understood how old these two were, Jonayla was more than two Gatherings old and her friend, 'Lola' looked about the same age, although he wasn't sure, he would not ask. Both females would be more than old enough to mate and would already have had one if they were Clan women. Although he couldn't really imagine any Clan man actually wanting to give these skinny looking women the sign.

"Groog, do you know that my mother is holding a meeting with the leaders from other caves and will be talking about the violence in the north?" Jonayla signed. She had been speaking out loud all this time so that her friend would be included too.

"Yes," Groog signed. "Tell me, will they do something about these people who are killing my people? This meeting, will it stop the violence?"

"I hope so Groog," Jonayla replied. "If my mother has anything to say about it I know we will do something to stop it."

"Then I am satisfied." Groog felt that this female Mog-ur would be able to make the Others do as she asked. He knew her power, he had seen it with his own eyes.

-O-

Lorala soon became bored with the constant questions and answers that passed between the strange angry looking man and her friend, so that eventually she excused herself. Jonayla found talking to the man of the Clan fascinating. They continued to speak about things ranging from leadership to what would be considered acceptable behavior among the Zelandonii and within the Can.

She looked into the eyes of the man sitting across from her and wondered what his life must be like. It seemed to her that he would live a more basic life than the Zelandonii. From his clothing - no more than mere animal skins with a fold that

formed a pouch to carry things tied in place by a rawhide thong - she thought his living accommodations must be the same, primitive.

As they communicated, Jonayla realized that there were similarities in their two separate societies; the Clan cared about their young as much as her people did. They had spiritual leaders just like her Zelandoni, maybe even more powerful, if she understood correctly what he was saying about them.

Jonayla had heard some stories from her mother about Mog-urs, especially Creb, the man who had brought her up while she had lived with the Clan. When she mentioned that her mother had known a Mog-ur named Creb, Groog sat up with a sudden alarmed expression on his face.

"You said 'Creb'! You said that 'Ayla' who is Mog-ur knew 'Creb' who was Mog-ur? Did I understand you? 'Creb' who was Mog-ur?" he repeated again.

"Yes, Creb adopted her to his hearth as his daughter," Jonayla replied.

"Creb who was Mog-ur? This is hard to believe. Why didn't Mog-ur tell me this herself? Creb is the most revered Mog-ur of all the Clan. I thought he was more of a legend than real. Do you know the story of Creb?" Groog signed excitedly.

"I know what my mother told me about him and Iza his sibling who shared his hearth when my mother was adopted by him. But we must be talking about a different Creb, because he lived beyond the end of the Great Mother River, many moon cycles away by horse to the east. How could you have heard of that Creb?"

"There is only one 'Creb'. No other would use that name. This is a powerful sign. Your mother who is Mog-ur will receive acceptance among our people because of it. This is important. Creb manifests himself once in every seventh generation. The power number of the Clan. I know this because I assist the Mog-ur of our Clan who is first among Mog-urs.

"To have been adopted by a manifestation of Creb is significant. There has to be a reason for this. I need to speak to Mog-ur, this changes everything," Groog could barely contain himself. Why would Ursus choose one of the Others for such an honor as this? The fact that the Clan's guiding spirit had done so was important and he knew he must get word back to his Mog-ur. This was beyond his understanding.

"Groog," Jonayla signed, "My mother did not know a manifestation of Creb. She knew the breathing man." Groog was silent, he would speak of this to her mother when the time was right.

-O-

Both Jondalar and Ayla had attended the initial meeting with the southern Doniers, as well as Joharran the leader of the Ninth Cave with his mate Proleva. Ayla wanted to bind the caves together, something that hadn't really been done before. As First, she felt that to create a close association between the northern and southern caves would make the Zelandonii people stronger and their society more stable in times of need.

Ayla wanted the first meeting to be with just the southerners, before all the other Zelandonia arrived and started to insert their own agendas into the discussions. She was certain that this was the best opportunity to convince the southern Doniers that she was serious about giving them a stronger voice in future decisions that affected all the people.

-O-

"We appreciate your statements of support Zelandoni, but up until the recent Gathering at Sacred Mountain, we have had little say in what decisions have been made. What would change that in the future?" the Donier who spoke for the southerners asked.

Ayla frowned, she didn't want to say anything negative about her mentor, the previous First Zelandoni, but it couldn't be helped in this case. "Zelandoni, I understand your doubt, but I am not my predecessor, I care greatly that both the south and north become one people in more than name only. I feel it is of great importance to combine our resources and in doing so, create a more stable environment for all."

The Donier who spoke for the southerners had to agree that it made sense. "I cannot argue with the logic of your vision. My only question is, will everyone agree with it? Until now it has seemed that we were not important to the northern caves. What has changed?"

"I am the change!" Ayla asserted. "I'm not interested in being above anyone else, I will gladly give up the position of First Zelandoni that I have been given. All I can say

is that I see what must be done and the Mother speaks through me to accomplish these tasks. It's not something I asked for, it is a burden, but I know that it must be done. I expect that being reasoning human beings, all of our brothers and sisters will see the advantages as clearly as you and I do." Ayla had spoken with conviction and certainty, now she needed to hear from the leaders attending the meeting.

"What say you others?" Ayla brought the other Southern Doniers into the conversation. "You've been listening to us discuss the situation. Do any of you disagree with the logic of uniting our people? Because if you do, the alternative is to become something other than Zelandonii. Maybe your caves could join those caves south of you who are closer. What say you?" Ayla looked at those sitting around the Zelandonia dwelling, catching the eyes of each.

As the silence drew on, she asked again, "What say you, do you want to stay Zelandonii?"

There were nods from all the other Doniers in the dwelling, then quite vocal agreement from all present.

Ayla turned back to the Zelandoni who spoke for the southerners in the room. "If you can all agree on this, then why not the northern Zelandoni? Are they more contentious or less intelligent? I know this will work and I see generations of our people reaping the harvest that we sow here, in this place and time.

"Now Proleva and I must leave you. She will be seeing to the feast of welcome for this evening and I must greet the new arrivals and see them settled. I have invited the Zelandonia and Cave leaders who are close enough to travel here to attend a discussion about the troubles in the north."

Ayla rose gracefully from her cross-legged position and walked confidently from the dwelling. All eyes were on her as she ducked around the hanging hide that covered the opening and disappeared beyond.

The Donier who spoke for the southerners sat there for a few moments staring at the hide covering, still impressed by the presence of the new First Zelandoni. She had expected to see flaws in the person who led them, little flaws that always come to the surface when someone is above others in rank. It was only human nature really. But this leader seemed different, even when she declared that the Mother spoke through her, it didn't seem like bragging. From the haunted look in her eyes, it

appeared to be the burden that she said it was. A burden that she might not want to carry by herself. The First was asking the south for help and she would get it.

The Donier who spoke for the southerners turned to Jondalar, the handsome mate of the First Zelandoni and asked, "Has the First Zelandoni always been such an accomplished woman? What did you think of her when you first met her?" She felt that a little background about the person of the First Zelandoni could be helpful for them all and especially for her. She needed to make up her mind about this new leader soon, before all the others arrived.

Jondalar had become less and less talkative over the past few years. But now, when he said something it would be interesting or it would be important. Ayla relied on his quiet strength more as time went on and his advice and support was naturally sought after by many of the people in the Ninth Cave and elsewhere.

Jondalar smiled, "I first met Ayla - that was her name before she became Zelandoni - after I had been attacked by her pet cave lion and severely mauled. She brought me back to her cave on the first travois that I had ever seen pulled by a horse and she put me back together, even stitching my flesh and muscles back into place."

The southern Donier interrupted, "Did I hear you say, 'her pet cave lion'?"

All the southern Zelandoni sat rigidly, body language full of disbelief. The first among the southerners felt a pang of disappointment. Was this the first flaw in the person she 'almost' had come to believe in?

"Yes, I know it sounds far-fetched but it's true," Jondalar said, seeing the doubt in the eyes of these spiritual leaders. He continued, "She even rode that lion in front of a whole Summer Meeting of the Mamutoi where we wintered the next year. Your First Zelandoni can talk to cave lions and horses and even birds. She learned these things when she lived alone in a valley in the middle of a wilderness."

"She lived in a valley with no other people? Was she on a spiritual journey at the time Jondalar?" The Donier asked.

"No, she was just living alone. She had never met anyone of her own kind before we met. In fact, she didn't even speak verbally before I met her. The first verbal language she learned was Zelandonii, because that is what I taught her.

"Oh, and by the way, when I taught her how to speak Zelandonii, I also learned that in Clan there is no way for their people to tell an untruth about something. Because Clan people can't articulate verbal language to any great extent, they communicate more with gestures and motions. Anyone who speaks it would be able to see an untruth instantly. She grew up with this as a way of life and because of it, she won't - can't tell a lie. I've never known her to lie, not once in all the time I've known her. And incidentally, you should be aware that she has the uncanny ability to tell if others are not telling the truth or the whole truth.

"I'm sure you've heard about her background, about having been adopted to the hearth of the spiritual leader of the Clan who was first among their Mog-urs. And then later, after his death, she was forced out of the Clan by a brutal leader who hated her. She wandered for a time until she knew that if she didn't stop and prepare, that she wouldn't survive the coming winter moons.

"She found a protected valley and a cave on a mountainside that protected her from the cold north wind. There was a river in the valley and lots of game. She set up a home and it was quite comfortable. And yes, I know this also sounds hard to believe - that a young girl could do all this - but you must know by now that your new First Zelandoni is not just 'anybody'. She has a power in her that drives her unlike anyone else I've ever known. She had that power before she was trained to be Zelandoni. In fact everyone here thought she was Zelandoni when I first brought her back.

"When we first arrived back here, all she wanted was to be my mate and to have children like any other Zelandonii woman. She was insistent about that and for a time that was the way of it. But the previous First Zelandoni who lived at the Ninth Cave saw things in her that convinced her that she should be of the Zelandonia and I believe she was right."

All the Doniers sat there looking at the man in silence, then finally the first among the southerners spoke, "Well, that opens my eyes. Actually it creates more questions in my mind than it answers. Jondalar I hope you have a little more time that you can spend with us because I have many more questions about our First Zelandoni. I'm not sure why she hasn't shared her past with us in more depth before this, but I'm grateful for your candor," the southern Donier said.

"I think to Ayla, err, to the First Zelandoni, these things I've mentioned are nothing special. She'll tell you that the cave lion as well as the horses and Wolf, only answered to her because they saw her as a friend. That anyone could do what she

did if they got the animals as babies and brought them up like they were your children."

Jondalar paused and looked around the circle of leaders to see if they understood what he was trying to get across to them. He could see that they were giving him their full attention so he continued, "That may be true, that anyone could have done that, but can you see yourself bringing up a male cave lion? I can't see myself doing that. Even though we all ride horses now and can't believe we didn't think to do it before, she is the one who brought that knowledge to our people. Not to mention the firestones. She is an amazing woman who thinks of herself as ordinary, or at least did before the Mother began to speak through her.

"That feeling of being nothing special is the reason that she doesn't speak of her past. It's not that she is trying to hide anything, it's just normal to her. But she's not just a normal woman, and if she says that something is going to be, or needs to be, then I believe her and I will help her any way I can."

The southern Doniers continued to ask Jondalar questions about the new First Zelandoni and about their journey from the east and their encounters with other peoples and the Clan that they had met while traveling back to his home.

In all, this conversation went a long way toward creating a better understanding of the woman who now led them. The Donier who spoke for the southerners was greatly impressed and now more than ever, willing to back her colleague in whatever she felt was essential for the betterment of their people. She felt anyone who could survive and thrive through all that this woman had, deserved the respect and willing support of those subordinate to her.

Chapter 14: Red Ocher

Jonayla had been digging red ocher for her mother and her hands were stained with the red clay. The deposit near the cave was almost exhausted, requiring her to ride some distance up Wood River valley to the next good size deposit. Here the clay was buried deeper and it was a dirty job to get at it, requiring picking through stones and debris.

Once she had filled the pouch with enough of the mineral, she went over to the river and washed her hands. That's when she saw Cambarre sitting astride his horse on the other side of the river in plain view. She was startled for a moment and then flushed as she remembered their last encounter.

"What are you doing here? Are you following me?" she called out, challengingly.

"No, I was just hunting up river," Cambarre answered. "You know, the place where there's an overhang that makes a good lookout to see deer watering."

"Yes, I know the place," she replied. "I must get back." She turned toward her horse.

"Would you let me ride back with you Jonayla? I just want to talk, I promise," he said.

Jonayla looked at him for a moment, trying to decide if he was being genuine, or if he was going to make fun of her because she had acted like a scared little girl the last time they'd been together. Finally she decided to take the chance. "Alright," she said as she mounted Gray.

Cambarre reined his horse across the shallow river to take up a position beside Jonayla. "I just wanted to apologize for my behavior the other day. I didn't mean to do anything to upset you."

Jonayla didn't respond, she just kept riding silently, looking straight ahead. She didn't know what to say. He had been trying to seduce her, but he had probably done that to many willing women. She wanted to share pleasures with Cambarre. It was knowing the possible result and her own inexperience that was holding her back. She knew in her heart that once she got started she would not want to stop.

"I mean it, I'm sorry. I want to be your friend Jonayla. Actually I want to be more than just your friend. I realize that you only want to give yourself to your mate and actually, I admire you for that. I think any man would be proud to be chosen by you." He remained silent for a time, then added, "If you'll forgive me and give me another chance, I would like to earn your respect and maybe... your affection?" He involuntarily choked up a bit when saying 'your affection'.

All this time, from the moment she'd realized that Cambarre had been near, her heart had been beating fiercely and she had been experiencing inner turmoil. 'Was this what they called love?' she wondered, 'did love make you feel all jumbled up inside?' When she was with any other man she felt perfectly normal and in control. It was only when Cambarre was around her that she felt like this.

She wanted to give herself to him, she might even have done so now, if he hadn't just said that he respected her for not giving in. "I like you Cambarre," she said. "I just don't trust you. But I accept your apology; actually I have to admit that you were probably just doing what you're used to doing with girls like Marilla. But I'm only interested in a man that is only interested in me. I don't want to share a man with other women. I want a relationship like my parents have."

"They are in love, that is obvious," Cambarre said. "But your father has been known to be with other women and even your mother too, once, so I've heard."

Jonayla looked at the young man riding beside her and could have hit him in the face just then. "You're absolutely right Cambarre; my parents shared pleasures with others. That was a long time ago, and they have been faithful to each other ever since. I only know them as committed to each other and as you said, it's obvious that they love each other."

She was angry that he'd brought up the one time that her parent's actions had made them look foolish. It was as if he was trying to make her feel bad about herself. She knew that her mother hadn't acted responsibly, nor had her father back then. She'd only been a small girl at the time and in the years since they'd always acted toward each other with a great fondness.

Having been forced to dredge up this event in her parent's lives made her angry at him, so she finished her reply in a harsh voice, "My mother and father may have made a mistake many years ago, but when I see you, all I see is a man who is willing to meet women in secret places so he can have his pleasure with them without

everyone knowing. But of course everyone knows anyway, so you're not fooling anyone."

Jonayla snapped the reins of Gray's halter and galloped away from Cambarre, forcing her horse to maintain a gallop toward the Nineteenth Cave which could now be seen in the distance.

-O-

"Hello daughter," Ayla greeted her child, taking the pouch of red ocher with a smile. "I'm afraid that I'm going to have to ask you to stay with Groog again this evening during the welcome feast. I don't want him to be alone with all that's going on and I can't stay with him myself."

"Oh mother! Can't Durc do it? It seems that I'm always the one that has to watch him."

"Durc is a young boy, you're an adult and an Acolyte. You'll also be interpreting for him tomorrow during the meeting with the cave leaders and their Zelandoni. I want him to feel comfortable with you. I want him to think of you as a friend, it will help me if you do this." She said this, hoping that her daughter would understand that she needed her help and that this wasn't just a casual request.

"Yes mother, I'll do it. I'll go there now. Would you ask Lorala to bring us a plate of food later, before all the good things are eaten? I would appreciate it," Jonayla said, with a long suffering expression.

Ayla loved her daughter and knew that sixteen could be a difficult time for unmated young women. They were considered women, but with the changes that the knowledge of conception wrought, there were more insecurities now than most young women had before that knowledge came to light. Jonayla was more mature than other young women her age, but that was little consolation.

Ayla was glad that they had gone on journeys as a family, away from the Summer Meeting each year. She felt that her family should have away-time, just being on their own, and these experiences had helped their children grow more self-reliant and had nurtured a more mature attitude.

-O-

Jonayla pushed aside the hide drape and stepped into the main room of her family's dwelling. Groog was propped up on his sleeping furs looking into the fire that burned in the hearth, the flames reflecting in his large dark-brown eyes. He looked up as she entered and signed a greeting, then asked a question. "When will Mog-ur come? I wish to speak to her about Creb."

Jonayla responded, "Greetings Groog, I think she will be busy with the leaders and visiting Zelandonia that have arrived. They are holding a welcome feast this evening and then tomorrow you will be called to speak to the gathering to tell your story."

Groog knew all this, but having to talk to all these Others and their leaders was making him feel nervous. Having so many of the Others around all the time was making him even more nervous and he didn't like the feeling.

Jonayla could see the worry in the Clan man's face and she felt a momentary sympathy for him, but then the thought came to her that if he hadn't been here, she wouldn't have to be sitting here with him right now. Not that she had anything else to do since her confrontation with Cambarre earlier. "Groog, you don't have to worry about the meeting, mother will watch out for you. And when it is over she will make time to talk with you."

Groog was embarrassed by what the young one had just said. Was his fear that obvious? He would have to be careful around these people and not show his feelings. The last thing he wanted to do was show his nervousness to a girl child of the Others and if she could read the signs of his fear then maybe others could too.

Before he could respond to her words, the hide door covering was pushed aside again and the other young female, Jonayla's friend, entered with two heaping plates of food. "Loralas brought us food Groog," Jonayla signed. "Let's eat and not worry about tomorrow until tomorrow comes. I will be with you to interpret what the others say so you will know everything that is said by our leaders."

Groog took the plate and ate the food, not really noticing the taste. He wasn't feeling good, his leg hurt and he didn't like being restricted to this dwelling all the time. But he wouldn't cause trouble, not now, when he was about to talk to the leaders of the Others. He just hoped that the talk would do some good.

To forget his embarrassment, he began to talk about his home place. He told Jonayla about his hearth family and his cave. The other female soon became bored and left them, which was alright with Groog. He didn't like the looks she kept giving him.

"My cave is far north of here and it is part way up a mountainside. You must climb quite a bit to reach the ledge, but at the cave entrance there is a small pool and fresh water from a spring that trickles down so that our women don't have to leave to get fresh water.

"I am training to be Mog-ur," he said, hoping to let this young person know that he too had spiritual training. "My Mog-ur is very old, and very wise. My mother's mother had been forced by a man of the Others and his totem was strong enough to give her a mixed child, a girl child, my mother. My mother told me that her mother was allowed to keep her because my Mog-ur's predecessor thought I was a mixture and not deformed and when my Mog-ur took his place he eventually took me as his helper."

Groog was a little amazed that he was telling this girl so much about himself, but for some strange reason it made him feel calmer to do so. He knew a lot about her and her family unit so in the sharing of his family details he felt that there was some sort of bond between them. In a strange place like this, any bond of friendship was welcome, even if it was just with two females; one a leader he was beginning to respect and one he spoke with on a personal level.

Signing, he continued, "My mother mated with our Mog-ur. He was old and he died before I was born. She was then taken to the leader's hearth because no other hunter wanted her. She never had another child, which made her sad. Being a small part 'Other' I looked a little strange but was still accepted by the other hunters. I am a good strong hunter and they wanted me on the hunts. But I was also of the Mog-ur and had Mog-ur memories so the new Mog-ur began to train me when I reached maturity."

Jonayla was interested despite having been forced to stay with him. She signed, "Do you have children Groog?"

"Yes," he grunted happily. "Two, one is in her birth year, the other, a boy, is in his weaning year. I don't know if he will be a good hunter yet, but I am happy, and I have a good mate."

"My mother tells me that your women can't hunt or use weapons."

“That is true. Clan women care for the young and they care for their mate, they have the memories for it. Clan men protect the females and children and hunt for food, we have the memories for that.”

Jonayla frowned, “Mother has mentioned this thing about memories, but I have to confess, I don't really understand what it means. We don't have any memories, we have to learn everything we do. But women can hunt and use weapons and do anything else they want to do. I can't imagine being told that I couldn't hunt. To me it doesn't make sense. It seems that it would be easier on everyone if everyone participated in the hunt.”

“The women do participate in the hunt,” Groog assured her, “they butcher and dress the kills and carry the meat. This is the way of the Clan. It has been this way since ancient times, a time before we ever saw Others in our land. It has worked well for us, so there is no reason to change it,” Groog made the grimace of friendship to soften his words so he wouldn't offend the young female of the Others. No reason to make an enemy of the one who would interpret for him at the meeting tomorrow, he thought.

Chapter 15: Murmurs of Agreement

Ayla spent most of the evening during the welcome feast fending off questions. Questions that needed answers, but not that night, not individually. She knew instinctively that the only way decisions would be made would be to have all the leaders of the Zelandonii in one place at one time. Only then was there a chance that the more level headed leaders would influence those who wanted to believe what they always had, even in the face of the facts staring back at them.

-O-

It was late when Jondalar and Ayla returned to their dwelling. Jonayla was lying on a mat in the main room asleep. Groog was also asleep close by the hearth fire. Ayla went to Durcan's partitioned area to check on him and then joined Jondalar in their sleeping partition.

"I hope I can make them understand how important it is to come together on this," Ayla whispered. "And I hope I can make our cave leaders understand that the violence in the north must be stopped. Nothing like that has ever happened before and there is no telling what will happen if it isn't stopped. These are clashes between two societies, not just a few people, but potentially hundreds of people, men, women and children. It's a fearful situation."

"Yes, it is. But let it go for this evening Ayla, it will be a long day tomorrow and it's late." He leaned over and kissed her on the lips. She kissed him back and settled with her back to his strong body as he hugged her. And that was the way she found sleep, in the comfortable reassurance of Jondalar's strong arms.

-O-

The next day, as Ayla had expected, the meeting was contentious. She had expected Denanna to stand against her on solving the Clan violence in the north, but she was surprised by the unwavering support of the southern caves, especially their spokeswoman Zelandoni for the southerners. Denanna was insistent that what was happening with the Chimudonii did not concern them and to walk into the middle of their conflict might bring the violence into to their own territory, rather than discourage it.

In the end, Ayla did need to bring Groog to the meeting place. She had hoped that she wouldn't have to involve him but it was essential that the leaders know what would happen if the violence was left unchecked.

There were many murmurs of protest when he was carried in on a pole stretcher. Ayla had dressed him in one of Jondalar's old hunting tunics so that he would look more familiar to the others in the room, many of whom may never have seen a man of the Clan up close before.

Jonayla took her place sitting across from Groog so that he could see her talk in sign to interpret what the others in the room said. Ayla noted the contrast between her beautiful fair-haired daughter and Groog's muscular, hairy and almost angry appearance. She wished there were a way to not have that comparison made, but she needed him to understand what was said and it was too distracting for her to interpret for him. She needed to concentrate on the others in the room.

Of course, Denanna was the first to challenge her, "First Zelandoni, we all know how you feel about these Clan people of yours, but why should we believe this man? I assume you brought him here to tell us what he knows about the conflict in the north. But all we have is his word for it. Even if he is telling us what he believes to be true, there is no one from the other side of the conflict - some of who, you claim may even be Zelandonii - to tell us their side of the story."

"That is perfectly true, leader of the Twenty-Ninth Cave," Ayla replied in a restrained voice, "but even though we don't have all the answers to the problem, it doesn't hurt to listen to the information we do have access to. I for one can tell you from personal experience that one of those Zelandonii is Brukeval. I think we all know what he thinks of Clan people. Wouldn't you say that he could be described as filled with hatred for them?"

"When I tried to carry this man away," Ayla gestured toward Groog, "Brukeval was so mad that he attacked me, knocking me to the ground and threatening me with disfigurement. He said he would beat me so badly that no one would recognize me. Is this the talk of a sane man?"

There were murmurs of agreement, everyone knew about Brukeval's feelings. It wasn't a surprise to anyone in the room that he'd turned up involved in the conflict.

"Let us hear from Tormaden, the leader of the Nineteenth Cave. Would you please tell us what you think of the situation in your area?" Ayla hoped that he would

support her. She hadn't discussed this with him in advance on purpose so that no one could accuse her of trying to influence him.

"Well, I'm not really sure what is happening north of North River," Tormaden began. "All I know is what I've seen and I'm pretty sure that Brukeval and his bunch are the cause of the troubles. We had never even seen a flathead before he started stirring up trouble. They always stayed north of the river and everything was peaceful.

"Brukeval's men had brought in two wounded hunters and that man over there." Tormaden pointed toward Groog. "One of the hunters had a spear wound and the other was unconscious from a blow to the head. Of course we took them in. Brukeval and his uninjured men left right away, saying that they were hunting flatheads and that they would be back later.

"The Chimudonii had just left when Zelandoni happened to reach our cave. It was fortunate that she did because the spear wound was bad and although our cave's Zelandoni has some talent in healing, his skill is not as great as the First Zelandoni's.

"I have to admit that I was shaken by the obvious signs of violence. That's the only reason I can give for following the Chimudonii instructions to leave that man," again gesturing toward Groog, "in a storage pit to await their return. When the First Zelandoni heard he was there she insisted he be moved to the cave along with the injured hunters. He had been beaten severely and was unconscious. He had cuts and bruises all over his body and he obviously had a broken leg. If the First Zelandoni hadn't removed him from the pit, I'm sad to admit that he might have died."

Tormaden paused for a moment, looking directly at Deanna, "I will say this, it does seem that these people to the north are led by Brukeval and from what I saw when he came back and confronted our First Zelandoni, he was obsessed with destroying any Clan people that he could get his hands on."

"Do you think this violence may spill over into your holding Tormaden?" Ayla asked.

"It already has," he replied. "The violence he perpetrated on you made us arm ourselves. If Jondalar hadn't stopped them from beating you there would have been immediate conflict between them and us."

Looking directly at Ayla but addressing Tormaden Deanna spoke, "I don't suppose you talked to the First Zelandoni about this before this meeting?"

Tormaden replied, sounding a bit irritated, "No Denanna, I wanted to talk to the First Zelandoni about this meeting but she said she didn't want to be accused of meddling in what I had to say. I guess she was wise to do that considering you're suggesting it right now."

The questions turned to the man of the Clan after that and his presence at their meeting. Someone among them would ask a question and Jonayla would sign to Groog what was said. He would answer her in signs and then she would speak for him to the gathering.

Groog spoke through Jonayla for some time. He tried to fully convey his people's distress and anger. Making no threats, but expressing fears of what could happen.

Ayla remained silent, watching the other Zelandonia and the leaders as they interacted with Groog through her daughter. She could see the ones with open minds and could guess who's were less open. The best outcome would be that the majority would agree to help solve the problem in the north. If it turned out that they refused, she would go by herself. Not a prospect she looked forward to after her recent experience with Brukeval.

In the end, nothing was resolved that day. The meeting was interrupted to allow everyone to eat when the sun was at its highest, and then reconvened again, to run until late afternoon. Finally, it was agreed that everyone should sleep on all that had been said and then a decision would be made in the morning.

As the general meeting broke up Ayla asked the Zelandoni to stay behind to give her their impressions of the discussion. Those that supported her, the Zelandoni of the Third, Fifth and Eleventh Caves as well as all of the Southern Caves were sure they could convince their cave leaders of the necessity of intervention in the north.

Even the four Zelandoni from the Twenty-Ninth Cave felt that with a little persuasion they would be able to convince their holding leaders to support an expedition to the north.

The others were less sure how they felt and what their leaders would decide. All Ayla could do was to ask them all to do their best to gain their leaders to support her approach to creating peace in the north, for she truly felt that if not checked, the violence would spread southward.

The next day dawned bright and sunny with the scent of growing things in the air. It would soon be time to leave for the Summer Meeting. Ayla realized that this gathering was unprecedented and that normally all the caves would be preparing for the journey to Old Valley, this year's host for the Zelandonii gathering. She hoped that the leaders would make a favorable decision.

Ayla stood before her Zelandonia and the leaders in attendance as the meeting reconvened. She laid out her reasons again for a journey to the north. Her calm reasoned arguments reminded her listeners that she was the giver of Doni's gifts, the one who acted as their intermediary with the Great Earth Mother to Her children. She was the voice, the instrument and surrogate of the Great Earth Mother.

She spoke to the gathering as if she was speaking to each of them individually, with a passionate conviction in her voice. When she had explained her reasons for intervention, she seated herself and let Joharran, as leader of the host cave, ask for a vote.

It turned out the vote was split and those who Ayla expected support from gave it and those she doubted would, withheld their support. But in the end, one more leader supported her proposal than not, so it was decided in favor of the intervention.

Three leaders and three Zelandoni - and any hunters willing to follow them from those caves would leave the Summer Meeting for several hands of time to journey beyond the North River to see what could be done about the conflict.

Ayla wasn't too disappointed with the outcome of the meeting. At least something would be done and this was better than just her and Jondalar traveling into a violent situation all by themselves. She included Jondalar in this because she knew with certainty that he would not let her go alone. Jondalar being with her would have been a complication because she knew it would be a dangerous journey and she didn't want to risk his life with just the two of them confronting the unknown.

With the discussion on the Clan issue concluded, Ayla launched into her next topic, the real integration of the Zelandonii of the south with the Zelandonii of the north. She told the assembly that to accomplish the coming together of both the northern and southern Zelandonii, some changes would be needed. One of the most

important would be the holding of Summer Meetings in the southern areas as well as in the north.

"I suggest that we agree to hold future Summer Meetings no farther north than the Twenty-Ninth Cave and no further south than the First Cave of the southern Zelandonii. And since there are more caves in the north, the Summer Meetings would only be held in the south once every five summers, unless suitable areas in the south can be found that would allow more than that without depleting the natural resources required to sustain the people for the duration of a Summer Meeting.

"Everyone here might wonder why I suggest changing the ways that tradition has dictated. The reason is that our people are expanding outward and if we want to remain one people, then we really need to be one people. The gathering in one place during the Summer Meeting is an integral part of who we are.

"Up until now, because of the distance, only some of the Zelandonia and some of the leaders in the south have journeyed to our Summer Meetings. That is a tenuous tie at best. My question is this; do we want to remain one people or are we prepared to split apart. That is what will happen if we don't tend to this issue."

As Ayla took her seat, Tormaden stood to address the gathering. "My cave is the farthest north and we will have the longest to travel. I am willing to do this but will have to discuss it with my people. The only real question I have about this change in meeting places is about hunting. It is well known that there is more game in the north than in the south. What will we do about supplies for the winter on those years when we hold the Summer Meetings south of the Ninth Cave?"

Ayla stood to address Tormaden and the others. Looking around she replied, "I have thought much on that. Because the south is abundant in growing things and the gathering of plants, grains, nuts and fruit will be consistent though a longer season than in the north, the only worry would be meat. I think this is easily solved by sending hunting parties out late in summer in the few hands of time before the Summer Meeting breaks up. Instead of bringing the kills back to the gathering place and then transporting the meat to individual caves, the hunting parties can stop off at each cave as they come back south and store their individual supplies at their own caves.

"It's actually a better use of time and energy. It will also be easier to hunt game, since the animals won't be as harassed as they normally are with smaller hunts all

summer long. Bigger kills done only several times in an area would make it more efficient to transport and store at the individual caves."

"I agree with this approach. It's too bad we can't do it that way every year, but I suppose it's too much to expect people not to hunt when it takes their fancy or if they need to fill their larders at Summer Meeting." This was from Denanna. This was the first time she had agreed with anything Ayla had suggested.

"What about the southern caves, would we be allowed to hunt in the north with the other hunting parties?" The southern spokeswoman Zelandoni asked.

"Of course. If your hunters are willing to journey into the north they are welcome to their share," Ayla replied. She looked around the gathering to see the northern leaders nodding. "It would also apply to gathering grains and plants in the south. The northern caves would take the opportunity to gather while at Summer Meeting as they would if they were in the north," Ayla said, looking at the southern Doniers.

"Yes, there is an abundance of grains, seeds and berries, so much in fact that much of it goes un-gathered every year," the southerner who was first among her Zelandoni replied. "There is more than enough to go around and I think you will find that it is much quicker to harvest because the longer growing season ripens the crops to peak at the time of Summer Meetings."

"Then it is settled? You will discuss this with the people of your caves?" Ayla asked as she looked around the room. "Is there anyone who objects to the union with the southern caves?"

Silence.

"Then that is how it shall be. Next year's Summer Meeting will be... at the First Cave south? Is that acceptable?" Ayla looked to the southern Donier who spoke for all six.

"Yes, that will be quite acceptable," she smiled at the First. This was just more proof to her that their new leader was truly first among them all. No one else would have given this so much thought and effort and no one else would have made it happen so quickly. She was continually surprised by this new leader of theirs. She realized that she would need to get used to surprises the more involved she became with this woman's unusual abilities.

Chapter 16: Journey to the Summer Meeting

Three days after the leader's gathering, the Ninth Cave was on the move. All but the very old or infirm were at the base of the abri, travois hitched to horses and pack horses loaded and ready to go. They all knew that this year they would be taking a different route to the northern holding and the Summer Meeting encampment. When the Mother had spoken the earth had moved and The River was now blocked by a huge fall of rock. That broken stone had formed a large lake that barred their passage by way of the traditional trail. Now they must travel north on the west side of The River and take the ridge route.

People could still travel on the east side of The River, but when reaching the area of the new falls they would have to climb abrupt hills and do some rock climbing. That would not work for the pack horses or a large group of people. Either way, they would be separated from The River and would have to be sure to site their camps close to water sources.

Ayla relied on Willamar, who had been the mate of Jondalar's mother - now passed to the Spirit World - to tend to Groog on the journey. He was fairly proficient in Clan sign language because of his close association with Ayla and Jondalar so he was the obvious choice to watch over the Clan man since both of Ayla's children would be required to herd Jonayla's horses. Willamar would transport Groog on a travois, trading off horses several times a day to keep them fresh.

By the end of the first day of travel the people of the Ninth Cave had been joined by those of the Third Cave. They had reached the beginning of the ridge route heading north late that afternoon. Although they were traveling as one large group, each family unit or extended family unit would camp together using the low slung camp shelters to deflect the wind and ward off the morning dew.

Ayla's close travel companions consisted of Jondalar, their children and Willamar. There were also Lanoga and Lanidar and Lanoga's siblings, Lorala and the smaller children who were as family to them. They were the children of a sad couple who had died a few years before. Jondalar and Ayla had stepped in, taking permanent responsibility for the children. And of course there was Groog.

There would be two more days of travel before the large party would be settled in Old Valley and begin their participation in the Summer Meeting. Normally the trip

could be accomplished in a day and a half at most by horseback using the now destroyed river path, but with so many people, half of whom were on foot with their possessions loaded on horse drawn travois, the column would be slowed to a walking pace no matter which way they went.

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That night they ate from the rations brought from home. Now that they were on a well-marked trail, Durcan would take Groog on the travois in the morning to give Willamar a break and then later in the day he would join Jonayla to help herd her horses behind the column of people. This is how it would go for the duration of the trip.

On the second day, after stopping in the late afternoon to make camp, Jondalar and Durcan left the campsite in search of a supply of firewood while Jonayla and Lorala set up the overnight travel tents.

As the two girls worked they talked and laughed about some of the things that had happened along the trail that day. Ayla was happy to see that her daughter and Lorala were so close. As she watched them busily setting up the travel tents she remembered back to the time when they were both babies. Jonayla had had a mother and father who cared about her greatly, while Lorala and her older sister, and for that matter, all of her siblings, had been neglected by their irresponsible parents. The children could have become like their parents but instead they had grown up to be just the opposite. Ayla gave Lorala's older sister Lanoga much of the credit for that. She had been - and was still - much like a mother to her siblings.

As she was placing the stones to build the evening's fireplace, Ayla looked up when she heard the sound of her name. Groog wanted to talk to her. She knew that with all the council meetings and planning for the journey to the Summer Meeting, she hadn't been able to take the time necessary to answer his questions.

Laying the last stone for the fire circle, she decided this would be as good a time as any to talk to him. She asked Jonayla to build the fire when the wood arrived and also instructed the two girls to erect the travel cache for the food so it would be kept safe from small animals.

"I'm sorry we haven't been able to talk recently. It has been a very busy time for me," she signed to the man.

Groog watched the woman's hands as she talked. It was still amazing to see one of the Others talking so proficiently. Usually the Others jabbered, making all sorts of noises, but this female Mog-ur could speak the flowing ancient, sacred, silent language of the Clan with ease, the language used to address the Spirit World and the language understood by all Clan people.

Ayla looked at Groog, and signed, "Groog. What questions did you want to ask me? Jonayla tells me that you have been asking to talk to me."

Groog wasn't sure how much to say, but decided that he had to find out if this story that her daughter had told him was... what he thought it was. There was no doubt in his mind that the young female had believed what she had told him, but maybe she had misunderstood.

"Mog-ur, your daughter told me that you were adopted to the hearth of Creb who was Mog-ur when you lived with our people in the east. Is this true or was she mistaken?"

Ayla was surprised by the question, coming out of the blue, showing her surprise in her body language, with a widening of the eyes and a body stance of truth. Groog knew from this that what she was about to tell him would be exactly that... truth.

"Creb's sibling Iza, who was Medicine Woman, found me when I was a little child. I was orphaned by an earthquake and I was sick and almost dead from a cave lion wound I had received. Iza was allowed by the leader to pick me up and take me with her. Iza was sibling to Creb who was Mog-ur.

"Creb did end up adopting me. He had no children of his own and we loved each other. He is the man that I still think of as my father. I was the daughter of his hearth. And I thought of Iza as my mother and when she had a child, Uba - who was named after the mother of Creb and Iza - I thought of her as my hearth sibling. Their mother's mother was first among all Medicine Women as was her daughter Iza and later I'm sure Iza's daughter Uba would be."

Groog could only stare. Even though he knew it was rude to do so, he felt so moved to actually be in the presence of a person, even a person of the Others, who had actually known an embodiment of Creb. Finally he said, "You must come north and meet my Mog-ur. You will be received... even though you are a female and one of the Others, you will be received as Mog-ur. I know that he will listen to you and if we can stop those wild men who hunt us, all will be well. Clan leaders will listen to you."

At that moment Jondalar and Durcan walked into camp and dumped a big load of kindling and broken branches beside the fire circle that Ayla had laid out. "We will speak more about the trouble in the north when we arrive at the Summer Meeting," Ayla explained in Clan hand signs. "I will ask for some of our hunters to come with us and we will stop the men who hunt your people. But that will have to wait until this Moon has come and gone. Before we can leave we have ceremonies that must be performed for the well-being of the Zelandonii people. But I promise you, we will go north and deal with this."

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By the morning of the third day of their journey, everyone was looking forward to settling down in their summer lodges later that afternoon. For the final leg of the journey, Jonayla was riding herd on her horses with help from Lorala. She and Lorala were riding side by side in conversation when Cambarre reined his horse into step with Jonayla's Gray.

"Greetings beautiful!" he said enthusiastically. "I've wanted to talk to you for days, but you always seem to be tending these horses of yours or you have this one stuck to your side," he nodded toward Lorala, who made a sound of disgust and pulled her horse away to gallop ahead, leaving the two alone.

"What do you want Cambarre? I think we said all there was to say some days ago. You're looking for a willing girl to give you pleasure at your convenience and I'm looking for a man who I can respect and love as a mate and to be the father of my children. I don't see what we have to talk about," Jonayla said with a disparaging edge to her voice.

She was trying to sound as if she didn't care, but inside, her stomach was turning with nervous butterflies and her heart-rate was rising as she spoke to the handsome young man. For some strange reason she felt all confused and flustered whenever he was near her. She didn't like that feeling, she had always felt confident in her abilities and in herself and she wasn't used to the feeling of panic that he caused in her. She just knew that he would make her do or say something that would humiliate her again like he'd done twice before.

"Listen Jonayla, I would like to start over with you. You're the woman I want. Yes I've been playing around with Marilla, but I haven't been running around with all the girls you think I have. And I'm more than willing to give up Marilla if you give me the

slightest word that you're interested. You're worth waiting for Jonayla and I mean that," he said seriously.

Jonayla was inwardly happy, soaringly so, but outwardly she remained calm, or at least hoped that she looked calm. "Cambarre. What am I to think when you tell me that all I have to say is I'm yours and you will dump Marilla on the refuse heap? How am I to trust a man who would do that to another woman? When would you decide to do the same to me? I want a man who is committed to me without conditions and I don't want to come between you and another woman. I think you have to grow up some more. Even though you're older than me, you sometimes act like a little boy who wants to be sure he has his comfort lined up before committing to a choice. Goodbye Cambarre." Jonayla, whipped her reins to urge Gray into a gallop. She stopped when she reached the head of her small herd, leaving her 'would be suitor' chagrined.

Jonayla shed tears of anguish as she rode on, tears she was determined not let Cambarre see. She felt as though she loved him, but she wasn't sure that she liked him very much.

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It was mid-day by the time the first people from the long column of Ninth Cave reached the descending trailhead into Old Valley. This trail would take them on a path around the Zelandonia ceremonial site situated on Sacred Mountain and down onto the valley floor and the Summer Meeting. Ayla, more than anyone else in the band of people, felt the presence of the mountain and its sacred place. The place where she had finally understood her position among her adopted people and her relationship with the Mother.

Joharran, as leader of the Ninth Cave, had sent his locum and friend Rushemar along with five other men to stake out a campsite. They needed to be close to water and have enough space to spread out comfortably for so large a number of people. They would surely be the largest group in attendance again this year.

Joharran had been watching out for Rushemar and waved to him as they filed down the trail into the valley. He looked approvingly at the area that Rushemar and his men had reserved for them. It was within easy walking distance to the lake that had been formed because of the recent earthquake. There was even a small stream flowing down the mountainside and ran through their campsite before feeding into

the lake. There was also a grove of pine trees that screened them from general view and gave the shaded place a private feeling.

It appeared that the Third Cave would set up their camp next to the Ninth so there would be an even larger group of people at this southern-most campsite. There was no room south of them, between their campsite and the lake, for any other cave so it would be quiet and spacious even with both camps so close together.

Most of the people went to work right away setting up their summer lodges and circles of stones for individual cooking fires. This took the rest of the day, but by dusk everything was set-up and many of the people had gravitated to the main areas of the Summer Meeting to visit friends and relatives from other caves.

Chapter 17: Carrots, Eggs and Tea Leaves

The next morning while many were still asleep, the more energetic members of the Ninth Cave were already up and at the main gathering areas.

Ayla was kneeling beside their cooking fire, with Jondalar's sibling Folara, preparing food for the others when Jonayla lifted the flap that gave privacy to their summer lodge and stepped out, yawning and stretching languidly. "Greetings mother, greetings Folara," she said, still sounding full of sleep.

Folara, Jondalar's sister, had mated with Aldanor, a man from the S'Aemunai ten Summer Meetings ago. She and her mate had been living with the S'Armunai since then but now they had made the long journey to the Zelandonii Summer Meeting with plans to stay with the Ninth Cave at least through the coming winter.

"Greetings Jonayla," Ayla replied. "You sound like you're still asleep. Maybe you should take a swim in the lake to wake up."

Jonayla rejected that idea, but came over to see if she could help with the preparation of the food. She was feeling depressed and being at the Summer Meeting with her feelings for Cambarre all twisted up didn't make her feel any better. They would be here for several full moons and she would have to be around him constantly.

Ayla could see that her daughter was struggling with something, but decided to remain silent and let her either talk about it or not. Jonayla was a young adult now and needed to find her own way at times. Ayla thought that she knew the reason for her daughter's mood, she knew that Cambarre had been paying attention to her lately and it appeared that they weren't communicating very well with each other.

When Folara left to return to her mate's summer lodge, Ayla decided that while they were alone it might be worth broaching her daughter's problems. So she said, "Jonayla, would you hand me the eggs please?" Ayla had been peeling the skins off some fresh carrots and paused for a moment holding her hand out for the eggs.

Jonayla handed her mother the small basket with the eggs in it and Ayla slipped them into the boiling water one at a time. "Daughter," Ayla thought it might be

worth saying something after all. "Have you ever heard the story about the carrot, the egg and the tea leaves?"

"No mother," Jonayla said, not really interested in a story about food.

Ayla could see she didn't have her daughter's full attention, stopping what she was doing, she turned to face her daughter. "Jonayla, I have always been proud of you, you know that. You have willingly learned what your father and I have tried to teach you, and you have mastered the skills to survive on your own if need be.

"At Sixteen summers, you are an accomplished hunter who contributes to the community. You are a better healer than many who claim to be healers. You would make any man a good mate. In short, you are an intelligent, accomplished young woman."

Jonayla looked back at her mother with tears in her eyes. "If I am what you say mother, then why do I feel so worthless right now?"

"That's the question you must ask yourself. What is making you feel less than you are? It's a good question to ask." Ayla hugged her child. "Sit next to me and let me tell you my story about the carrots and the eggs and the tea leaves." She dipped the strainer that was made of woven reeds into the boiling water and removed the eggs before sitting next to her daughter.

"Think carefully about what I'm going to tell you. What happens when you put a carrot into boiling water?" She held up a freshly peeled carrot, then continued before her daughter could respond. "The carrot changes and becomes soft, even mushy if boiled too long."

Then Ayla reached over and took one of the extra eggs that hadn't been boiled, "What do you think happens to an egg that is placed in boiling water? It changes and becomes firm inside." Again, Ayla left no time for an answer.

"Now about the tea leaves..." Ayla paused for effect. "What happens when you sprinkle tea leaves into the same boiling water?" Ayla stopped and looked at her daughter, arching a brow, waiting for an answer from her daughter.

"I guess you make tea," Jonayla responded.

"Think about it daughter. When you sprinkle tea leaves into boiling water, you change the water into something that is still useful, something that still sustains, even something that is enjoyable. Instead of the boiling water changing the tea leaves, the tea leaves change the boiling water. That is the point of my story; don't let bad experiences depress or change you like the boiling water changed the carrot and the egg. Learn from them, let them help you to be a stronger person. Change your circumstances as the tea leaves changed the boiling water.

"Also, when 'your' water boils and you want to strike out at others, remember that other people feel the same as you do. They have the same problems that you have and they have the same fears and insecurities as you, so keep in mind how you would feel when you say things that may be hurtful to others."

Ayla handed her daughter an egg and a carrot and turned back to the hearth to continue the food preparation. Her daughter looked at the egg and the carrot and then at her mother. Slowly she began to smile, a smile that would remind anyone - should they have been standing nearby - of her mother. A smile that became sunnier and brighter until the young woman laughed out loud. "Thank you mother, that was a good story and I see what you mean." She jumped up, telling her mother that she would gather some more firewood, and left the campsite with a bounce in her step.

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Durcan was above the Summer Meeting, up on the slope that everyone called Sacred Mountain. He wasn't sure why the whole mountain was sacred since only one cave was special, but that was alright since most people went in other directions to hunt. That fact made the game on the mountain more plentiful and he was pretty sure that he would be able to hunt something for the pot just about every day.

He was heading back with his sling to the little meadow that had offered good hunting the afternoon before. Right now he heard voices. Durcan dismounted and crept forward to the edge of the clearing. There were three boys and a girl lying in the grass beside a stream, one of the boys with a sinew fishing line dangling in the water. They were talking and occasionally laughing.

Durcan had been trained by his parents to always be aware of his surroundings and to be prepared for anything. But this looked innocent enough, they looked to be around his own age, there was no apparent threat here. Durcan rose from his

crouch and walked into the open, still holding his sling in one hand and the reins of his horse, Lightning, in the other.

The other children noticed him for the first time and fell silent as he came nearer. "Who are you?" the girl asked.

"I am Durcan from the Ninth Cave," he answered simply. "I was hunting when I heard your voices," explaining his presence.

"Oh, we know you. The First Zelandoni is your mother. You must know things before anyone else does," one of the boys said. He held his hand up, "Greetings Durcan, my name is Artibon, and this is Tomalar and Bundiman and her name is Folrian." He gestured to each as he casually introduced them.

"Call me Durc, everyone does," he said. "What cave do you come from?" he asked, wondering why Artibon hadn't said.

"I'm from the Twenty-Ninth Cave South Face," Artibon said. "And so is Folrian, she's my sister."

"I'm from the Fourteenth Cave," Tomalar replied, "and so is Bundiman," he added.

"Do you mind if I join you for a bit. I have some dried deer jerky seasoned with linden, anyone like some?" Durcan asked as he dug into his belt pouch. "This is something my mother makes. She learned to do it from the Mamutoi, only they would have made it from Mammoth meat."

"So, do you know things before anyone else does?" Folrian asked.

"No, of course not. I don't sit in on the Zelandonia meetings," Durcan replied.

"But your mother is the First Zelandoni. Doesn't she talk about things when at home?" Tomalar asked.

"Yes, but when she comes home she's just my mother. She talks about things that mothers talk about, not Zelandonia things."

"Your father is handsome," Folrian said. "He is tall and well-built and they say he was very sought after before he met your mother. I can see why, even if he is old now,

he still looks handsome. You do too Durc, you look a lot like your father. Has anyone ever told you that?"

Durcan was embarrassed by this talk. It made him feel funny that a girl would talk about his father as a woman's man, someone who women would seek out. To him his father was just his father. Although at some level he knew his father was handsome and that women were attracted to him, but he had never discussed it with anyone before.

"Don't pay any attention to Folrian, she's always going on about stuff like that, men and women stuff, it's enough to make anyone sick to their stomach," her brother Artibon said.

"Hey! You little pig face, how dare you!" Folrian screeched, swatting at her brother, ending up making them all laugh.

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After a couple of hours, Durcan realized that he had to get back to his hunt. He said that he was hunting for dinner and had to continue. As he was saying his farewells Artibon asked if he could come with him. "I have my sling with me and also need to bring something back to the pot for my family. Mind if I tag along with you?"

The two boys mounted their horses and trotted away from the meadow. Since they had all been in the vicinity for hours, it was unlikely that there would be any game left in that area, so the boys rode further around the mountain looking for a likely place, such as a watering hole or another open meadow with undisturbed grazing.

Finally they came to an open space, but as they entered the outer edge of the area, Artibon signaled a halt with a raised hand. "Look there," he said pointing at a weathered post with an Élan mark on it. "I think we have entered a sacred area."

Durcan looked around and could see a well worn path leading up the slope to a terrace just beginning around the curve of the mountain. "Yes, this is the way to Revelation Cave. It is a sacred place to the Zelandoni."

Artibon looked at his companion, "You have been here before?" he asked.

"Only once, just after the Mother spoke and the earth shook. Wolf told my father and I that my mother needed us and we hurried to this place. But by the time we

finally arrived the Mother had spoken and Wolf had died." Durcan still felt a great sadness that his childhood wolf friend was gone. He only hoped that animals walked in the Spirit World like people did, because he would like to see Wolf again when it was his time to go there.

Artibon couldn't think of anything to say to his new friend. What he'd just heard from Durcan - spoken as if it were nothing unusual - was so strange he wasn't even sure he understood what had been said. He'd heard of Wolf, of course, everyone had. But to know someone who called him a friend and who had known him, that was quite something. Then to hear that a wolf had told his father something and that he and his father went to the place where the Mother had spoken... Yes, strange indeed, and awe inspiring too.

The boys withdrew from the sacred site and ended up finding a watering hole where they were each able to kill several fat rabbits. They invited each other to their respective lodges for a meal in the near future, as is customary for people in new friendships. Then promising to meet again the next day, they went to their home lodges to deliver their kills as a contribution to the evening's meal.

Chapter 18: Unexpected Visitor

That summer, by the end of Full Summer Moon, all eleven of the northern Zelandonii caves and three out of the six southern caves were in attendance. It was the biggest Summer Meeting held in living memory.

The twelve Zelandonia and their Acolytes were kept busy with the planning and implementation of the first Matrimonial and the newer, but just as important, puberty rituals that had taken the place of the Doni opening ceremonies for both the young women and young men. These new ceremonies were - in the case of the women - secret initiation rituals that stopped short of the old "opening" ceremonies that used to be a woman's coming of age event. The same with young men, the sexual aspect that used to take place when a boy had officially reached puberty had been replaced by tests of endurance as well as proving their ability to provide and protect their future mate and children.

These alterations were begun by Ayla's predecessor, the previous First Zelandoni. Many ceremonies in those years were altered to better fit the people's new understanding of the power of conception and the Mother's role in it. Ayla smiled to herself, knowing that some of the suggestions she had made and that had been adopted by the other Zelandoni, had originally been part of the Clan's ceremonials. She wondered what the others would feel if they knew.

By the beginning of Full Buck Moon, it was time to think about the short journey to the northern area to see what should be done about the violence taking place there. Reports were still coming in from travelers who were making their way to the Zelandonii Summer Meeting from other places. More deaths in the recent past, according to a traveling storyteller who had stopped at Hilltop Holding only five days before, while on his way to the Zelandonii gathering.

A meeting was held in the Zelandoni lodge. All of the cave leaders and their Zelandonia were requested to attend. After a long discussion to decide who should go, three leaders and three Zelandoni were chosen as representatives. They would leave the Summer Meeting for several hands of time to journey north and cross over the boundary river and into the conflict area.

As First Zelandoni, Ayla would lead. To her surprise, the Zelandoni of the Third Cave volunteered to join her. The First Donier who spoke for the southerners volunteered

as the third member representing the Zelandonia. The cave leaders of these three Zelandoni also volunteered to accompany their spiritual leaders as did many other men from those caves. So many people volunteered to go, that the leaders finally had to limit the number of hunters to twenty and chose the most reliable men among the volunteers.

It was now only two days before the first Matrimonial. The decision was made to leave shortly after the ceremony. The decisions made, they all dispersed to their home lodges.

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It was still early, sometime before the noon meals were to be prepared, that a small group of dusty travelers were seen south of the gathering. They were first spotted by people from the Ninth and Third Caves, since their encampments were farthest south of the gathering.

Ayla heard the murmurs increase as more and more people noticed the traveler's approach. She finally left the project she was working on inside the family lodge to see what the commotion was about. She quickly noticed what the people were looking at and without a word mounted Summer Child and rode out to meet them. As she came closer she could see the man in the lead had bright red hair like a fuzzy cap and a flat nose and sparkling eyes. He reminded her of someone she felt she should know.

The travelers were on foot so Ayla dismounted and stood waiting for them to reach her. She had stopped far enough away so if they were not used to horses they wouldn't feel threatened. "Greetings travelers," she said in Zelandonii, making the universal sign of welcome and friendship with her hands.

"Greetings. My name is Ralev and these are members of our troupe," the young man said in heavily accented Zelandonii. "We are storytellers. We have traveled since before the end of winter to reach you and later we will go even further west until we reach the land's end. We heard from the Losadunai that the Zelandonii Summer Meeting would be in this place this year and hoped we would be welcomed."

Jondalar had mounted his horse and galloped to Ayla's side. He'd been up the valley when he'd heard about the visitors, but he hadn't thought too much about it until he reached their summer lodge and saw that Ayla had gone to meet them. As he approached, something about the man at the head of the group seemed uncannily

familiar to him. He couldn't quite place the man. He was unusual looking, yet somehow familiar.

As Jondalar dismounted he heard the man ask, "We hope to find Ayla and Jondalar. We are Mamutoi and have mutual friends. Do you know them?"

"Yes I do," Ayla said with a big happy smile of welcome. "This is Jondalar and I am Ayla! And if I'm not mistaken, you are Ranec and Tricie's son!"

"It is nearly unbelievable that you would be the first people we run into. I was just an infant when you visited the Mamutoi, but from the stories I've heard and what Danug has recounted about his visit to your home many years ago, I feel that I know you."

Jondalar shouted in surprise, "I knew you looked familiar. You look like both of your parents, that's why I recognized you, even though I didn't know why."

Ayla stepped forward and hugged him, even though it wasn't the traditional way of greeting, this was a moment that meant a great deal to her. If she hadn't already loved Jondalar, Ranec would have been the man of her hearth and to meet his son after all this time, was an emotional experience indeed.

"I loved Ranec and I admired Tricie and I welcome you to the Zelandonii Summer Meeting Ralev, and those who follow you." Ayla had tears in her eyes as she stood back to inspect the young man. "Danug had mentioned when he last visited that you wanted to come visit us then. So you finally came!"

"Yes, I've become a traveling storyteller so it's only natural that I would want to meet the legendary Ayla and Jondalar, or should I say, "The Mother of the Wolf Star and Her Pale Shining Moon Lover Jondalar. It is still a very popular story in our part of the world and there are many variations on the theme. I have to say that I was a little awed to see you ride up on your horse, I can understand how Attaroa must have felt when she first saw you."

"You know about the S'Armunai?" Ayla was surprised.

"Oh yes, there are many stories from the S'Armunai who count you, among other things, as the spirit of the Mother. We stopped there and in many other places on our way here."

Ayla smiled at the man, "Well, I don't know about any legends, we didn't do anything legendary, we just tried to survive a bad situation and help people who needed it." Ayla realized then that these travelers must have been walking for the better part of the morning. "You must stay with the Ninth Cave as our guests tonight. You must also be tired by your trek here. Come, let's get you settled and some food in you. I would very much like to hear about everyone at Lion Camp. I miss them so and it will be good to hear news of them."

"We will be glad to share a meal with you and I would very much like to spend time with you and hear some of your stories, if you have the time, but we need to get to the storyteller's lodge and stake out our space before there is no room left."

"One question, before you go," Jondalar asked. "Can you tell me how Wymez is doing? The last I heard he was mated to Tulie as second mate. Does he fare well?"

Ralev looked uncomfortable for a moment and Jondalar could read his expression instantly. "No, not Wymez!" Jondalar said in alarmed disbelief.

"Yes, I'm sorry to tell you that Wymez passed over into the Spirit World last winter. It was a severe winter, colder than many and he caught a cold that went to his chest and, well... it happens sometimes that people don't make it when they get that sick. But he was happy for a long time and Tulie loved him. We all loved him..." Ralev's voice trailed off for a moment. "I do have some things of his that Tulie said I should give you. Wymez always said that next to him, you were the best flint knapper he'd ever met," Ralev said.

"It grieves me to think that Wymez no longer walks the earth, he was a true artist, one that I learned so much from," Jondalar replied sadly as the group began to walk toward the Ninth Cave's encampment.

"Yes, he was important to you Jondalar, that's why he will remain alive in your memory, even now that he has gone," Ayla kissed Jondalar on the cheek as they entered their home encampment with Ralev and his group of storytellers.

It was agreed that once the group had found their place in the lodge of the storytellers and settled in, they would return to the Ninth Cave's summer camp for a meal so they could talk about friends long missed. Ayla and Jondalar wanted to know about everyone at Lion Camp and Ralev was keen to hear some of their stories to add to his growing cache of tales about the couple. To hear stories directly from

the legendary couple - first hand - would add much to his standing in the community of storytellers.

Ayla introduced Jonayla to the storytellers and assigned her to lead them to where they needed to go. They soon left, following her through the large sprawling gathering of people. As they walked through the area, Ralev realized how big this gathering really was. There were so many people, more people than any Mamutoi Summer Meeting he'd ever been to.

-O-

Durcan and two of his new friends, Artibon and Folrian, were wandering around the Summer Meeting, taking in the sights and sounds of the large gathering when they stopped at the storyteller's lodge. It was more of a surround than a lodge since there was no roof, just walls made of wooden frames and reeds intertwined. Against the back wall of the surround were some sleeping shelters and an area with an awning stretched over it for rainy days, but the main area was just a big open space where people could sit and watch and listen, although there was a structure at the side of the compound that had a dugout floor and a pointed roof providing a more intimate space when needed. Most meeting places across their travels provided such an enclosed structure for 'close encounters' with those interested in Storytellers.

Storytelling was more than just telling a story. Sometimes there were masks or disguises and sometimes the storytellers would take parts and speak to each other as if they were the people in the story itself. At night they would have torches attached to poles to give light that shone down on them from above, making it seem almost like day. Sometimes when a big story was being told, one that had been announced during the day, they would build a huge bonfire and walk around it, speaking many parts using a group of storytellers.

All of the children loved the story telling and Durcan was no exception. The only times he wasn't sure how he felt, was when they told stories about his mother and father. To him they were just mother and father and to hear stories about what they had done in strange faraway places was confusing and a little frightening. After all, if any of it were true, that meant he didn't know his parents as well as he thought he did. That idea was always a bit disconcerting to the young boy.

The three children had stopped at the storytelling surround when Durcan noticed the red-haired friend of his mother, the man called Ralev, was speaking. He was curious so he pulled his friends to the seating area and they listened.

He was telling the story of when Ayla and Jondalar had attended the Mamutoi Summer Meeting with the Lion Camp. How she had stood up to the people who were making fun of Rydag and how she had taught the Lion Camp to speak with hand signs so that Rydag could understand them. He went on to say that the Lion Camp would make jokes with their Clan signs about people when they were rude to Rydag, who was a mixture between people and flatheads. They would make the young boy smile with their jokes, turning the rudeness back at the perpetrators.

The story told how Ayla had tended the boy and that she had performed the Clan burial ritual for the boy when he had died from a weak heart and how all of the Mamutoi Summer Meeting had watched.

Then the story went on to describe Ayla riding a cave lion on the plain below the meeting area and again how all of the Mamutoi had watched. Ayla had been a major topic the next year at the Mamutoi Summer Meeting, but no one ever saw her again. After that summer, many of the people were less judgmental about being different and eventually they became more understanding and accepting of people that were different looking, all because Ayla had shown them the way with that little boy of mixed blood.

Durcan had liked that story, but when the red-haired Mamutoi storyteller was done, some of the people at the fringe of the crowd made rude noises and mumbled things about flatheads and abominations. Durcan and his friends hurried away, not liking the atmosphere and the rudeness of the adults. When grownups acted mean, it was always frightening to children, especially children whose parents never acted like that. It made them wonder why some adults didn't act like adults.

-O-

They were sitting outside the family's summer lodge near the main hearth. Ayla, with Jondalar at her side, had been in discussions with several of the leaders who would be staying behind, including Denanna; Ayla was always careful to include her in discussions. Also in the meeting were the Zelandoni of the Fifth and Third Caves, whom she had become accustomed to relying on as advisors. When Ralev and his troupe returned to the Ninth Cave's camp she set aside the discussion and broached the subject of her departure to the north.

"I'm sorry that we have to leave in two days, but it should only be for a hand or two of time. It was planned some time ago and I can't delay it." Ayla was a bit distressed

at the thought of leaving so soon after her Mamutoi friends had arrived so unexpectedly. "You can enjoy the Summer Meeting and have your meals at the Ninth's camp. Proleva will see to your needs."

"Sure I will, I'd be happy to make you welcome for as long as you stay with us, any friend of our Zelandoni is like family to us," Proleva declared.

Ralev had been silent, but finally asked, "Zelandoni, what is causing the trouble? I'm not sure why anyone would bother to hunt Clan folk, they seem to always stay to themselves. At least that's always been my experience with them."

"I think it is basically because people don't know them, they look different and they have different ways. But if you look past their appearance, they are much like us. They make secure homes for their families, they care deeply for their children and they respect Mother Earth, in their own way," Ayla said earnestly. "You only have to talk to Groog," she nodded to the man of the Clan who was engaged in a silent conversation with Durcan at the edge of the encampment, "to know that they are intelligent people."

"I can see that your Groog is of mixed spirits. I wonder if that makes him different from other Clan people, being a mixture of us and Clan?" Ralev said. "That reminds me, I'm sorry I didn't tell you this earlier, but I have been so busy getting settled in the storyteller's lodge that I almost forgot. My father made me promise to tell you about Durc, your Clan son."

Chapter 19: The Past Becomes the Present

In the silence that followed Ralev's statement, you could have heard a feather drop. The man suddenly realized that these people sitting around him didn't know about Ayla's son. In those moments it also became apparent to him that he probably should have brought up the subject of her Clan son in a more private place.

Jondalar stood, "I think we should begin our preparations for the journey tomorrow." He held out his hand to Ayla in a gesture that they should leave.

Ayla looked up at Ralev with a worried expression that changed into a determined one. He knew what was coming. "You have news of Durc?" she asked, looking into the young man's eyes, tension in her voice.

"Uh, yes," he responded nervously. "I don't know much, but we had two hunters go south on a Journey two summers ago. They had an accident when traversing a steep slope of scree. One of them slipped and fell, rolling down into a ravine. It turned out that he broke his leg, just here," Ralev touched the shin of his left leg. "Neither of them had any real healing knowledge, so they did what they could by splinting his leg the best they knew how and making camp where they were.

"They were many days to the south of their lodge and close to acknowledged Clan country. Things seemed pretty desperate. That's when a group of Clan people came across them by chance. The two hunters had their spearthrowers, but they also knew if it came to a fight they would lose.

"That's when one of the Clan men, obviously a man of mixed spirits..." Ralev licked his lips nervously and looked around at the gathered people. "Well, he came forward and pointed to the hunter with the broken leg and then he pointed to a Clan woman from his group.

"We all know about Medicine Women from you Ayl... uh Zelandoni," Ralev paused. "The Clan woman had that otter pouch that you always wore when you were with us, so they knew who she must be. Since they had no alternative, they signaled in basic sign language, the same sign you taught the Lion camp and now all the Mamutoi use - that she could tend his injured leg.

"All of the Clan people seemed surprised that these two hunters could communicate with hand signs. Maybe that's why they helped them. The hunters weren't sure why they did, but they were certainly grateful.

"It was late in the day by the time the Medicine Woman had set the hunter's leg, put splints on and bound his leg tight. Being so late, the Clan people stayed nearby for the night. The hunters communicated on a basic level with the man of mixed spirits. He seemed to be the leader of the group and he came to the hunter's fire for a while.

"It appeared that he was curious about them because they were 'Others', he wasn't hostile at all. He gave his name as Durc and the Medicine Woman's name was Uba. The hunters had heard the name Durc before from the stories that were still circulating about Ayla and Jondalar and their animal friends. The hunter spoke your name and the Clan man jerked in surprise and kind of grunted something and signed really fast, bringing the Medicine Women to his side.

"The hunters couldn't understand what they said to each other because their hand signs were moving too fast for them to follow what passed between them. As it turned out after more discussion, this Durc was your Durc and, well, that was a surprise...

"Several of us from Lion Camp went looking for him when we heard about it, but we didn't find him or his group. It had been a full moon since the hunters had seen them and their trail was cold. I wish I had more to tell you, but that's all I know. The hunters could barely communicate with them so they couldn't give us much information." Ralev finally stopped then looked around at the people who had heard all this.

"Zelandoni, are we to understand that you gave birth to a... Clan child?" Denanna asked quietly.

Jondalar, still standing, stepped closer to the leader of the Twenty-Ninth Cave and said, "Tell me Denanna, if you were alone and eleven summers old and a big brutal man of the Clan beat you and forced himself on you over and over again, and eventually made a baby in you, how would you handle it?" He stared hard at the woman.

"Ah, I-I... just think that we should have been told this significant part of our First Zelandoni's history, that's all. What else don't we know about her?" she said.

Ayla rose from her cross-legged position and stood with dignity, saying, "Denanna and everyone else who is here," she looked around at the people, some of them friends and some of them not. "I love my eldest son, who happens to be part Clan and part me. It is true that there was one bad man in the group of people who saved my life and brought me up. And it is true that he put a child in me. I hated him, but I never regretted what had happened to me once my son was born and I'll not pretend to feel otherwise now.

"If you think less of me because of what I went through when I was a child, then that is your right. I think that the trials I overcame in my life have made me stronger and the experiences - including the birth of my son Durc - have made me who I am today. I do not apologize for my decision to refrain from telling the Zelandonii community about my son Durc. I know how many of you feel about the Clan. My son Durc is a very special memory to me and not to be shared with people who would not understand.

"And I'll say one more thing, I'm proud to be the mother of Durc and he is as important to me as are the children that Jondalar and I have conceived together." Ayla turned and walked to Summer Child, mounting her without a riding blanket and urged the horse forward, gradually increasing the horse's speed into a gallop.

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Jondalar caught up with Ayla farther up Old Valley. She had slowed Summer Child to a walk and when she saw Jondalar coming she stopped and waited for him.

"Ayla! Are you alright?" concern was written on his face. After all this time he had thought that her secret was safe. To have it made public in such an unexpected way was a shock. At least to him. As he looked at his mate though, all he could see was a radiant smile and eyes that sparkled.

"Jondalar, do you realize what Ralev has just said? Durc is alive! My son is ALIVE! He leads others! He's alive and leads others Jondalar! And Uba is Medicine Woman, they are BOTH alive!" Ayla's tears flowed freely.

The light of excitement shown from Ayla's eyes, making her look beautiful, and so alive. Jondalar couldn't help himself, he dismounted and beckoned Ayla to dismount too and he hugged her tightly. "You know what this will mean don't you Ayla?

There'll be Zelandonii who won't accept you now. There are always people who like to put down those who have attained a higher status in the order of things."

"I don't care Jondalar. All I know is that I'm happy that my son is still alive and he seems to be accepted as a leader. I've always worried about him. There has never been a day that I haven't thought of him in some way and worried about him. A huge weight has been lifted from my shoulders to know he's alive and well."

"I'm glad that you're happy Ayla," Jondalar hugged her again, slowly rocking her back and forth, secure in his arms. As he hugged her, he looked over her shoulder, back toward the distant summer meeting and frowned. 'What would happen now that the Zelandonii people knew her secret,' he wondered.

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As expected, the story about the First Zelandoni's Clan child had spread through the Zelandonii gathering like wildfire. Everyone had an opinion. Many of those who were jealous of anyone who was better placed than themselves were the first to call for the First Zelandoni to step aside as leader of their spiritual community so that someone else who had not given birth to an abomination could lead the Zelandoni. They argued that she was tainted and that she could no longer intercede for them with the Great Earth Mother.

Foregoing the planned dinner for the just arrived travelers, Jondalar and Ayla, their children and immediate family, including Folara, her mate Aldanor, Joharran and Proleva and Lanidar and Lanoga and Loralala too, rode out of camp to the lake's edge to be alone and to discuss what had happened.

"Durc, would you gather enough wood to make a cooking fire? Jonayla would you please help your brother?" Ayla asked quietly.

The children left without comment. They had heard most of what had been said from others in their encampment. Jonayla in particular understood the implications of what had happened. Although her mother had always said that children who were of mixed essence were still children, many didn't feel that way. Some people thought that any woman who had lain with a Clan man, a flathead animal, was little better than an animal herself, someone with no self-respect. They simply ignored the fact she was only eleven summers old and subjected to repeated rapes.

It was hard to imagine a Clan man raping her mother. She thought to herself what it must have been like. How would she feel if a flathead man had attacked her? She thought for a moment about Groog, what would she have done if Groog had attacked and raped her when she had been only eleven summers old? He was powerfully built and looked like he could be dangerous if angered. Would she have been able to stand up to him? Maybe. But only because of what her mother and father had taught her.

She had to admit though, from her experience with Groog, she didn't think he would do such a thing. He was a man who seemed to have honor and self-control. She knew that in the beginning he must have been in great pain from the damage caused by his severe beating, but he never complained, in fact he never even mentioned his condition. Almost any Zelandonii man would have been flat on their back for a full moon after a beating like that.

Durcan called out that he'd found a fallen tree with lots of dead branches so Jonayla reined Gray toward her brother. What about Durcan? It was so obvious that he had been named after a flathead boy. Why would her father have named his son after a flathead? What would Durcan have to put up with now? she wondered.

Well, she wouldn't put up with anyone harassing her little brother. If anyone ridiculed him in her presence, they would regret it. Jonayla dismounted and began to violently break away the dry branches from the fallen tree as if she were offended by them. It felt good to snap the branches from the trunk with her bare hands, it soothed her anger to act out on the inert pieces of wood.

-O-

When the children returned to the family's impromptu campsite and unloaded the wood, Jondalar quickly built a fire and Ayla filled a heating basket with water from a tributary stream to the lake and prepared some heating stones to make tea.

Still, in silence, Ayla and Proleva served the tea to everyone and they settled around the fire as dusk descended around them. For a time the only sound was the lapping of lake water against the nearby shore and small sounds made by tiny creatures foraging for nocturnal food sources.

Finally Ayla stood, and Jondalar also stood, taking his place just behind her and to one side. Ayla noticing his movement, looked at him and smiled. They had talked

earlier while the water was being heated and had come to some decisions that she would now share with their family members.

Looking around at each person in the firelight, Ayla realized how much they meant to her. All here were her family and over the years she had grown to love each of them as if she'd known them all her life. To have people who acknowledged her as part of their family was secretly more important to her than life itself. She stood and said, "You have heard the story going around about my Clan son. I wanted to speak to my close family in private to answer any questions you may have about this without others listening.

"I know that except for Jondalar, none of you were there when Ralev brought to light the story of my Clan son, so I wanted to tell you about Durc and what happened to me when I was a child of the Clan.

"I know this is a shock to all of you and I apologize for not telling you before this. The only people that I told about my first born son were Marthona and the First Zelandoni before me and they both counseled me not to reveal that part of my past.

"First, let me assure you that I love my first born son Durc as much as I love my son Durcan and my daughter Jonayla. Can you imagine me not loving a child of mine? Even a child of mixed essence?

"It is true that I was forced by a brutal man, and because he forced me time and again he made a child in me. He hated me and I hated him, but I loved the rest of the people in our Clan. They didn't know how to react to the man's behavior toward me, their traditions didn't allow for that type of behavior. They couldn't understand why he acted the way he did toward me.

"Once I knew that I was with child I no longer cared what that man did to me. I was happy that I would be having a child. Back then, at eleven, I didn't know how children were conceived and everyone told me that my Cave Lion totem was too strong for me to ever have a child. Children were an important status symbol for any Clan woman and the fact that I was carrying one inside me, stopped the man from abusing me. He kept on hating me, but after it was known that I would be a mother he tried to ignore me.

"I almost died giving birth to Durc. I think it has something to do with the size of a Clan infant's head and the birth opening of people like us. But I did survive and thanks to my adopted mother, Iza, my baby ended up surviving as well. Durc thrived

because of her care and the kindness and understanding of other members of the Clan.

"Durc was much like us. By now he would be tall with straight legs and wide shoulders. He had a high forehead, much like ours, but he also had some of his father's features. I had to leave Durc behind when he was only five summers old. I don't know for sure how he would look as a grown man. Until now I didn't even know if he still lived.

"I was eventually forced out of the Clan by the same man who had attacked me. I was being turned out and cursed with death by this man who had become the new leader of our cave. I thought that my chances of survival were slim at best, so I couldn't take my son with me. I consigned his fate to Brun, the past leader of our cave and to my adopted sister Uba. From what Ralev said, it appears that my trust in them was justified and that my son Durc has survived and even prospered.

"I love my son Durc as much as I love each of you. How could I not?" Ayla said again, concluding with, "Now please ask me anything you want to know and I will answer you."

Joharran spoke first, "As far as I'm concerned you answered the questions I had. As you can probably guess, I support you. This thing about a Clan son makes no difference to me as far as how I feel about you."

"I agree with my mate, you are family and you have brought much to the community," Proleva said. "Anyone who can't see what you've done for the Zelandonii people is blind, and if they would ridicule you for a past over which you had no control..."

Folara jumped in, "I too will support you with all my heart," she said earnestly. "I'll not allow anyone to say anything against you, not in my hearing!"

Ayla smiled gratefully at Jondalar's sister, and then she looked at her own two children. They were sitting side by side, eyes wide. She knew that they were confused and uncomfortable with this new knowledge. She knelt down in front of them and looked into their eyes, first at one child and then the other, and asked, "Children of my heart, what have you to ask me?"

Jonayla replied, "Mother, I guess I understand why you kept this whole thing private, but what will you do now?"

"And father," Durcan asked, "why did you name me after mother's Clan child?"

Ayla stood up and moved to Jondalar's side, "Both are good questions. I will answer Jonayla's question first. What do I plan to do next? I intend to travel to the north the day after tomorrow as already decided. When I have accomplished what I have set out to do there, I will call a meeting of the Zelandonia and let them decide what should be done as far as the people's future spiritual leadership is concerned."

Then Jondalar spoke, "Son, as far as your name, I liked the sound of it. I thought it was a unique name that would set you apart from the crowd. I also named you, using your older brother's name sound because I knew your mother loved him and had to leave him behind because of circumstances beyond her control. Your mother also gave up any chance of ever seeing him again by coming with me to my home. I named you to honor your mother's love and sacrifice.

"I also have one other thing to add," he said, looking around at the gathering. "I promised Ayla that if the Zelandonii didn't accept her because of this, I would follow her to another home where acceptance would be unquestioned. We stopped at many places on our journey here, where the people would have loved to welcome us as members of their communities, no matter what our past might be.

"Although I would regret leaving the Ninth Cave, I will do so if the people turn against the woman I love. We and our children will travel east to find a home where we would be welcomed," Jondalar concluded.

Jonayla blurted out, "But father, this is my home, the only place I've ever lived. All my friends are here. I don't want to go."

Jondalar looked at his daughter and softly said, "Jonayla, you are old enough to decide for yourself. We don't know if we're going to leave or not. It depends on what happens in the future. But you're right, your life is here and if that is important enough to you, you may remain here."

-O-

Early in the morning, Ayla walked through the main gathering area to the Zelandoni lodge. There were some calls of support. A few people came up to take her hands in friendship, but there were also many people who stared, some with hostile

expressions. She ignored those people, not caring what they thought as she strode confidently toward the Zelandoni lodge with her daughter at her side.

Jonayla was trying very hard to imitate her mother's confident appearance, but deep down inside she cringed at those hostile stares and the derogatory comments, barely heard. She had always been taught that one stood up to people who treated you unjustly and this was obviously one of those cases.

As they reached the mammoth hide drape that covered the opening to the Zelandoni lodge, her mother turned to her and said, "Daughter, why don't you go and talk to your friends and see what they are saying. You need to make up your mind how you feel about all of this."

"I'd rather stay with you mother," Jonayla replied.

"Yes, I know, but I think it would be best if you talked to your friends and see how they are reacting to this new information about your mother. I plan to take you north with us and you might not have the opportunity to talk to them again before we leave on our journey. I think it's time you found out who your friends really are, don't you?"

"Alright mother," she replied reluctantly. "I'll do as you suggest." Jonayla walked away as her mother entered the Zelandoni lodge, beginning a day that promised to be long and tiring.

-O-

"Jonayla!"

Jonayla had only walked a few yards beyond the Zelandoni lodge before hearing her name called. She looked over her shoulder to see Cambarre hurrying toward her. She swallowed, nervous about what he might say to her. It seemed that they'd had nothing but one misunderstanding after another. Even though that was true, she was still greatly affected by him when he was near her. If he rejected her now, it would be devastating. She wondered momentarily, if maybe she should go with her parents and brother if they decided to leave. What would be left for her here?

"Jonayla, I wanted to talk to you. I heard about your mother's Clan son and I've also heard some of the nasty remarks from some people. I wanted to tell you that I don't care that your mother had a mixed child. That makes no difference about how I feel

toward you. I love you Jonayla. There I said it! I've just been really stupid about things," Cambarre paused for breath.

"I'm not ashamed of my mother or her first born son," Jonayla responded with tension in her voice. "She was raped by a Clan man when she was just eleven, but being who she is, she never held it against her child. She loved him as much as she loves me and I'm proud of her."

"Yes, I understand. Your mother is an inspiration to anyone who can see beyond their nose. Don't think that everyone has forgotten what she has brought to the Zelandonii people. I've always admired her and I believe that her past experiences have made her the person she is now."

"Why are you saying these things now Cambarre?" Jonayla asked suspiciously. "You've never even mentioned my mother before."

"I heard a rumor that you and your family might leave us and I wanted to tell you that I don't want you to go, I don't want to lose you. I want you to know that I will stand by you, and your family. And if you decide to leave with your family, I want to come with you, that's how much you mean to me," Cambarre said earnestly.

Jonayla was surprised by all of these statements of devotion from this man. She had always been drawn to him, even when they only seemed to bump heads. Suddenly she realized that HE was the reason that she hadn't wanted to leave and that was the reason for her outburst at the family meeting the night before.

"You really mean it? If my family decides to leave... you would come with me?" she asked.

"Yes, without a second thought, I would follow you anywhere. You don't realize what an amazing, accomplished woman you are, do you? Maybe that's why I've fallen in love with you. I've stopped seeing anyone else, I'll wait for you, you're worth it to me," Cambarre said with passion in his voice.

Jonayla looked into Cambarre's dark brown eyes. Her tears could no longer be held back, but she smiled through them, and standing on her tiptoes she reached up and pulled his lips to hers, giving him a kiss as an expression of her feelings toward him.

Cambarre took Jonayla's hand in his to show everyone that they were together as a couple and they walked on. The simple touching of hands made Jonayla's heart soar.

Anyone who might glance at the young couple would notice a confident and graceful young woman walking beside a handsome young man and not guess for a moment that only the night before they had both experienced anguish and uncertainty.

-O-

That night, wrapped in her furs, snug within their summer lodge, Jonayla had trouble falling asleep. They had turned in early because they would be up by dawn the following day to prepare for their departure to the north. She could hear her parents sharing pleasures in the dark. They were trying to be quiet, but she could hear an occasional moan from her mother and once a surprised gasp from her father and rhythmic noises that made it obvious to her what they were doing.

She knew what pleasures were, she had been sharing them with Lorala for the past two years, but she felt that sharing pleasures with a man would be different. She assumed it would be more intense. Those thoughts and the sounds that she could hear so close by made her feel an urge that was becoming stronger, deep within her. She missed Cambarre's presence, even though she would be seeing him again in the morning. She wished he was lying beside her now and that they were sharing what her parents were. She squirmed with secret pleasure at the thought.

Thoughts about Cambarre began to merge with thoughts about their journey tomorrow. He would be traveling with them to the north. They would be together for several hands of time. That was a pleasant thought. Jonayla heard her father's long strangled groan and knew what had just happened. It made her wish once again that Cambarre was already her mate. It would be so fine to have someone to share everything with, including pleasures, she thought.

-O-

Eventually, sleep must have overtaken her, because Jonayla woke with a start at the sounds of movement around her. Her parents were up and outside and she could just see Joharran getting up from his sleeping place. The summer lodge was dimly lit by dawn's light and it was obvious that the morning was upon them.

Jonayla hurriedly dressed. As she pulled aside the hanging hide at the entrance to the lodge and stepped out into the opalescent peace of early morning, a shiver of excitement ran through her body. She would be traveling with Cambarre, they would be together, and who knew, maybe, just maybe...

Chapter 20: Journey of Understanding

The group leaving for the north the next morning consisted of the Zelandoni of the Third Cave, the first Zelandoni of the southern caves, Ayla and Jondalar, as well as the Donier's Acolytes and Groog. Also included were the leaders and six handpicked hunters from each of the three caves.

By the time they actually took the trail north there were twenty-nine people in all and twice as many horses because most of the travelers had a least one pack horse. Jonayla had three extra horses that she was bringing with her, one doubled as a mount for Groog and the others were pack horses that could be traded if the opportunity arose. In the north, trained horses were still nonexistent and she felt that there might be better trading there than at the Summer Meeting.

It had taken Jonayla almost half a moon-phase to get Groog on the back of a horse. Although the man wouldn't show it, it was obvious to Jonayla that he feared to climb onto a horse's back. His leg was now wrapped in a bark and clay cocoon to hold it immobile so the bone would continue to mend and he could get around on the crutches that her father had made for him. At first Groog had claimed that his stiffly wrapped leg made it impossible to climb on to the horse, but when Jonayla showed him an easy way to mount from a pile of naturally placed boulders, he had little choice but to try.

It took two days to get Groog to actually move while sitting on a horse's back. To get him to finally try to guide his horse, she had to point out that all the women and children of the Others rode horses and that he should be able to do the same. After all, he was a man of the Clan and a brave hunter, wasn't he?

With his pride a little dented, Groog soon mastered the ability to ride a horse, although somewhat awkwardly. Jonayla had to satisfy herself with the fact that her charge would probably never be a horse person, but at least they wouldn't have to drag him on a travois all the way to the north.

Ayla and Jondalar had made arrangements with Proleva and Willamar to watch Durcan while they were away. They both felt that he was too young for a journey into a troubled area that might offer danger. At first Ayla hadn't been sure that leaving him behind was such a good idea. Especially when the night before they left he'd shown up at their family lodge all dirty, scraped and bruised.

It had taken considerable power of persuasion to get the story from him, but it finally came out. His friends Artibon and Tomalar had repeated stories they'd heard about his mother's Clan child. They had called her the names they had heard and they said that they had heard that he was no better than a flathead himself, because he'd come from her polluted body.

As it turned out, Durcan had convinced them - first with his fists and then when he reminded them that his mother was the one to bring horses and firestones to the Zelandonii. "What have your mothers done?" Durcan asked. "Does your mother speak to The Great Earth Mother?" That comparison resonated with the boys.

Ayla hugged her son, proud of him and telling him so. She told him that standing up to people who said things just to hurt another, was always the right thing to do. She told him that it always made things better when an individual faced other people with bravery and strength.

Ayla thought he would be strong enough to stand up for himself, and after all, he would also have Proleva and Willamar to watch over him. Durcan wasn't happy about being left behind, but Ayla reassured herself that at eleven, he would soon find things to distract himself from his disappointment.

Ayla was also buoyed by her meeting with her fellow Zelandoni, the day before. When she had told her daughter to seek out her friends, she had done so partly because she felt that there would be a confrontation with her fellow Zelandoni. To her surprise the first meeting after her story was made public was not what she had expected.

When she had entered the Zelandoni lodge, just about everyone was there. She had walked to her place and silently sat down in her familiar cross-legged position at the head of the main hearth and waited for comment.

None came, everyone went about their business, talking about the coming ceremonies and discussing who should be in charge of each coming event, but no mention was made about the stories that were circulating.

Finally the Zelandoni from the Nineteenth Cave asked to be heard. "As I have already mentioned to everyone here, before our First Zelandoni arrived, I want to ask for a discussion on the request that was made by my colleague, the Zelandoni of White Cave. He wishes to change the name of White Cave. He feels that 'First Wolf

Cave' would be a more fitting name. As I've already said, he has meditated over this issue for some time and is certain that this should be done." He paused for a moment to look around at the other spiritual leaders. "Since it was our First Zelandoni's Wolf companion that discovered the cave, it only seems fitting that he be honored in this way.

"There are some who didn't have the opportunity to meet Wolf, but I say that he was Zelandoni if ever an animal could be. And the Zelandoni of the White Cave is sure that this is so. This is why 'First' should be included in the name, because that wolf was First among his kind. When you think about it, the Great Earth Mother is mother to all living things. So why wouldn't there be animals who are like Zelandoni?

"I and my colleague from the White Cave also ask this change to be made to honor our leader's sacrifice. She gave up her wolf friend so that the Mother would speak to us. To help us make an important choice at a critical time. What do you say? Is this a fitting name and a fitting honor?"

He looked around at all his fellow Doniers, then asked, "Raise your hand if you think this name change should take place to honor the Zelandoni who is named Wolf and our leader, The First Among Those Who Serve The Great Earth Mother."

One by one every Zelandoni present raised their hand in acceptance of the Nineteenth's suggestion. He looked around the group then nodded, saying, "Then if this is accepted by you, our leader," he looked at Ayla and smiled, "the cave at Hilltop will now be called First Wolf Cave by us all."

Ayla was deeply touched and thanked them all with an earnest sincerity. When she tried to bring up the subject of the stories that were circulating about her Clan son Durc, the first Zelandoni of the southern caves held up her hand and said, "There is no need to talk about your Clan son, unless it is to tell us about him. It makes no difference to us what may have happened when you were a child, dependent upon adults who should have protected you. I have passed on to everyone here what you said yesterday. You have nothing to explain or to apologize for. As far as the Zelandonia are concerned, we're happy with your leadership and we support you."

-O-

Manvelar, leader of the Third Cave, had taken the lead as the sun reached the western sky and he was the one who first spotted smoke from Hilltop Holding. It

was late afternoon by then and their trek was almost done for the day. They had planned to make a base camp near the Nineteenth Cave and ford the North River the next morning with only half of their party so they would be able to live off the land rather than worrying about carrying enough food for a larger party. They could always send someone back for more men if it became necessary.

It had been a long day and everyone was ready to make camp by the time they reached the foothills near Hilltop Holding. The sight of smoke had bothered everyone. This year everyone from the Nineteenth Cave was at the Summer Meeting. With the advent of domesticated horses, even the old and frail, so long as they weren't ill, could travel in relative comfort. Also, the holding was one of the smaller caves with only twenty-nine people. There were no imminent pregnancies or ill elders to require anyone to stay behind. Also it was close, just being at the north end of Old Valley, everyone wanted to be away from the place where they had been forced to remain during the cold winter just passed.

The cave should be empty, only guarded by a Mother Doni figurine at the opening. This precaution had always been enough to ward off at least human intruders if not wild animals. Some caves whose entire population left for the Summer Meeting would return in the early fall to find that considerable damage had been done, especially when a family of Wolverines had decided to make their home in a portion of a cave. No one could remember any humans violating the Mother Doni Sentinel before.

They stopped briefly at the planned campsite, leaving the pack horses and two guards. Everyone else continued up the trail to Hilltop Holding to see why there was smoke coming from the Nineteenth's home cave.

Manvelar was still in the lead with Ayla and Jondalar right behind him as they turned the final bend in the trail to see a group of people moving in and out of the cave, with others sitting by the outside hearth with a fire burning in it. Manvelar said, "So that's the smoke we saw, but what possible reason would these people have to intrude into someone else's cave. Look, do you see any sign of the Mother Doni that guarded the entrance? I don't."

Ayla nudged Summer Child forward, putting slight pressure to the horse's sides with her knees. She now took the lead, hurrying the pace very anxious to find out why these people had disregarded the Mother Doni to make themselves at home in a Zelandonii holding.

As she reached the open area before the cave, the men sitting around the fire jumped up and reached for their spearthrowers. One of them shouted, bringing others from inside the cave. Ayla counted ten men and two women. "What are you doing in this place?" she asked, putting all the authority she could into her voice.

"Who wants to know?" A broad-shouldered man with eyes that appeared to be looking in two different directions at once stepped forward. He walked threateningly toward Ayla, then stopped when Jondalar rode up next to her. He became nervous as it became apparent that they were outnumbered, as one after another of the Zelandonii travelers came into view after negotiating the last bend in the trail.

"I am First among the Zelandoni who serve The Great Earth Mother. Who are you? And I ask again, what are you doing in this place?" Ayla, removed her sling from around her forehead and ran the leather thongs through her fingers.

The man with the crazy eyes looked at her hands and realized that the thong wasn't just to hold her hair out of her eyes. It was a sling weapon and stones seemed to have magically appeared in her hands.

Ayla wasn't taking any chances after her experience with Brukeval on her last visit to the Nineteenth Cave. Even the thought of her vulnerability at that confrontation made her flush with anger. This man with the 'crazy eyes' swaggered toward her threateningly until he had seen her companions and that too angered her.

As the man looked up at the blonde woman sitting on the horse, he was inwardly shocked at the anger that he saw reflected in her eyes. He quickly adjusted his approach, wondering how dangerous this woman might be. "We were chasing flatheads. They forded the river and we're following them. There was nobody here so we're just taking a break. There's no harm in that. It's not like we could ask anyone, there was no one here." The man spoke in a very stilted version of the Zelandonii language as if he had come from the coastal region.

What he had said was true, there had been no one there, but they didn't look like they would have cared even if there had been someone to ask. This man looked like he would do what he wanted no matter what or who got in his way. "You will leave this cave and you will leave our land. Until we decide differently, you're not welcome here," Ayla said as Jondalar pulled his spearthrower from its sheathe.

Crazy Eyes looked at the blonde woman and then at the big blonde man sitting on his horse beside her. He didn't like them. He didn't like pretty people. He wanted to

damage pretty people. But this wasn't the time to flex his muscles, he was greatly outnumbered. "Well, I'm always willing to please a pretty woman." He leered at her, indicating that he'd like to please her by doing more than she had asked. "We'll pack up and be gone in the morning. We just stopped to rest, like I said."

"No, you won't wait until morning and you will leave the things you were preparing to steal," Ayla gestured to a pile of belongings obviously pilfered from the cave. "You will leave now, or we will hold you here until the rightful owners return to give you their justice for your trespass."

The man was about to argue further when five of the hunters with her walked their horses forward, towering over him. He looked at them and then beyond them to the others. His eyes widened slightly as he realized that each of the men were holding spearthrowers, ready for use.

In the north the use of horses was a newer thing than farther south. The Zelandonii of the Nineteenth Cave had just begun to use horses on a regular basis over the past few years. It had taken almost a decade to catch enough colts and fillies and then it took time for them to reach enough maturity for the people's use. As yet, those who lived north of the river had no horses of their own and they were intimidated at seeing them up so close. Men on the backs of the horses and holding weapons tended to heighten that intimidation.

The man finally smiled and said, "As you say, we'll leave now. Be sure that our leader will have something to say about this, but I'll leave that between you and him." He turned to walk back to the fire.

"You tell Brukeval that we are looking for him," Jondalar said. Urging his horse forward, he made the man with the crazy eyes turn and stumble, falling to the ground. "You tell him that we're not going to let him keep this up. He must stop the violence or we will make him stop."

Crazy Eyes rose to his feet, dusting off his leggings, "It's gone beyond that my friend," he smiled evilly. "Flatheads have killed our people and we've killed theirs, so now it's a matter of who has the stomach to finish the job. You people should be on our side, we're the same. Those flatheads are a menace."

"We have never seen Clansmen pillaging our caves. We don't see them causing violence in our territory. You Chimudonii seem to be the menace here. Now be gone!" Ayla shouted, placing stones in her sling and swinging it blindly fast.

Suddenly three stones hit the fire almost simultaneously causing sparks to fly and making the men jump to their feet in surprise. "Leave NOW!" Ayla shouted louder.

The Chimudonii hunters grumbled as they picked up their equipment and straggled down the path, past the Zelandonii group who still held their weapons ready.

"Joharran, would you take a man and follow behind them to see that they cross the river. If it looks like they are not, send the man back here immediately and we'll come with a large enough group of men to see that they do," Ayla finished. She didn't trust the intruder. There was something more than just his crazy eyes that made her think he could be as dangerous as Brukeval.

Joharran, nodded and without saying a word, turned his horse to face the path then gave a nod to Cambarre. The young man followed behind his cave leader.

Ayla turned to Manvelar, "I think we should send someone back to the Summer Meeting to let Tormaden and his people know what has happened here in case he wants to send some of his people back here to reclaim their holding and to see what damage has been done."

Manvelar signaled one of his hunters, a man called Bandoman who was from the Third Cave, and gave him his instructions. He immediately turned his horse to head back down the trail, when Ayla called to him, "Bandoman, wait until morning, it's late in the day."

"First Zelandoni, I can reach the other end of valley before dark," Bandoman replied. "We can be back here early the next day if I leave now. I don't mind, this is important. I know how I would feel if strangers had done this to my cave."

Manvelar said, "Go Bandoman and thank you. I'm sure the Nineteenth will be grateful to you." The hunter's horse trotted down the trail and he was soon lost to view as his horse made the bend and then was gone.

-O-

Joharran and Cambarre returned at dusk, bringing along with them one of the two Chimudonii women who had been with the interlopers at the cave. As it turned out she hadn't wanted to be with them, she was only there because her mate had died in a fight around a full moon before and the men had taken her with them to cook and as comfort, when required. Apparently she had been looking for a way to get

away from them and when she'd seen Joharran and Cambarre following, she'd decided to make a break for it and throw herself on their mercy.

Her name was Melodene and she turned out to be a fount of information. At twenty-eight she was a mother of two, both of whom had died and now her mate was dead too. She was tired of the violence and she didn't like the people who followed the Shaman who seemed to be the main instigator of the unrest between the Clan and her people.

The leaders and their Doniers gathered around the outside hearth to listen. As her story unfolded they learned how the Chimudonii had come to the area north of the river. Her ancestors had originally come from the edge of the land facing the big sea. That was one of the reasons that things had gone so wrong.

Their legends told of a powerful Shaman whose name was Skytalker. In ancient times this Shaman had foretold the destruction of their village by the sea. He had warned that the earth would shake and that the sea in its anger would destroy their village. Those who believed him, followed him into the hills, and those who didn't stayed behind.

The earth did shake and the sea did cover the village. After everything settled down and the people from the hills were led back to the shore they found that nothing was left to see. Every twig and stone had been scoured from the land and those who had stayed behind were no more.

The Shaman told the survivors that they must trek to the east, away from the water and so they did. Those who followed him eventually ended up settling in the area above the North River, they called it Neema River. They called themselves Chimu, and did not add 'donii', meaning 'people', to their name because it was not their custom to do so. They had lived in peace until recently. They had grown prosperous and multiplied without any natural disasters to thin their ranks, they had grown to two holdings and were looking for a place to build a third.

Then a Shaman came into their midst who had strange fangs and looked terrible and he had a powerful warrior by his side and the Shaman called himself Skytalker. Some of the Chimu didn't think he was really 'the' Skytalker, but many did.

At that time there had been a small altercation between the Chimu and the flatheads. This greatly angered the Shaman's warrior and he led a punitive raid on them, bringing back a severed head. The Shaman Skytalker performed a sacred

ceremony and the men who had gone with the warrior to vanquish the flathead enemies were greatly honored and given gifts.

Things escalated from there, turning her people into fighters, hunting the flatheads and ignoring the elder's words of caution. There had always been an element within the population that didn't want to follow rules, people who acted out and were violent but had always been kept in check before. But now, with a powerful shaman to lead the way, they soon became the ones who made the rules and told other people what to do.

After listening to Melodene, the Chimu woman, the Zelandonii leaders asked questions and then discussed their next step. There was suspicion that Brukeval and his followers would not stop fighting unless made to. They decided to seek out the Chimu leader and the more level-headed people among the Chimu and talk to them.

It was also decided that Groog would accompany them so that he could lead them to his Clan. Ayla wanted the opportunity to talk to them and hear what they had to say and maybe settle this problem through negotiations between the two groups.

Chapter 21: North of the River Neema

The next day, just after dawn, the Zelandonii left the Nineteenth Cave and rode down to the river crossing. There were fourteen of them, including the Chimu woman and Groog. As planned, they had left the remaining fifteen to guard Hilltop Holding. It was prudent to travel light until they knew what kind of reception they would have from the Chimu people. There was no way to tell how long they would be on the trail and even with horses they could only bring a few days rations with them and since they might have to hunt for food, too many mouths to feed was to be avoided.

They brought Melodene and Groog with them as emissaries for the time when they met their respective groups. The Chimu spoke a recognizable language that most of the Zelandonii could understand, once they got past the accent, but by having Melodene with them they would more easily be able to find those they were searching for. Ayla would be the interpreter for the Clan people, although Jonayla would be able to help with that too if necessary.

As they came to the ford in the river they could see a huge sheet of granite that had been uncovered over time by the rushing water. The water passed over the slab of rock at less than a foot's depth, although at a furious rate. There were erosions in the stone but the crossing was easy enough there, compared to anywhere else in the vicinity, at least at this time of year when the snow melt season was almost over.

They rode over the submerged slab single file. Jonayla led Groog's horse, uncertain that he would be able to control the animal properly. Ayla had Melodene riding in front of her on Summer Child, holding her with one arm around her middle, with her horse's mane gripped in the other to keep her balance while picking their way across.

Once the group reached the far side of the river they turned their horses up a well-defined trail through tall pines that crowded close together. The forest was so dense that they could see no more than a few horse lengths into the trees. Following the Chimu woman's instructions they forged a small stream and reined their horses to the east, following its bank.

There was only room enough to ride single file along the trail so Joharran had arranged the group so that the hunters rode ahead of the Zelandoni, who in turn watched out for Groog and the Chimu woman. He expected trouble and wanted the strongest men in the lead.

Jondalar rode close behind his brother. It had taken some time to persuade Ayla that she should ride in the rear with the Zelandoni. He'd persuaded her with the argument that it would be better if she were near Groog to help Jonayla protect him and the other Zelandoni in case they ran into the troublemakers.

Eventually the landscape became rockier and the going harder so they finally had to dismount and lead their horses on foot. As they left the river bank heading north again, the trail became so faint that Joharran had to call Melodene forward to walk beside him. Soon the undergrowth became so thick he would not have recognized the turn off that she had described without her help.

Melodene was in the lead when they finally came into a clearing among the trees with a stream running through it and a cave opening at the base of a rocky slope. Melodene called out but received no reply. She was about to run forward when Joharran caught her arm, "No! Something is wrong here. Wait!"

Joharran and Jondalar, spearthrowers ready, mounted and urged their horses silently forward, waving everyone else to wait. The clearing was maybe thirty horse lengths long by half that wide. Reaching the cave entrance, they called out then briefly waited for a response before dismounting and entering the cave. Shortly after, they came out and called the group forward.

Jondalar came to Ayla as she led Summer Child into the area before the mouth of the cave. "Ayla," he said quietly, "You're not going to like this..." his voice trailed off as he frowned in worry.

"What is it, Jondalar?" she looked around trying to see why he was concerned.

"Inside the cave... there are skulls, many skulls..." he couldn't bring himself to go on.

"What?" Ayla broke away from his grip on her arm and walked to the cave opening. Just inside the uneven opening there was a natural alcove about twenty hands deep. On the earthen floor just inside the alcove were skulls, a pile of them. There was dried flesh and bits of hair clinging to some of them. It was obvious from the shape

that they were Clan skulls. "NO!" Ayla screamed kneeling in the dirt beside the hideous find.

Jondalar came to Ayla's side, not knowing what to say. This horrible sign of violence toward other people, even Clan people, was beyond his experience. How could anyone be this evil? The skulls sat there with their empty eye sockets staring out at them accusingly.

Ayla was quietly sobbing, still on her knees in front of the gruesome shrine to man's inhumanity toward man when Groog entered the cave. Most of the people in the group hadn't realized what was just inside the cave opening so no one tried to stop him.

When Groog realized what the woman Mog-ur was kneeling in front of he let out a cry of rage, bringing Ayla out of herself, out of her shock. She scrambled to her feet, forgetting her own rage for the moment and gripped Groog by the arm and tried to pull him away from the hideous sight. But he was the strongest man there and she couldn't budge him. Even with a mending leg he could resist Ayla's most strenuous effort to remove him from the cave opening.

Finally giving up, she signed, "The people who did this are Hyenas. They are filthy disgusting carrion beasts with no honor and no humanity. We will find them Groog, and we will stop them. They will be punished for what they did here!"

Groog was stunned. With pleading in his eyes he signed, "Why?" Then a more commanding, "WHY?" He was facing Ayla, but his eyes weren't really focused on anything or anyone. Then Groog slumped, almost falling, and would have if Jondalar hadn't caught him. Clan people didn't cry, they had no tears to show their distress, but Ayla could read his deep agitation and his building rage. "Groog! GROOG! Look at me! You must trust me!" Ayla signed an imperative. "You must trust me! We will make these people sorry they did this. Have I not been truthful in everything I've said to you? I will not stop until these Hyenas have been stopped!"

Groog looked into the eyes of the female Mog-ur and he remembered what he'd seen her do before and understood that she would be the one to bring these killers to justice if anyone could and that his people needed her goodwill. He had always been taught that when someone transgressed against another person, the transgressor had to pay a like price, either in goods or in physical punishment. Groog knew there could never be any price in goods that could be paid for this atrocity. This Mog-ur was a friend of the Clan and he would trust her, but he wasn't sure

what to think about her people. What these Others had done to his people was beyond anything a reasoning person could have done.

Ayla stood in front of him and gripped his upper arms squeezing his massive biceps in the Clan sign for friendship. Then she stepped back and again spoke to him in sign, "Your people will have justice Groog, I promise you. But remember this, the Chimu are not all like these Hyenas. We will find the Chimu leaders and tell them what has happened here and enlist their help to track these carrion beasts down and make them pay."

-O-

All of the Zelandonii were shaken by what they had found in the cave. There was no doubt in their mind that one of their own was involved in this hideous thing. Brukeval had grown up with some of them. They knew that he hated Clan people. It was totally shameful that Brukeval would be involved in something as evil as this. He had brought shame on the Zelandonii people by his actions.

When they were asked by their First Zelandoni to dig a single grave pit for the remains, everyone put their backs into the work and soon had a respectable grave pit dug. Normally there would have been ritual cleansing and a funeral feast, but under the circumstances they wanted to move on as soon as possible and a funeral feast would have been inappropriate.

Groog watched as the people stood at the edge of the grave pit and followed the chant that the lesser Mog-urs of the Others had begun. He couldn't understand what they were saying but he did understand that they were trying to offer respect.

Groog paid close attention as the woman Mog-ur removed the hide-wrapped remains from the cave one at a time and placed them in the grave. To his satisfaction the burial ceremony seemed to observe the basic rituals, even though it wasn't exactly as he knew it should be. But then the circumstances were so unimaginably cruel that nothing was as it should be.

Groog was pleased as the female Mog-ur placed flowers in the grave. She, Jonayla and Melodene had gathered the blooms while the grave was being dug.

The people came forward with stones and began to pile them around and on top of the remains while Mog-ur made the correct motions that asked the Spirit of Great Ursus to guide his people's spirits safely into the next world.

Then as the last stones were laid in a cairn, the people stood back and the female Mog-ur began to perform an eloquent lament in motions and sign that stirred the Clan man's soul. She spoke to the world of the Spirits of the injustice that had taken place here. They were ritual gestures, repeated in essentially the same form for every funeral. Though the outward form of the female Mog-ur was unconventional, the fervor, conviction and ineffable sorrow of this holy woman imbued the formalized gestures with significance far beyond mere form. Groog was stunned and grateful at the sincerity of the Mog-ur's lament and her ability to speak to the Spirit World.

-O-

There had been twelve skulls in that cave. As they rode up the trail away from the gruesome place, Ayla thought about that. Twelve lives taken, and at least one was a child, she knew that from the size of the skull. How could anyone kill a child and then display its tiny skull as if it were a trophy. How could anyone be that perverse?

This place had been the third cave of the Chimu, but now they referred to it as the 'skull cave'. How long had the cave been uninhabited? Ayla was worried that this sign of abandonment and violence bode ill for their mission. She could only hope that the Chimu people were still organized enough to help them resist these wild men.

Ayla was riding Summer Child with Melodene seated behind her, holding Ayla's waist for balance. The Chimu woman was becoming more used to riding, but being so high above the ground and the feeling of such power between her legs was still daunting. At this point in their journey, the pair was riding toward the front of the column with only Joharran, Jondalar and two hunters in front of them and the trail was hedged in by the ever present pine forest.

Hearts began to beat fast when the six of them saw ten men step out from behind trees. The men blocked their way, having the high ground, but they were on foot. The man leading the others was unmistakably Brukeval. Joharran called out, "Brukeval, you have a lot to answer for. Why are you here causing all this trouble?"

"Well, if it isn't the noble Joharran? Great leader of the Ninth Cave! Why are you here? This isn't your land, you have no reason to interfere here," Brukeval sneered.

"You're stirring up trouble with the Clan and it's spilling over into Zelandonii territory. The violence you're causing is creating instability that isn't good for these people," he gestured toward the men standing around Brukeval, "or for the Zelandonii."

"You should join me in my fight instead of getting in the way. This is a rich land and there's no reason why we need to share it with flatheads. They're filthy animals that pollute the environment and they need to be killed, just like wolves and other dangerous animals," Brukeval said with bitterness in his voice.

"Brukeval!" Ayla urged Summer Child forward into the vanguard. "You have it wrong!" she shouted. "You're the filthy animal that is polluting the land, not the Clan. You and your men there are going around killing and abusing people, even from your own holdings. The Great Earth Mother will curse you and she will curse those who follow you and do evil for you!"

"Ah, I see you're still at it 'Ayla.' I thought our last meeting would have warned you off your interfering ways." He deliberately used her given name rather than her title as a sign of insolence.

"No Brukeval, but it did make me realize that you are dangerous like a Hyena and that anyone around you needs to be prepared to defend themselves. You have turned into a disgusting person. To think when I first met you, I thought of you as a friend. What happened to you Brukeval? You can't stand the fact that you're part Clan so you are trying to wipe them out?"

"You stupid bitch! How dare you say that! You're the one who is part flathead. You had a flathead child by one of those disgusting animals and I bet you liked it. I can see you now, squirming around in the dirt grunting with lust as one of those beasts put an abomination in your belly. You disgust me. Since you can't keep your filthy mouth shut, I'll shut it for you!" All control lost, he raced toward Ayla, arms raised with hate and insanity glowing from his deep brown Clan eyes.

Ayla had been shocked that Brukeval would have already heard about her Clan son but this time she was prepared.

Groog hadn't understood a word of what had been said, but he did understand that these were the people that had killed twelve of his Clan and that the one who looked a little like a man of the Clan and who was making lots of loud disagreeable

noises was their leader. When that man menaced the Other's Mog-ur, Groog moved forward to intercept him. He would teach this man what it was to feel pain.

As Groog moved between Brukeval and the female Mog-ur's horse, he heard a 'thunk' and then a second 'thunk' and the loud angry man dropped like a rock, falling face first to the ground. Startled, Groog stopped and looked up at the female Mog-ur to see her still holding a sling in one hand and a couple of stones in the other. He had seen her using the sling a few times before, but her expertise with the weapon was still surprising. He didn't think that he'd ever seen anyone better with a sling than her. It was still startling to see a woman using a weapon, especially so proficiently.

"You there!" Ayla pointed toward a man standing close to Brukeval's prone body. When the man turned to Ayla she saw his face. His eyes were as strange as they had been the last time she'd seen him back at Hilltop Holding. "We want to meet this Shaman of yours. Take us to him!" She said this in a commanding voice, a tone of voice that she was becoming more and more accustomed to using.

He warily looked at her and then at the men around her. "I don't think that Skytalker will be too happy with you for knocking his war leader unconscious. He is unconscious isn't he? Or did you kill him?"

"If I'd wanted to kill him his head would be split open. I used clay pellets instead of stones, he will live. Where is this Shaman of yours? We will keep Brukeval as a hostage until he comes to us," Ayla said in as threatening a voice as she could muster.

All of the others, including Jondalar and Joharran of the Zelandonii, had been shocked into silence by the ruthless verbal altercation between Brukeval and First Zelandoni. Jondalar recovered first, urging his horse forward to position himself next to his mate. He still couldn't quite believe all the nastiness that had flowed from Brukeval's mouth directed toward Ayla. He'd grown up with Brukeval and even though Jondalar had never said it himself, it was obvious Brukeval was of mixed essence.

That fact hadn't stopped Marthona, Jondalar's mother, from caring for Brukeval as a boy. Why was he still holding such a grudge against the world for the teasing he received when he was a child? He could have overcome that with his skill as a hunter or as an accomplished leader of men. Instead he'd become a bitter and angry man who, for some reason, was leading these people into more and more violence.

Joharran now moved his horse forward too, as did Manvelar, leader of the Third Cave, "You have no choice," Joharran addressed the man with the strange eyes as he pulled his spearthrower from its sheath. "You WILL comply with our First Zelandoni's command while we hold your war leader as our prisoner!"

It was obvious from the sullen expression on the other man's face that he wasn't going to try to fight them, but he wasn't happy being told what to do either. Ayla didn't like the man; she thought he might be even more dangerous than Brukeval.

"I'll go to our Shaman. I can't take you to him, he will have to decide whether or not he wants to see you. I think you'll regret this, Skytalker is a powerful shaman who has come to us from our legends. He led our people here in ancient times and has come back from the Spirit World to help us reclaim our land from those animals you're trying to protect."

"Can you really believe that?" Ayla asked. "Do you really believe that this Shaman is so powerful that he can come back from the Spirit World?" She wasn't sure what to think, but she tried to put a touch of derision in her voice to show him her skepticism.

'Scare tactics are needed,' Crazy Eyes thought. "You'll see, he has done many things to prove his power and he will not be happy to be summoned. If he curses you, you will die. I've seen it happen myself."

Ayla felt a foreboding envelop her. She would have to face this Shaman and persevere. It would be the only way to stop the hideous things that were happening here in the north. If this Shaman was all powerful then she would be lost. She trembled inwardly, remembering her experiences using the magic Clan root. How could she stand up to someone so powerful that he could actually return after so long a time in the Spirit World? Was the crazy eyed man just trying to scare her?

Ayla would not show any fear. She wouldn't back down, not when there were so many Clan people already dead. Not when these renegade men were threatening the Nineteenth Cave and the Zelandonii way of life. Ayla knew that the violence would only worsen if they did nothing. Once all the Clan people were gone, what then? She knew what would come next. The Chimu Shaman would want a foothold in Zelandonii territory. Bullies and thieves are never satisfied.

"Enough talk! You will bring your Shaman here. We will wait until tomorrow morning. If we have heard nothing from this Shaman of yours by then we will take your leader to the Nineteenth Cave as our prisoner. Then we will come back with more men and look for this Shaman," Ayla said, looking into the crazy eyes of the Chimu man. Ayla then gestured toward Brukeval, still sprawled out on the ground. "Jondalar, Joharran, would you take Brukeval and place him over there against that tree? Tie his hands securely behind his back."

She didn't want to be in command; Joharran had spoken up but no one else had and she didn't want Crazy Eyes to guess how unsure she really felt. "You," she gestured to the man, "Go now! Take your men and leave. You have until morning."

He had no other alternative than to do what she demanded. He shouldn't leave Brukeval behind, but what choice did he have? They were mounted on horses and had the advantage of numbers. Finally he turned and made the universal hunter's sign with a raised arm for his men to follow him.

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The Zelandonii made camp where they were. There was a small stream that would supply adequate water for the group without having to leave the area. Also the open area was big enough to give them a good field of vision so they could see anyone coming with enough advance notice to react.

Ayla and the other Doniers wanted to find out more about the Chimu people and this Shaman. While everyone else was busy setting up the temporary camp, they sat with Melodene by the stream and questioned her further about her people. Jonayla was instructed to bring Groog and to translate their conversation for him. The Doniers felt that they should have at least one Clan person who could understand what was happening here so that when they finally reached his people he could confirm what Ayla said to them was true.

The Zelandoni of the Third Cave cleared his throat, then asked, "Zelandoni, I'm not entirely sure what we want to accomplish here. I understand that these Chimudonii are causing trouble for the Nineteenth Cave and that we must help them, but to come into another people's land and force them to do things that we want, well, it hasn't ever been done before." The Third looked worried. "Shouldn't we just make sure they don't cross the river? Make them understand that if they do we will respond to their incursion. I wish they weren't such hostile people, it would be better if we could trade with them rather than fight them."

"I understand your concern Zelandoni. Why don't we let Melodene tell us what she knows about her people and the reasons they follow this shaman who claims to have come from the Spirit World. With more knowledge we might make better decisions."

Ayla turned to the younger woman. "Please tell what you know about this shaman of the Chimu and why the violence has broken out here in the north."

"Well," Melodene began, "the Chimu are decent people, or at least most of us are. I don't know why so many of our hunters follow Skytalker. I know when he first came among us, he did do some amazing things. He made our old Shaman die when he cursed him. We all saw it. Skytalker cursed him and he fell over dead.

"We were having a dispute with some flatheads at the time. We were trying to establish our third holding a day's travel to the east and there was a group of flatheads that were causing a bit of trouble. That's when Skytalker made Brukeval appear, he called him his hunt leader. One moment he wasn't there and the next, in a flash of smoke he appeared.

"Our new Shaman, claimed to be our original Shaman from ancient times having returned to us from the Spirit World. He told us that Brukeval was a great leader of men from the past too, and that he would get rid of the problem of the flatheads once and for all. Even more than that," Melodene said with a catch in her voice, "he said he would make our people great among all peoples.

"At first our leader listened to him but soon she started asking questions, 'Why did we need to exterminate all flatheads?' she asked. 'Why should the men that hunted flatheads be able to do what they liked without heeding our laws and customs?' The men would take other people's possessions and even unmated women. They forced the women to cook for them... and to do other things... and there was nothing we could do about it.

"Finally Skytalker told Camma, our leader, that he would curse her like he'd cursed our Shaman if she persisted in her opposition to his wishes. He said that he was doing these things to make the Chimu a great people and that she must accept his word as to what was required."

The story was pouring out of Melodene now as if she couldn't stop herself. Soon everyone had gathered around the woman as she told the sad history of events in the north.

"That's when Camma and many of our people moved back to First Place, which is beside a small lake with a cavern that goes deep into the earth. This was the first place that the Chimu settled and the cavern is a sacred place to our people. There are many small caves in this area that had been abandoned in the past for more open areas, but now with the arguments and the splits between those who follow Skytalker and those who follow Camma, First Place is a safer place to be. First Place has high cliffs and is situated in a small valley that is easily defended, yet is open to the lake that offers a good water source.

"Now it seems that there are two Chimu. Camma's people control the northwest from the small valley and Skytalker and his hunt leader Brukeval, control the southeast, which is near the Zelandonii. Apparently, from what I saw, the Chimu have abandoned the other caves completely to the shaman, or at least that is what it looks like to me." Melodene sighed unhappily, "My mate didn't want to go with Camma. He was afraid that Skytalker would curse us and at the time I was heavy with my third child and he thought we should go with the powerful spiritual leader.

"As it turned out my mate made the wrong choice. We were living rough and there were only a few women willing to follow the men that followed the Shaman. Those of us who did were worked like slaves. We even had to give pleasure to other men who didn't have a woman. That's when my mate was killed. He didn't want to share me and because of that he didn't come back one day from a hunt.

"They told me he'd been killed by flatheads, but when I insisted that they take me to his body, no one would look me in the eyes and finally it became obvious that he'd been killed by one or more of them. I began to hate these men when that very night I was forced to lie with several of them, even though I was grieving for my man. I lost my child two days later. Before the next moon cycle they were at me again.

"But I want to make you understand that these men that follow Skytalker aren't what the Chimu are really like. They have turned evil under the influence of this Shaman. They will do whatever he tells them to do..."

A loud voice interrupted Melodene's story. "You better hope that we don't get our hands on you again woman! You're a traitor to your people and your Shaman!"

Everyone turned to see that Brukeval was awake and glaring at Melodene.

"She's no better than a flathead, that one!" Brukeval nodded his head indicating Melodene. "She's no good."

Jondalar shouted out, "Shut your mouth Brukeval! Anything you say is going to be a lie, and that means Melodene must actually be a good woman. If you say anything else I'll tie a gag over your mouth!"

Brukeval growled, "You wouldn't threaten me like that if I weren't tied up. I could break you in half pretty boy!"

Jondalar could take no more, "Brukeval, what happened to you? You weren't like this when we were young. What's happened to you to make you so angry?"

Brukeval turned away from Jondalar cursing quietly. 'What would he know about anything?' Brukeval thought. 'Him and his beautiful woman, two beautiful accomplished people at the top of Zelandonii society. *He'd* never had to defend his birthright. *He'd* never had women calling him an ugly flathead or had other boys and then men taunting him, saying that he looked like a flathead.'

Brukeval shivered with suppressed hate and rage. What did that fool know anyway? There was no reason to keep talking to him. Somehow he would get away and the next time he and pretty boy met, or his flathead loving mate, for that matter... he would show them what anger was all about. For now he would remain silent. No reason to give them any information. In his anger he might let something slip that could help them and that was the last thing he wanted to do.

When it was obvious that Brukeval's outburst was over, the Doniers continued to talk to Melodene about the Chimu and what might be done to help them. It was finally decided that once they had spoken to this Shaman, they would go on to the Chimu's home valley and talk to the Chimu leader. If everyone united against this Shaman and his followers, they would have no choice but to either give up or go away.

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It was late afternoon before Crazy Eyes was seen making his way through the thick surrounding pine trees at the far side of the clearing. One moment there were only trees, the next he had stepped from concealment to hail them.

Without hesitation he walked toward the gathered Zelandonii, stopping just within extreme spearthrower range. "I have come to lead you to our Shaman, he will see you," he yelled. "You are to bring his hunt leader with you as a show of good faith. And you will come on foot. The forest is too thick to ride anyway and he doesn't like horses other than for eating.

"If you accept this, then I am ready to lead you to him now." He looked over at Brukeval and saw that he was conscious and he nodded to him as some sort of signal. Ayla, who could read body language almost as if they were spoken words, was sure that something important had passed between Brukeval and the man with the strange eyes.

"Joharran, Jondalar, come here," Ayla called quietly. They were at the fire and there were people between the three of them and the Chimu man so he couldn't see them. "Try to stall him. As a matter of fact, I think you should try to stall them until morning. I don't think it's just coincidence that they came for us just before dusk. I smell an ambush."

Looking over her shoulder at the Chimu man, she was certain that he hadn't seen her yet. "I want to slip away and back track that man's trail. I don't think this Shaman is very far away and I want to find out what I can through observation before we confront him."

"Ayla! I don't like this," Jondalar was obviously afraid for her. "It could be dangerous. Remember what happened the last time you were confronted by these people? At the very least you shouldn't go alone."

"Jondalar, I know how to track silently, I know how to observe without being seen. If I can track a pack of wolves and observe them for hours at a time, day after day and not be noticed by them, I think I can do at least as well with humans. Besides, one person is much less likely to be heard or seen. Please Jondalar, trust me." Ayla was determined, and Jondalar knew it. He also knew that she could do what she was proposing and do better at it than almost anyone he knew. Finally he nodded with a frown, still deeply worried.

"Jondalar, please go blindfold and gag Brukeval. I want to be certain he doesn't see me leave. After the man is well gone you can take them off him." She stood on her toes and kissed him on the lips.

Jondalar did as she asked and with the help of Cambarre, was able to gag and blindfold him quickly and silently.

Using the cover of the forest, Ayla made a crouching run for her travel pack, out of sight of the Chimu man standing in the open field. She left her spearthrower because it would be too cumbersome to bring while tracking on foot, but she grabbed a handful of clay pellets for her sling and she took her medicine bag. Then looping the wide thong from her travel pack over one shoulder, Ayla slipped away into the forest... and danger.

As Ayla moved around just outside the open area she could hear Joharran telling Crazy Eyes that they were waiting for someone and that they would not be able to leave without him so they would wait until morning. She stopped, now almost parallel with the Chimu man and waited to hear his reply.

"The Shaman will not see you if you do not come now!" he said loudly. Ayla looked past the man into the pines behind him. His posture and his voice told her that he was speaking so that someone else could also hear his words, someone hidden. She would have to be very careful and keep her eyes and ears alert for another person.

Joharran replied, "It can't be helped, we will not leave here until morning. We are expecting someone from the south and we want them with us before we go further. If your Shaman doesn't want to talk to us, then we will look for someone else from your people who will and we will take Brukeval back with us as our prisoner."

Ayla began moving silently into the pine trees behind Crazy Eyes after she heard him reluctantly agree to come back in the morning to get them. As he turned to leave, Ayla slipped behind a large fallen tree whose trunk was almost as thick as she was tall and listened to the man's footfall as he passed her position.

She quickly reached down into the moist earth and scooped up a handful of it and rubbed it onto her face, streaking her face and neck, then her arms and legs with the dark brown mud. The object wasn't to cover her skin completely, but to break up the contours and planes of her face and body. This is what she'd always done when observing wild animals or stalking her prey, before she had the advantage of a horse. She was happy to just follow Crazy Eyes instead of backtracking his previous approach. Chances were that he would take a more direct path on his way back to the Shaman.

Shaking the residue mud from her fingers then wiping them on her hips. Ayla picked up her travel pack and slung it over her shoulder then moved silently out from behind the fallen tree to follow the man who was disappearing into the trees a few lengths ahead of her.

Ayla knew better than to follow too closely. She had no idea how accomplished the man was as a hunter and tracker so gave him the respect that she would show someone as skilled at tracking as herself. It was always wise not to underestimate your quarry.

The Chimu man kept looking around and at the trail behind, stopping just off the path, waiting and listening. It was obvious that he was worried that he might be followed. Then suddenly someone else stepped out onto the trail. He was taller than Crazy Eyes and much more muscular, but it was obvious by his body language, that he was lower in rank. They stopped and talked in voices too low for Ayla to make out. Then they moved on, seeming confident now that they weren't being followed.

Ayla kept the two men in her line of sight, but just barely. As they disappeared behind a rise or around a stand of trees or copse of bushes she would move on silent feet, flitting one way then another, always listening intently. She could hear a man breathing or a footfall twenty arm-lengths away when she concentrated on her surroundings. It was almost second nature to her to blend into the landscape. She could become invisible just by standing bent to fit the contour of a rock, letting light and shadow disguise her.

The two men had been walking for no more than a short time when they broke through into a large meadow with a stream running through it. Ayla went to ground and crawled forward to the edge of the meadow. Tearing a stalk from a fern and holding it in front of her face still allowing her to see through its feathery leaves, she watched as a startling thing happened.

To her shock and horror a huge hairy monster rose right out of the earth as a bullroarer began its eerie moan, then another bullroarer and then another began to roar until the whole meadow buzzed menacingly with the sound. In the falling dusk the huge monster lumbered toward the approaching men. Each step it made sounded like a snake's hiss and its face was hideous, covered with sores and bumpy warts.

Ayla wanted to get up and run, this hideous beast must be the Shaman. If it was a live thing, it looked unstoppable. Ayla wished that she had brought her

spearthrower. Yes it would have been a cumbersome thing to carry while stalking, but a sling with nothing but clay pellets against a monster this huge would be next to useless. She could understand why many people were afraid of this Shaman. Who wouldn't be? He was obviously from the Spirit World, how could they even think of stopping something like this?

The two men walked without hesitation right up to the hissing growling beast who had risen from the depths of the earth. Now Ayla noticed a fog or smoke oozing out of the ground where the beast had come forth.

Then as she watched, Crazy Eyes stood in front of the apparition and said something. Ayla couldn't make out what he was saying, the bullroarers were making such a racket that every other sound was obliterated.

Then suddenly the beast's arms lowered and it fell forward onto the ground. As the beast fell, the bullroarers stopped abruptly. Ayla was looking at a man who had been inside the beast. No, not a beast... A disguise! The man's feet were strapped to raised platforms. They looked like flat drums, and as the man kicked first one off, then the other, Ayla could hear the hissing snake sound that the apparition had made with each step it took.

Ayla blinked. What was going on here? Then in the silence she heard a vaguely familiar lisping voice. "Why didn't you bring t-them? Why d-did you let t-them talk you out of coming?" the man asked in a plaintive voice.

"Because they said they were waiting for someone and if we couldn't wait until morning, then they would just go on to First Place and take our hunt leader with them. Apparently, that woman they captured has been telling them everything she knows about us."

The lisping man... It was Madroman!

So Madroman and Brukeval had come north together and set themselves up as Shaman and Hunt Leader! Ayla could hardly believe it. She hadn't known Madroman that well, but what she had known about him hadn't made her like or trust him. And now here he was pretending to be a Shaman just like he'd pretended to be a Zelandoni when he'd lived at the Fifth Cave. Except this time his lies were tearing apart one group of people and exterminating another.

She would have to decide how to deal with this. At least now she knew who they were dealing with. The mind numbing fright she had experienced at the first sight of the fake monster had turned to anger. Ayla knew what Madroman had planned for them. He wanted to scare them, make them run back across the river, never to return.

They had to be stopped and punished. Ayla moved silently back into the forest and soon turned and began to silently trot back to the Zelandonii camp.

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As dawn's light crept over the top of the far hills to shed its pearlescent light over the Zelandonii campsite, Ayla and Jondalar were already packed and ready to go. Ayla had decided to keep her knowledge about Madroman between just Jondalar and herself. She reasoned that if everyone knew, Brukeval would know too and might warn the Chimu when they arrived at the meadow. She wanted to make sure that Madroman would be there and this was the surest way.

As the sun rose fully above the hills, Crazy Eyes stepped out from the dark forest surround and beckoned them. No one said anything. All the Zelandonii had been ready and waiting for some time by then.

They followed the Chimu man single file on foot, leading their horses because the path - a different one from the night before, Ayla realized, was no more than a game trail. She thought that in the daylight Madroman's fake monster might lose some of its frightening characteristics so he must have found some other place with dim light to perform his trick.

Sure enough, as they approached a small waterfall filling a pool at the base of a low ridge of granite, Ayla saw a large crack in the rock face. It was a narrow trail that they followed into dimmer and dimmer light, the sides of the granite walls effectively blocked out much of the daylight. When they finally filed out into a widening space with high rock walls all around, like a huge bowl with mossy grasses and small bushes the only growth, she could tell that this place would be perpetually in shadowy light throughout the daytime.

Crazy Eyes signaled for them to stop where they were. Jonayla and Joharran were close behind Ayla and she whispered to them, "Don't be surprised by anything you see, it is an illusion and can't hurt you."

Jonayla wanted to ask her mother what she meant but felt this wasn't the time to start a discussion. Then from far away they heard a bullroarer begin its mournful moan. Then a little closer, another, but from a different direction. Finally a third bullroarer began, closer in.

As the third bullroarer started, Ayla said to everyone in their group, "Do not fear what you will see or hear, it is an illusion and cannot hurt you. Trust me, what is to come is nothing but an illusion."

Brukeval, now gagged and his hands tied behind his back, stared at Ayla with an angry frown. What did she know? How could she know that this was going to be a deception? It had worked so well when he and Madroman had first come into the Chimu territory. They had even frightened the Chimu's old Shaman to death with the outfit they'd devised. The old Shaman's heart had stopped at the perfect time.

It didn't matter that Brukeval's men knew it was just a disguise because they had seen other things like the fire stone and seen the cursing and death of their old Shaman and believed that their Shaman was powerful and the disguise was just part of the ceremony.

It was disturbing to have Ayla telling everyone not to worry about the illusion they were about to see. Brukeval had not figured that into his plans.

Suddenly, from the ridge to their left, a cascade of burning brush and fully engulfed logs fell to the earth in front of them raising a screen of dust and smoke as it hit the ground. It billowed out toward them making everyone jump back in surprise.

The bullroarer noises rose to a frenzy when an apparition emerged from the murky smoke, huge and threatening, its arms held high, claws at least the size of a grown man's fingers, sticking out ready to slash the flesh of an enemy. Each step the beast took sounded like a hundred snakes were being disturbed and the smell of carrion was in the air.

Everyone but Ayla and Jondalar cringed backwards in fear. Some were ready to run and cries of anguish rose from many of the Zelandonii. The people watched and were trembling at the horrible sight. Ayla calmly stepped forward right into the path of the beast. With lightning speed she unerringly hurled two stones, one after the other, right at the head of the beast.

Just as the monster began to moan and speak, the rocks hit their target and a frightened howl came from the beast. Jondalar rushed forward and at the last moment jumped up and against the chest of the beast, slamming his shoulder into it with all his weight, making it topple backwards, arms swinging wildly, trying to maintain balance.

Ayla could hear a commotion behind her. She knew the noise was Manvelar and some of the men of the Third Cave holding Brukeval down. She could hear them struggling, but they had done what she'd requested of them, even after the shock they'd just received. Ayla dismissed the noise as a distraction and concentrated on the scene unfolding before her.

The two other Doniers were close behind Ayla so they were the first to see what happened next. The huge hairy monster fell backward and crashed to the ground. The eyes of the Doniers grew wide in disbelief as a man crawled out from under the monster. A man who seemingly hadn't been there before.

At this moment the Bullroarers ceased making their unearthly noises. It was obvious to Ayla that the men with the instruments could see what had happened. She raised her voice even louder to include them in what she would say next.

"Zelandoni of the Third Cave and Zelandoni of the First Cave from the south, meet Madroman, who is apparently now pretending to be the ancient Shaman, Skytalker," Ayla said loudly, mustering as commanding a voice as she could. This was a critical moment, if she did or said the wrong thing, Madroman's men might come to his defense and a fight would surely break out.

Directing her comments to her fellow Zelandoni, she said, "Madroman was a Zelandoni Acolyte, one who was caught cheating, pretending to be called by the Mother and in shame he left our people to wander elsewhere. It seems that this deceitful trickster has ended up among the Chimu. Still unwilling to earn his place, he resorts to illusion and through Brukeval, intimidation."

Just as Ayla completed her accusation there was the sound of a spearthrower's dart whizzing past her ear and a shout of pain came from behind her. Ayla whirled around to see Jondalar falling to the ground impaled by a spearhead with three hands widths of shaft attached. A second dart also missed her, resulting in another shout of pain coming from someone else in the Zelandonii party. Without thought for the danger she was facing, Ayla ran toward the man who had used the spearthrower, screaming with only one thought racing through her mind 'revenge'.

Her revenge was thwarted when the man mixed with his companions and the group scattered into the woods. Which one was it? Ayla was uncertain; did one man do this or two different men? The two darts came at nearly the same time. In the confusion of the attack Brukeval was able to slip into the forest also, his hands still tied behind him. The two Doniers, still standing where they had been, now rooted to the ground in shock, watched as the man called Madroman scurried away as well.

Chapter 22: The Chimu

Ayla stopped her charge as she reached the wall of trees that surrounded the meadow. She wanted to kill the man who had used a spearthrower on Jondalar but at the same time she had an overwhelming need to get back to him to see how badly he was hurt. She turned back, and ran, seeing her daughter crouching over him, cutting away his tunic to reveal the wound.

"Daughter, look to the other wounded man, I'll take care of Jondalar," Ayla said this breathlessly as she slid from a full run into a kneeling position beside his prostrate body. She could see that because the spear had been thrown at such close range the blade was buried deep in the fleshy space between shoulder and neck.

Ayla yelled over her shoulder, "Someone please start a fire! I need hot water to clean the wound after I remove the spearhead." The Donier from the south shooed away Joharran when he knelt to build a fire, "I will take care of the fire," she said in a commanding voice, "you and the others make sure those people aren't hovering around just out of sight." The southerner looked at the Donier of the Third Cave and asked, "Would you see to the making of a couple of pole-carriers? We'll need to get the wounded back to safety as soon as possible so they can be looked after properly." Ayla was grateful that someone was taking charge so she could concentrate on Jondalar's wound.

She could tell that the wound wasn't immediately life threatening but it could be in the long run. Any breaking of the flesh could cause death. It was all up to The Great Earth Mother as to who was chosen to walk the Spirit World and who would remain with the living. Ayla worked through her tears as she talked softly to her mate. The spearhead was buried deep and would have to be cut out, causing further damage.

What Ayla didn't want to accept was that in cases like this a wounded man could easily lose use of the arm, that was what usually happened, or worse, lose their life from suppurating corruption of the flesh. This thought caused tears to well up, blurring Ayla's vision as her fingers did their work, cutting the remaining clothing away to bare his muscled chest and strong arms.

Although in pain, Jondalar was still conscious, but beginning to go into shock, "Ayla," he whispered though gritted teeth. "Don't worry, I'll be alright, it will take more than a little wound in the shoulder to get me down."

"Be quiet Jondalar, conserve your strength. You will be fine my love, I'll make sure of it. Now lay back, as soon as the water is heated I'm going to remove the spearhead and then flush the wound." Ayla looked over at Jonayla, "Daughter, who else was wounded?"

Jonayla was crouching over the other injured man, but hearing her mother's question, she looked up, passing the back of her hand over her forehead to remove loose strands of blonde hair from her vision and leaving a streak of the man's blood behind. "It's Matagan," she replied, "he's been hit in the left arm, but the spearhead didn't lodge, it just tore the skin leaving a deep gash. How is father?"

Ayla was determined not to let her fear show, it would do no good to let Jondalar or Jonayla know how worried she was. "The spearhead is deep, but it's in the fleshy area of the shoulder. We need to get him away from here to a place where he can be properly cared for. I think we should return to the Nineteenth Cave as soon as both wounds have been tended to and pole-carriers are made."

Mother and daughter exchanged meaningful looks; both knew how dangerous a deep wound could be and the chances of bodily corruption building up that could be fatal. But they could also read determination in each other's expression and that gave them both a sense of hope, knowing that they would do whatever it took to make Jondalar better.

"Zelandoni, we are much closer to First Place than the Nineteenth Cave. First Place is only a few miles north of here and I can assure you of a welcome and the help you would need," Melodene of the Chimu said.

Ayla looked at the woman, "Yes, that's where we'll go then. If you will lead us there I would appreciate it. Thank you Melodene."

Melodene smiled at the woman who led the Zelandonii. She wanted to please this woman, this Donier leader who so impressed her. Melodene thought of the blonde woman as a sort of Shaman in her own right. After the unmasking of Skytalker, her respect for this woman's bravery and calm had grown even greater than before. "I would be pleased to be of some use to you Zelandoni, you and your people may be what save the Chimu people. Our leader, Camma, will be happy to help you, I'm sure of it."

Ayla was no longer listening; she had turned back to her man's wound. The hot water had been brought by the southern Donier and placed beside her for use on the wound. Ayla opened the otter head-flap of her medicine bag and deftly pulled several small pouches out, one after another, laying them out side by side.

'I must be quick,' she thought to herself. 'I'll remove the spearhead and wash the wound and rinse it with an infusion of blue lobelia.' Ayla was frustrated that she had only a small amount of Lions tooth root to add to the poultice but she felt the poultice would be good enough for now. When applied externally it seems to fight corruption and helps heal wounds.

Jonayla was watching her mother as she chose the different herbs and roots and she understood what they were each used for. "Mother, make enough infusion so that I can wash Madigan's wound too," she reminded her.

Ayla quickly poured out a portion of the hot water into a stiff hide mixing bowl and measured out proper portions of the medicinal herbs into the water. She stirred the mixture with a stick to speed the release of the healing properties of the leaves and ground roots. Then setting the bowl aside to cool, she turned to the wound.

Jondalar was semiconscious now, his pain was obvious and the shock that comes from a severe wound had set in. Ayla wanted to give him a strong relaxing tea, but there was no time, not yet. She would have to remove the spearhead now. Waiting would only cause the wound to become more dangerous. She knelt close, placing her lips to his ear and whispered, "I love you Jondalar and I promise that I will heal you, but this is going to hurt. I'm going to put a willow stick between your teeth and I want you to bite down on it. Remember to breathe. I can't stop you from feeling the pain but I'll make it as brief as I can. Do you understand me Jondalar?"

Jondalar opened his eyes, looking up at her and nodded. Ayla looked into his impossibly blue eyes as she placed the willow stick between his teeth. Tears formed, threatening her calm at the thought of the pain she would cause him, but steeling herself, she took a finely edged blade from her medicine bag and dipped it in the cooling wash to clean it and without another word she slit her mate's skin to open the wound further, while at the same time pulling the spearhead cleanly out of the wound in one smooth motion.

Jondalar let out a low groan, clenching his teeth around the stick that Ayla had placed in his mouth. She quickly began to pour the now warm wash of healing herbs

into and around the wound to clear away the blood and dirt. After using the portion of wash that was needed she indicated that Jonayla take the rest for Matagan.

Ayla used some of the fiber cloth that Jondalar's mother Marthona had taught her to make and soaked it in the butterfly weed mix, she then placed it over the wound. She looked down at her mate, still with tears of sorrow sparkling, she wished they'd never come here, she wished she had never become First Zelandoni. If she hadn't, maybe Jondalar wouldn't be lying here in pain now. But she realized that these thoughts wouldn't solve anything so she signaled for the men who had been assigned by the Donier of the Third Cave to carry the wounded men. All that could be done for Matagan and Jondalar here in the woods had been done. The pole-carries were ready... It was time to head to the Chimu holding, which Melodene had called 'First Place'.

-O-

Trivodan, leader of the First Cave from the south stayed behind with five of his hunters to look for the Shaman and his Chimu followers. They were to determine which direction the fugitives were heading. If it was away from the direction the Zelandonii were traveling, then they would return and follow their own people's tracks to First Place.

Joharran led the way, with Melodene's aid. The men carrying the wounded were next and then the rest of the group following in no particular order. They moved as fast as they could through the forest with one hunter following some way behind, keeping an eye on the trail they had just traveled, to make sure no one was following.

Jonayla was mounted on Gray, leading her mother and father's horses as well as the southern Donier's. Her mother walked beside the pole-carry keeping an eye on Jondalar for any changes in his breathing, while the southern Donier walked beside Matagan who, although with a lesser wound, could not ride a horse or walk.

Cambarre rode directly behind Jonayla and her charges, leading the horses of the four men who had volunteered to be pole-carry bearers. The pace was slow because they could only go as fast as the men walking ahead and the ground was uneven and rough and a travois would have been an uncomfortable conveyance for a man whose wound was as severe as Jondalar's.

Groog was now able to walk with the aid of a staff and he much preferred walking to riding. He could see the advantages of riding, but he always had an uneasy feeling when mounted, it didn't seem natural to ride on the back of an animal that his people hunted for food and he didn't like being so far off the ground.

He knew that the female Mog-ur's mate 'Jonlar' had been severely wounded, he'd seen the man fling the spear at the Mog-ur and he'd seen that spear miss its target, taking 'Jonlar' just beyond. He understood the Mog-ur's grief. When Jonayla had explained what they would do next he understood why they had to go to the Chimu people. But he wasn't happy about it. The Others in this area were from the same people that had killed Clan men, women and children. They might not be the actual men who had killed, but they were from the same people.

Groog had, over the past hand of time, fashioned a clan style spear. The heavy stabbing spear had given him new confidence. Now he could at least protect himself. When the Mog-ur had given him a hunting knife the night before, he was touched. He wondered, if the situation were reversed, would he have done the same thing for her or even for her mate 'Jonlar'? Probably not,' he thought.

Groog squinted, looking down the trail concentrating on a movement. He shouted one word, "Jonayla!" After he called her name, he realized that her name and Ayla's were the only ones he could actually speak properly.

Jonayla twisted around on her horse and looked at him as he signed that there was at least one man ahead to the left of the trail. She turned back and scrutinized the area ahead of them but saw nothing. "Joharran! Groog says there is someone ahead to the left!"

Joharran held up his hand to signal a halt. He looked at Melodene, "Would that be someone from your people?"

"Yes, probably. Let me walk forward and call out," Melodene offered.

"No, I think not. We're not sure if this person is friend or foe. He could be one of the Shaman's men for all we know. You wait here," Joharran said, handing her his spearthrower and walking slowly forward with his hands raised above his head.

As Melodene watched Joharran walk forward she had tears in her eyes. To have a man worry about her well-being was something she was unused to. Since her mate

had died she'd only known rough treatment. She was grateful to the strong solidly built man. He didn't talk much, but he was a good man, she could tell.

"STOP!" A man stood up from atop a massive boulder to the left of the trail and looked down at them with raised spearthrower. "Who are you, why have you come here?"

Joharran stopped in his tracks, still holding his hands up and looked up at the threatening man. "Is this any way to greet people?" he demanded. "It seems ever since we crossed over the river that you people call Neema, we have been met with one threat after another. Whatever happened to simple hospitality?"

"You didn't answer my questions! Who are you, and why have you come here?" the man again demanded.

Melodene, came forward, "Duroban, these people are friends," she said, holding her hands up also.

The man looked beyond Joharran to the woman, "Ah, so I'm to believe a woman who went away with the Shaman and his Hunt Leader. I ask again," turning back to Joharran, "Who are you and why have you come here?"

"We are Zelandonii, from south of the river," replied Joharran. "We came into your lands to try to stop the false Shaman you call 'Skytalker' and also his hunt leader, a man called Brukeval. Both of these men lived with us some ten summers ago. One was driven out and the other hated everyone so much, that he left to wander on his own. It appears that they both ended up here.

"We have two wounded men and five women with us and we need help. If you would lead us to a place where we can care for our wounded we would greatly appreciate it," Joharran concluded.

The man looked beyond Joharran and saw the two men on pole-carriers and the long line of mounted people. He looked at Melodene again and asked, "Where is Monkam?"

"Monkam is dead, he was killed by the Shaman's men because he didn't want to share me with others of the group. When these Zelandonii came upon us I escaped and went with them. They are good people who have taken up our fight. This is Zelandoni who is First among their spiritual order," she indicated Ayla and then

pointing at the man lying on the pole-carry beside her, "and it is her mate that lies there severely wounded. She overcame the Shaman and humbled him in front of everyone. That is why they threw spears at her. They missed and hit her mate and the man on the other pole-carry. Please Duroban, take us to Camma now."

The man surveyed the group once more. Ayla was about to speak when he turned and placing two fingers in his mouth, he blasted out a shrill whistle that rose in pitch and then lowered again. They could hear an answering whistle in the distance and then an even fainter one farther away.

Duroban climbed down from the rock and called to the other side of the trail, "Stay and continue to watch, I'll be back as soon as I have delivered these people to our leader." A man stepped out from the trees and nodded.

"Follow me," Duroban said as he began to walk briskly down the trail. Coming to a narrow spot he called out, "I bring friends to see our leader!" Another man stepped out from the trees up a rise to the right and waved. He held a spearthrower in one hand.

Even with Duroban in the lead, they had to halt twice more before they finally made the shore of a lake and followed the shoreline for a while until they came to an area that had a cliff that ran within several hundred feet of the lakeshore.

It was an amazing looking place. Even through Ayla's concern for Jondalar's health, she could appreciate the uniqueness of the place. It was situated so that there was no way to reach it from above without great effort, for the cliff wall was sheer and even tilted outward slightly as it rose upward. The only access to the place was from along the shore line at either end and that area was less than three hundred paces in length.

What was even more surprising, were the cave openings. There were dozens of them and most of them had been shaped by man, square openings, in some cases. The square openings were covered by denuded trunks of small young pines lashed together were used to form an entry covering that could be opened and closed. Other openings just had hide coverings. What they were seeing was an entire community massed together in less than a three hundred foot length at the base of a cliff.

As they neared the beginning of the communal area, they noticed a tall red-haired woman standing in their path with several well-muscled men standing just behind her, fanned out to either side of her. All held spearthrowers.

Ayla left Jondalar's side and walked past Joharran, gripping his arm and murmuring, "Stay here. Let me speak to their leader first."

The column stopped, letting Duroban and the First Zelandoni walk forward.

"Duroban, I see you brought us visitors without the normal precautions." She looked sternly at the man.

Ayla watched the tall woman carefully. She noted right away a confidence that comes with experience in leading others. She was quite beautiful too, in a magnificent sort of way, full bodied and lush curves to show that even though she was strong and muscled, she was a woman. She stood there, every muscle tensed, ready for anything as she listened to Duroban.

"Leader, these people are Zelandonii from south of the River Neema. They had a fight with Skytalker's people and have two wounded men with them. They say they came into our land in pursuit of the Shaman and his hunt leader because they were causing trouble in their territory." Duroban finished with, "And I thought it wise to bring them through our observation points myself so they would be able to get their wounded cared for as soon as possible."

The tall red-haired woman now looked at Ayla as she stood beside Duroban. As their eyes met, Camma, the leader of the Chimu people noted the confidence in the blonde woman. It was in her stance and in her eyes. Her whole being said that she was a person to be reckoned with.

"I take it that you are leader of these Zelandonii?" Camma asked, no longer holding her weapon at the ready but with her hunters still alert behind her.

"Yes Camma, leader of the Chimu people. I am First Zelandoni among the Zelandonii, their spiritual leader. We would appreciate your hospitality and a place to care for our wounded. In our recent confrontation with your Shaman, my mate was injured and I need to get him inside in a secure place so he won't have to be moved for a while. I need to properly care for him. My daughter will care for the other man. Melodene suggested that it would be quicker to come here rather than back to Hilltop Holding south of the Neema River.

After a long silence Ayla asked, "Will you extend to us your hospitality?" Ayla stood with her arms extended forward and spread slightly with her palms up. She looked into the tall woman's eyes, willing her to comply.

Camma, the leader of the Chimu returned the stare for a moment then when she felt herself being pulled into those eyes as if her will were being tested, she shook her head ever so slightly and looked away, clearing her vision. Then after a moment looking back at the blonde holy woman, she commanded one of the men to lead them to the guest area. "Duroban and Melodene, remain here, I wish to speak to you both," their leader commanded.

Grateful, Ayla returned to Jondalar's side and as she passed the southern Donier she said quietly, "Zelandoni, please stay with their leader and speak for us. Introduce yourself as one who speaks for our people and answer any questions she might have while I attend to Jondalar. I need to look at the wound again and wash it once more and bandage it properly."

"Of course, thank you for your trust in me," the southern Donier replied.

"I trust you with my life. You want what is good and right for the Zelandonii. That is what I also want. We are in complete harmony in all things Zelandoni," Ayla said, squeezing the other woman's arm with affection, then turning away to walk beside Jondalar's pole-carry and toward the Chimu caves.

The Chimu leader and the Zelandoni from the south stood watching the procession head toward the caves with a Chimu hunter in the lead. Then the Donier turned to the Chimu leader and addressed her. "The First Zelandoni requested that I answer any questions about us that you might have."

"Thank you. I do have questions I would like answers to. Tell me, how many Zelandonii are there in the south? How many places do you have there? I only ask this because I would know your strength."

"I've never thought about it in terms of strength before," the southern Donier said. "Let's see, there are eleven communities north of Big River and six south. The cave that our First Zelandoni comes from has around two hundred people in it and though it is the largest single cave, the Twenty-Ninth has as many people, although they are spread out into three smaller communities."

"That is many times the size of the Chimu," Camma said, quite impressed. "Tell me about your First Zelandoni. Why do you think she brought her people north to confront the Shaman? I can't really understand why she would involve her people in someone else's problems," Camma said, really not able to understand the Zelandonii spiritual leader's motivation.

"Yes, I can understand why you would ask. I asked the same thing of her. What you couldn't know about our First Zelandoni is that she comes from far away. It is so far away that it took her and her mate a year on horseback to reach us. She has an unusual background, one of the more unusual aspects of which is that she was brought up by those you call flatheads."

"What?" Camma was very confused now. "Brought up by flatheads, how can that be?"

"I was surprised too when I first heard the story but it's really very simple. Our First Zelandoni lost her parents in an earthquake when she was a small child of no more than five summers and was forced to wander on her own.

"You can imagine what shape she would have been in after days of wandering alone at that tender age. As it turned out she was taken in almost at death's door, by a group of what you call flatheads and she calls Clan. They brought her back to health and cared for her. Our First Zelandoni loved those people and cares for Clan folk in general as much as she does her own people.

"I am grateful to the Clan too, because if they hadn't taken in a small child - not of their own kind - when they did, we wouldn't have her as our First Zelandoni now. I'm here to tell you that she is an exceptional leader and blessed by The Great Earth Mother. I have actually heard the Mother speak through her directly to us. It is the first time I actually heard the Mother's words spoken out loud.

"I'm a full-fledged Zelandoni in my own right and leader of the Zelandoni south of the Big River, but I answer to her and I'm honored to do so. We Zelandonia can be a bit skeptical about others, knowing more about illusion and subterfuge than most people, but this spiritual leader is unique in my experience. She really doesn't care about the trappings of power or position like most people would, she only wants to do what is right."

Camma had many more questions to ask but decided that she would wait until she could ask the spiritual leader herself. If the blonde woman was half the leader that

this Zelandoni from the south made her out to be, then they had every chance to correct the errors of the past and remove the false shaman from their midst.

-O-

Brukeval crouched down behind a low rise in the ground, shadowed by the tall pines and watched the Zelandonii hunters tracking him and his followers. Madroman and the others were ahead of him by a few hundred paces, he tarried behind to see how many Zelandonii were following. It seemed just a small group of five or six.

He could have his hunters attack them, but that would probably be foolish. It would just bring more Zelandonii to the area and make his life even harder. For the hundredth time he wondered what that flathead loving interfering woman was telling the Chimu. He knew what it would be. He knew that she would tell them all about him and Madroman. But did it really matter? They had already split away from the Chimu of First Place. They were already enemies, so what did it matter what they thought.

Brukeval estimated in his head how many followers he still had. It would have been better if he'd had someone else other than Madroman to play the part of Shaman, he thought. That spineless fool had been a liability more than once. Now they were down to a mere twelve warriors, not counting himself. Now, with the incursion of the Zelandonii from the south, he was way outnumbered. What would happen if the Chimu and the Zelandonii combined forces and decided to hunt his group?

How many of his men would stay if that happened? They were already complaining that they had too few women to look after their needs and that they were now having to live rough off the land all the time. What would they do if they knew what was happening back at the Chimu village?

Brukeval was worried. He knew that bitch Camma would form a friendship with Ayla, he knew that they were much alike. He wished for a moment, deep down, that Ayla or even Camma had looked at him with favor in their eyes. Secretly, Brukeval would always remember the very first time he'd met Ayla. There had been no hesitation in her eyes or voice then. She had been attracted to him, he knew that for certain.

That had been a moment of great joy that he had hugged to himself like a cloak, giving him something to look forward to. Even then he'd known that she was committed to Jondalar and that they would be mated. Deep down inside he'd

dreamed that something might happen to Jondalar and he, Brukeval, could step in to ease her grief. He couldn't help but think of the children that would have been his, and the pleasure he would have making those children with her.

His mind was suddenly brought back to the present when he heard a voice very near. What a fool he'd been, he had been rehashing old memories while his enemy had advanced so close that he was in jeopardy of being discovered.

He looked up at a man he didn't know who said to another man not very far away, "I think we can say that they are heading east, don't you think so Trivodan?"

The man who was almost standing on top of Brukeval replied, "Yes, I think you're right. Let's head back and catch up with the others. I think we've tracked them long enough to determine that they aren't doubling back to follow our people."

Brukeval remained silent as he listened to the retreating steps of his enemy. They would be sorry. 'Thank you Trivodan,' he thought. 'Good idea.' He would double back and he would make them pay for interfering. They would be sorry. After the men were out of sight he rose and headed out at a trot to catch up with his men and that fool Madroman.

-O-

Jonayla felt so helpless. She wanted to do something for her parents, but there was nothing for her to do. Her mother had been with her father almost non-stop since they'd arrived at First Place. The Chimu were trying to be hospitable, considering their reduced circumstances. Apparently the split between their people had forced this portion of the population to congregate here. And although to begin with there had been game close by, having almost one hundred people in one area with a lake bordering on one side and a cliff on the other didn't make for the best hunting. That at least gave her something worthwhile to do. She would hunt large game to lessen the burden of feeding so many people.

They had been at First Place for ten days. At first Cambarre accompanied her on her hunting forays, but as they had to go further afield, Jonayla had insisted that he pick another direction and they both hunt away from each other. This of course made sense from strictly a hunter's outlook. Cambarre had been difficult at first, pointing out that they were in hostile territory and that he felt he should stay with her.

Finally she'd blown up at him and told him that she was probably better than he was in tracking and hunting and that she could take care of herself. He'd been hurt by her outburst and had backed off his insistence that they stay together. Jonayla regretted having been so harsh with him, but she knew that she was right and was proven correct when they started bringing in twice the amount of kills each day.

Now that she had proved her point, Jonayla would apologize to Cambarre and make up with him. She really did love him and didn't want him to feel hurt. He had been her ideal foil up till then. He understood her better than anyone else, except maybe Lorala and that would change when she and Cambarre finally began to share pleasures. She wanted to experience pleasures with Cambarre more each day, but she also knew that now wasn't a good time to begin a child, not with her father lying wounded and all of them still in hostile territory. She would wait a little longer before taking that step.

Jonayla had been riding northeast. This area seemed to be full of small game, but this day she was looking for something larger. She had even brought travois poles to carry anything she was lucky enough to kill.

Suddenly she saw a flash of tawny brown streak into the bush to her right. It was a deer; she hadn't gotten a good look but she thought it was a buck. Jonayla slid off Gray's back and dropped her reins to touch the ground which was her signal not to stray and she pulled her spearthrower from its sheath and slipped into the forest quietly.

Jonayla heard the thumping noise of the deer bounding ahead and was about to follow when an apparition rose up beside her and she suddenly felt intense pain as something hard came into contact with the side of her head. She struggled to remain standing, tottering on trembling legs, fighting to remain upright. Then as she recognized the face of the man that had hit her, she saw his fist coming toward her face and everything went black.

-O-

Jondalar's body wasn't responding to Ayla's attempts at healing. His temperature was steadily rising and he was feverish just about all the time now. Over the past ten days he'd had moments of lucidity, but more and more he was looking into the Spirit World.

Ayla was bitterly worried. She couldn't imagine cutting away his flesh, and wouldn't unless there was absolutely no other choice. When a sickness got that bad, most people died no matter what a healer tried. For now she would continue to keep him as cool as possible and try to draw out the evil that was festering in his wound.

She knelt over her mate, washing the wound with an infusion of blue lobelia and lion's tooth root for what seemed like the hundredth time. She worried that what she was doing would not work, that she'd gotten it wrong, but deep down inside she knew that this was the best care anyone could give.

She'd learned from a revered Medicine Woman of the Clan. Iza had always said to clean the wound's interior and the surrounding area too. She was adamant about the cleaning process. Many of the other Medicine Women didn't think that cleaning was that important. They felt that evil corruption was dealt with by incantations from a Mog-ur, not necessarily just medicinal herbs. Iza had been the First Medicine Woman among all those in the Clan in the east so Ayla trusted what she had taught her as the right way. Incantations would help but a clean wound was paramount.

As she finished wrapping the wound and was beginning to mop Jondalar's sweating body to clean and cool him, Camma came over to kneel beside her. "Your man has fever," she said, stating the obvious. "That is bad."

Ayla grunted, slightly annoyed and continued to mop Jondalar's body, wishing that they were home at the Ninth Cave and that she'd never come to this place.

Camma remained silent and watched the Zelandoni leader. She realized by the other's reaction that she had said the wrong thing. Actually she had only been trying to strike up a conversation, but had done it awkwardly.

Camma watched the other woman lovingly touching the prone man. She could tell that there was intense love there, not just a healer's obligation. Camma noted that the Zelandoni was about her own age, maybe a few years older, and that she was quite attractive. Her face was somewhat broader and shorter than that of Chimu women, but nicely proportioned, with a well-defined jaw. She was a shade taller than most other women, but then so was she. The Zelandoni's dark blonde hair was enhanced with sun-lightened streaks and her clear gray-blue eyes held secrets, a strong will, but no hint of haughtiness.

"I'm sorry for my awkward words, I didn't mean to offend you. It is obvious that you are an accomplished healer, more so than anyone else here."

Ayla looked into the other's startling green eyes. She had noticed how unique the other woman had looked when they first met, but since then she had been with Jondalar day and night and the other woman had left her undisturbed. "I too am sorry if I seemed upset with you, it's not you. It's my worry over Jondalar. He's more important to me than my own life. If he should die I don't know what I would do."

Camma thought for a moment then said, "That is a love that may be destructive to you. We all die eventually and cannot be so bound up with another that when we lose them our life stops too. You have children, that would be a reason to continue on, would it not?"

"Yes. I don't mean that I would die, not really, but I would never be the same again inside. There would never be another man to fill Jondalar's space in my life," Ayla said, wondering why she was telling this woman her innermost feelings.

"I understand how you must feel. I lost someone who still leaves a void. But it is strange how time will heal the rawness of the pain and only leave behind what was good between you," Camma said with sadness in her voice.

"Well, I have no intention of losing Jondalar. I know he has a fever and his wound is very red and angry, but it has been more than ten days and although his fever is still raging, his body is fighting it. He has always been a big healthy man and I know he will get better," Ayla said firmly.

Camma looked down on the naked man lying before her, slightly moaning and restless. He was a handsome specimen, that was for sure and very well endowed, she saw. She could imagine how she would feel at the potential loss of a lover such as him and she again felt sorrow for the blonde healer beside her.

"I'll bring you some hot stew, you need to eat more. Then I will tell you about our people so you won't feel so alone." The tall striking woman went to the hearth and served up a wooden bowl of savory elk and vegetable stew, bringing it back to Ayla, along with a spoon carved from some type of dark shiny hardwood.

"Now you eat while I tell you about the Chimu," she said. "I talked to Melodene about her time with the outlaw group and her meeting with your people, so I know that she told you about why we left the sea coast. But she wouldn't know what it was like to be a leader with the responsibility of caring for others. I think you would

appreciate knowing some of the details. It might even help you to better understand why we let that man you all call Madroman control us to the extent he has.

"When the big wave came, my father was leader, his name was Cammadon and I was his only child. My mother had died two years before the big wave, in child birth. She was really too old to have more children and we didn't have a good healer at the time. Things like that happen sometimes.

"Our Shaman knew from ancient tales passed down to him, that when the earth shook the people should climb into the hills. He told my father that the shaking angers the waters and the waters fight back by receding from the shore, gathering strength, and then rushing back in giant waves. When that happens, those that do not climb will perish in the rushing waters. One ancient tale tells of the waters receding and rushing back with no warning, attacking the earth by surprise just as the earth attacks the waters.

"My father tried to get everyone to follow him into the hills, but many were either too lazy, or didn't want to leave all they knew, or were uncertain that it was necessary. As you have heard, the giant waves came and obliterated all the villages along our coast. As we watched, the waves came again and again, scouring every last thing from the earth. If a man with a spearthrower threw with all his might, and then walked to the spear he had thrown, then threw it again and repeated this thirty more times, that is how far the water from the sea came into the land.

"With each wave, the water came less inland than before, but by the time it was done, there was nothing left for as far as the eye could see north and south along the shore. My father said that this evil might come back for anyone it didn't get the first time and he suggested that we journey inland far away from this threat.

"Some of the people said that all they knew were the ways of the sea and how to harvest the ocean's bounty. My father told them that there was food aplenty in the interior, but that it would be on four legs instead of with fins. In the end, about half of our people stayed behind. The rest of us trekked inland to these hills, twenty three moons from the sea. We brought with us all of the belongings that we were able to carry.

"It would have been good if we'd known about the Zelandonii horses then, how much easier it would have been. Sometime you might tell me the history of your horses and how your people found a way to tame them to do your bidding?" Camma asked.

Ayla smiled and replied, "It was an accident, like many things. Someone befriends a horse, then rides the horse and others see the advantage of riding and soon everyone has a horse. It is like that in many things, don't you think?"

"Yes, but you have to admit the first person to realize the use of horses had to be very clever indeed," Camma said. "I would never have even dreamed of such a thing and I consider myself clever."

Joharran had been passing the two women as they talked and chuckled, "That's very true Camma," he said. He'd been getting to know all of the Chimu, especially the leader and he liked her, knowing her to be smart and capable. "You're talking to the person who brought us horses. You can also blame her for the firestones that Madroman used to impress your people into believing that he was something more than just a grasping, puffed-up nothing."

Still chuckling, Joharran moved to the hearth to serve himself some of the stew that had been sending out tantalizing aromas.

"So, you continue to have hidden depths. Layers beneath layers. I would ask you to share your knowledge with me in the future and not remain behind a veil of modesty. Just as you now know of me and my people I need to know who you are and who the Zelandonii are if we are to work together to bring peace to our land. It is very interesting to know that your horses have only been recently introduced to your people. I assumed that you had had them for a generation at least."

Ayla nodded, and replied, "It's amazing how fast people take to something that is obviously useful. I can tell you that when Jondalar and I first rode horses into this region there were many frightened people watching us. If they hadn't known Jondalar, if I'd come alone on a horse, I'm not sure what their reaction would have been.

"But once the people saw how a horse could pull a travois and carry people faster and farther than any person could go on foot, they quickly decided that taming horses was a useful thing to do. In fact my daughter Jonayla has a small herd as do some others. She actually trades them for goods and services," Ayla said proudly. "I'm not sure I would have ever thought to do such a thing. See, we all have our limits of imagination. Each person can imagine something, but no person can imagine everything." She smiled again, making the point that Camma wasn't the only one who might not think of everything.

Ayla wanted to find out more about this woman. "So how did you become leader?" she asked to encourage the other woman to continue her story.

"My father brought us to First Place, this area that you see now. It is a good place, with plenty of caves to live in and, at the time, plenty of game to hunt, good water supplies and as it turns out, easy to defend.

"We arrived here around twenty summers ago. I was just becoming a woman then, my blood had begun to flow. My father took another woman as a mate and we were a family again. The people prospered and our community grew. By the time my father passed to the Spirit World, the Chimu had three communities, spread out over a large area. That third community turned out to be the beginning of our problems.

"By then I had mated a good man who was a good provider but I don't think I appreciated him as much as I should have. Sometimes you only realize how good a person is when they are no longer with you. My mate died in a fall while hunting seven summers ago and I've never mated again. It's not that I haven't had the opportunity, but it's hard to become intimate with a man when you're the leader, or at least it is for me," she said, wondering how this woman beside her had a mate and two children and still led her people as their spiritual leader.

"It was five winters ago when my father died and I was chosen as leader. I was then twenty-seven, very young to be a leader of men, some of who were twice my age, but the name Camma was familiar to everyone and I had grown up living in the leader's circle. There was also a little jealousy between the communities, each thinking that they should have the right to lead the others.

"So in the end I was chosen as the person most acceptable to everyone. I have to tell you that I wasn't ready for the responsibility and that may be why that man you call Madroman, was able to walk into our land and control our hunters without real opposition at first.

"Now, looking back, I know that my father would have seen through him and his hunt leader, but at the time when, as Skytalker, he overpowered our Shaman, we were all awestruck and afraid. He had come among us in disguise, claiming to be a Spirit from our people's past. The name Skytalker has been part of our legends for generations, ever since the first big wave long ago. So you see, it seemed at first that a Great Spirit had returned to us."

Ayla was fascinated by the story the tall red-haired leader was recounting. She could understand how Madroman along with the help of Brukeval could have fooled these people. As an Acolyte of the Zelandoni, Madroman knew many ceremonies and lore that he could pervert to his own advantage. And Brukeval, no matter what she might think of the man, was an accomplished hunter who knew how to lead men and knew how to use weapons.

"Now knowing what has happened to the Chimu, I wish we had somehow been able to keep those two in our community," Ayla replied. "To the Zelandonii they were just ordinary people and they couldn't really hurt anyone. I see now how they could use their knowledge to fool others into believing they were something they were not. I'm sorry this happened to your people and I'm also sorry that they are hurting Clan people.

"Tell me, I heard that the conflict really started with the Chimu and the Clan and that Madroman and Brukeval took advantage of that conflict to create their following. Is this true?"

"Yes, it is. If I had it to do over again I would have just tried to relocate our Third Place back toward the west. It was shortly after I had become leader of the Chimu that it was decided that we would create Third Place. As I'm sure you know, if you have too many people in one place for too long the resources begin to become depleted. Lack of firewood is always the first sign that it's time to move. In fact, before all the trouble began we were intending to move away from First Place and to only keep it as our special ceremonial place. At least until the forests had time to recover and the game came back to the area."

Ayla was fascinated by First Place, it was so unusual. "This is a unique place, with the carved portals and the smoothed painted walls. What made your people think to spend so much effort on shaping the cave dwellings so?"

Camma had pride in what her people had done. "The stone here is sandy and easily shaped, it only required sharp-edged stone tools to gouge out the sandy stone. At first the shaping was done for practical purposes, such as squaring the openings so entrance coverings would fit better and keep the cold out more efficiently. When people found out how easy it was to shape the stone, those who enjoyed the process took it further and squared the walls of some of the caves, smoothing them and even painting on them as you see here."

Ayla had noticed the paintings, not that they were as accomplished as her friend's work at the First Wolf Cave but they were well done. She wanted to bring the conversation back to the Clan and asked, "So what happened between the Chimu and the Clan?"

"We had apparently encroached into flathead territory. I hadn't known they were there until our people began to have run-ins with them. There were some altercations and we were deciding what to do about it when the Shaman showed up and claimed that he would drive the flatheads away, so good decent people would no longer have to fear animal attacks from them. He said that was why he'd come back from the Spirit World, to help us, in our time of need.

"I didn't know what to think, but I have to admit that I believed him at first. I'm embarrassed to say that I was completely taken in by his words... and his deeds actually. When our old Shaman defied Skytalker, there was a confrontation and our Shaman ended up dead. They were casting spells at each other and suddenly our old Shaman clutched his chest and fell over dead. That's when some of the people decided that they would follow Skytalker.

"It wasn't very long before I knew we were in trouble. When Skytalker had "commandeered" most of our hunters to seek out flatheads and try to kill them or run them off. Soon we were experiencing casualties. The first among us to die was a man I was thinking about mating. I had finally decided to share a hearth with him and then to have him die while seeking a fight was what finally opened my eyes to what was happening.

"Even then, it took a while for me to stand against the Shaman. It came to the point that if I did nothing, we would all be in thrall to this Shaman and his Hunt Leader and there would be nothing left of the communities that my father had nurtured into being."

Ayla listened to the hurt in the other woman's voice, she looked down at Jondalar and thought, 'He lies here because of this conflict that I decided to become involved with. In the future I hope I won't be speaking with the same regret in my voice that Camma is speaking with now.'

"Of course," Camma continued, "I had left it too late and when I accused them of causing unnecessary strife that tore our people apart. There were those, mostly from Third Place and some men from the other communities that wanted to continue to wipe out the flatheads. Some of them liked the power they had over

others, some of them were afraid to go against Skytalker and his Hunt Leader. About a third of our people remained at Third Place and continued to fight the Flatheads.

"It didn't go as easily as Skytalker thought it would, especially when the flatheads started to really fight back. They had tried to avoid our hunters at first but after a while when it was obvious that our people were going to hunt their people down, they began to lay ambushes and make raids on Third Place, eventually driving Skytalker's people away and forcing them to live in the forest.

"That's when they started to show up here and at Second Place, demanding food and weapons and in some cases women to serve them and care for their rough campsites. Eventually those from Second Place who hadn't succumbed to their demands were forced to retreat to First Place for protection from their own people.

"And so here we are today. I blame myself for what has happened, if I had been more skeptical, I would have seen what this "Skytalker" Shaman really was. I heard that you and your mate humiliated the Shaman in front of everyone. I wish I could have seen that."

Ayla looked down at Jondalar who was burning up with fever. "I knew who he was. I had tracked one of his followers the night before and had seen who was pretending to be the monster that was called Skytalker. Otherwise I would probably have been just as afraid.

"As it turns out, Jondalar has had to pay the price for my actions. I just hope he will recover soon so I can seek justice," Ayla said this with fire and determination in her voice. "Joharran sent one of our hunters back to the Nineteenth Cave to bring men, food and supplies to First Place. Hopefully by then Jondalar will have recovered enough so I am able to do my part to end this violence."

"Yes, *that* would be good," Camma said quietly. She hoped that this woman's mate would survive, for all their sakes. What would happen if he died? Would the Zelandoni still be forcefully involved in their conflict? She didn't want to think about that, she wanted to think about this Zelandoni leader taking the fight to Skytalker and driving him away. She wanted her wayward people brought back into the community and she wanted to put this terrible time behind her and her people. "Yes, that would be very good," she repeated with feeling.

Chapter 23: Fugitives

Cambarre nodded to Joharran as he dismounted. He'd been out all day hunting and had made a makeshift travois to haul his kill back to camp. He'd taken down an adult Elk with his spearthrower and had gutted and dressed it before lashing it to the poles.

Several Chimu women hurried forward to relieve him of the welcome meat. They would cut it into sections for cooking. With so many extra mouths to feed, meat was used up as fast as it was brought in and hunters were having to go farther afield every day.

Unfastening the travois harness from the fresh cut poles, he stored the harness in one of the carry baskets and was about to remove them and the riding blanket from his horse when he stopped. He hadn't seen Jonayla. Cambarre called to Joharran, asking after her.

"No, I haven't seen her all day," Joharran said. "Maybe she's had luck too and is having to haul her kill back like you did."

"Yes, that could be. I think I'll ride out to the east a bit and see if I can find her, she may welcome some help," Cambarre responded.

Joharran smiled and arched an eyebrow. 'Young people! Who were they fooling, certainly not me,' he thought. He stood, watching the young man ride back the way he'd come. He was thinking that Cambarre had settled down nicely since he'd taken up with Jonayla. Females that knew their own minds tended to have that effect on men. He thought of Proleva, his own mate and had a pang of regret that she was back at the Summer Meeting caring for Durcan and not here with him.

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Cambarre wasn't too worried that Jonayla was still out hunting. There was plenty of daylight left at this time of year but when he came upon her horse standing in the middle of a well-used game trail and shouted her name and received no response... It was then he began to worry.

If Jonayla was close by and hadn't responded to his shout, then it was because she felt she couldn't give her position away. Maybe it was just that she was on the trail of some animal and didn't want to lose her kill. Maybe.

Cambarre dismounted and checked Gray. From her droppings it looked like the horse had been standing there most of the day. Why would Jonayla leave her horse for so long? Tracking game could possibly take her that long, he thought. He pulled his spearthrower from its holder and a quiver of bird darts and melted into the forest to the east. His horse would naturally stay with Gray.

Immediately he saw a trampled area just off the trail. It looked like someone had struggled or fallen into the bushes, breaking branches. The damage to the plants showed that a body had fallen full out onto them as if unconscious... or dead?

Cambarre began to sweat and his heart began to beat faster as he moved through the forest, looking at the ground, noticing here and there the prints of one human being. The prints that showed in the moist loam were those of a large man. Nowhere could he see Jonayla's smaller prints.

He wished he was as good a tracker as Jonayla, then he would be able to read the signs well enough to make out what had happened. As it was he'd just have to follow the trail of broken twigs and occasional footprints until he found the person making them. He guessed that whoever it was, was carrying a hurt or unconscious Jonayla. Could it be one of the outcast followers of the false Shaman? That thought made him worry even more.

Cambarre followed the trail of the unknown person for almost an hour before he began to wonder when his quarry would stop to rest. Jonayla wasn't all that heavy but she did weigh enough that a normal size man carrying her would want to stop from time to time to catch his breath. Not this person though, he must be unusually strong.

When Cambarre began to hear voices in the distance he dropped silently to the forest floor; pine needles eliminating any sound he might have made. He had to orientate himself to the sound before moving again. Where were the voices coming from? They were gruff male voices, he heard no females. It was hard to make out what they were saying. He began to carefully crawl toward the voices.

As he reached the edge of a clearing, Cambarre stopped and listened again.

"...Yesssss, that was luck Brukeval, you couldn't assk for a better hostage," someone with a lisping voice said.

"I wish I could be there to see the expression on that smug face when she finds out that her precious daughter is missing. I think when the little chit wakes up I might want to teach her that she's not all that special when she doesn't have family members to protect her." Cambarre heard an evil sounding laugh following that statement.

He wanted to jump up and attack the two men then and there but he held himself in. It would do no good to be over powered by them and held hostage too, or they might kill him. How would that help Jonayla? Besides, Brukeval's men would be somewhere close by. He would be far outnumbered.

Finally Cambarre came to the conclusion that he would have to wait until dark and then try to spirit her away. How badly hurt was she? He hadn't heard her voice and knew that if she were conscious he'd have heard her respond to the man's snide remarks.

Cambarre resolved to wait and found a good position that would allow observation of the clearing. While daylight prevailed, he would identify the layout of their campsite and try to formulate a rescue plan. He had to find a way to get Jonayla away from these two and their band of followers.

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Dusk was falling as Cambarre eased himself into a more comfortable position. Of course comfortable wasn't quite the right word to describe his condition. After hours of lying in one spot, unmoving, his body was screaming for action. But at least he had been able to survey the campsite and pick the quickest way in and out. It looked like there were ten men including Brukeval and Madroman, but probably a few more standing guard.

During the time he was observing, he'd seen Brukeval carry an unconscious Jonayla into a makeshift lean-to that was covered in pine boughs. He hadn't seen any blood on her; that was a good sign. After another hour or so of waiting, he heard Jonayla's voice; that was a definite relief. He remained silent as he heard her challenge Brukeval and the man's threats of bodily harm to her and her mother and any of the Zelandonii that might cross his path.

Then he heard Brukeval say, "I look forward to making your pretty mother do as I say, if she ever wants to see you alive again. You're a pretty valuable hostage when I think about it. I bet your mother would do just about anything to get you back." Then he was smirking, as he said, "I expect she'd take you back even if you're a little damaged.

"I suggest you don't fight them when they come for you tonight. My men have been without a woman's companionship for some time now and there's no way I'm going to deny them your sweet young body. I don't think I could even if I wanted to. Myself, I wouldn't touch you; I want your mother. I want her to beg me to take her," again the nasty laugh.

Cambarre tensed for action as Brukeval swaggered over to Jonayla and kicked her to stop her defiant protest. Cambarre couldn't see where he'd kicked her because the lean-to structure blocked his view, but he'd heard Jonayla's cry of pain. It took all his self-restraint not to jump up and attack the man. Finally, Brukeval walked back to the campfire and now all Cambarre could hear were murmurs as the men talked amongst themselves.

Cambarre watched Brukeval closely after that. He committed his features to memory so that he would recognize him even by his outline in the dark. It was hard to believe that this man was some sort of relative of Joharran and Jondalar; he looked nothing like the two men. His head was larger than considered normal, even for his muscular body and he had a massive brow-ridge with what looked like one bushy eyebrow running in an unbroken line along it.

But what really made Cambarre question his relationship to a leading Zelandonii family, were his eyes. They looked exactly like Groog's eyes, big dark brown eyes, nothing like any of the Zelandonii. There was a difference between his eyes and Groog's though. Brukeval's eyes always looked angry. Maybe it wasn't the eyes but the expression of hate that he always seemed to wear.

Even if he was a strong and brutal man who had followers at his command, Cambarre vowed to himself that if they tried to force Jonayla he would attack them and kill as many as he could before he died. He knew that Jonayla was unknown to men in that way and he couldn't stand the thought of her being repeatedly forced while he just stood by, doing nothing to help her.

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Day turned to dusk and dusk into night as Cambarre waited. Plan after plan ran through his head, but there was nothing he could do until events unfolded. He would be forced to react to their movements. With that in mind he left his spearthrower and darts hidden under brush at the western edge of the clearing and with only his hunting knife and a pouch containing a firestone fastened to his braided rawhide belt, he crawled close to the shelter that housed Jonayla.

The men were around the campfire laughing and telling jokes. They seemed to be enjoying themselves, and then Cambarre noticed that they were passing water bags between them and taking long swallows from them. With his hunter's nose he could smell the distinct odor of Barma in the air. How had they obtained Barma? No telling, but this was good for him. It might slow them down if they drank enough of the intoxicating beverage. Any help would be welcome with so many men to deal with.

Cambarre tensed as one man rose from the fire to the cheers and jeers of the others. Apparently they had drawn straws for the right to go first in what would be a long night of torment for Jonayla. Cambarre could hardly believe that any man would do this to a woman. It was vile and totally evil and made him so angry he wanted to kill.

As the man walked to the lean-to Cambarre recognized him as Brukeval's second in command, the man with the crazy eyes. It was fully dark now and Cambarre had silently crawled toward the lean-to from the edge of the forest where he'd positioned himself an hour earlier in preparation for his rescue attempt. He could hear the man grunt as he bent down to crawl into the lean-to and he tensed as he heard Jonayla's scream of defiance. There was a scuffling inside the lean-to and then sobbing.

When the men heard her sobs they laughed and Cambarre looked over toward them and could see them outlined by the flames of the campfire, slapping each other on the back and making nasty jokes. Without stopping, Cambarre slithered to the open end of the lean-to and saw the man on top of Jonayla's prostrate body. Her hands had been tied to stakes driven into the ground and her tunic and leggings had been removed so that all she was left with was a loincloth... and her attacker was working to remove that.

Cambarre didn't hesitate. He silently entered the lean-to and drove his hunting knife into the man's back as deep and as hard as he could. He had to judge where the man's heart would be and hope that he would hit it from his angle of thrust. Even

though he'd judged correctly, the man let out a long low moan as Cambarre twisted and pushed the knife in deeper, reaching around to cover the man's mouth with his hand.

The men waiting around the fireplace for their turn laughed again, thinking that Crazy-Eyes was moaning in pleasure as he violated the young woman at his mercy, not that his life was ebbing away.

Hurriedly Cambarre tugged at the knife, but the flint blade broke off in the man's flesh, leaving only a small piece of blade still attached to the knife's handle. Jonayla started screaming then. Cambarre put his hand over her mouth and whispered harshly in her ear, "It's me Jonayla, be quiet and let me cut the ropes."

The men at the fire laughed and joked some more, hearing Jonayla's scream cut off so abruptly. They were imaging their turns with her and more jokes were exchanged as Cambarre used the piece of blade that was left to saw away at the sinew ropes holding her wrists to the stakes. As the bonds were removed he grasped her, hugging her as she sobbed into his chest.

Quietly Cambarre said, "Come Jonayla, we need to escape." He took her hand and pulled her to the far edge of the lean-to, but she stopped him. "Wait," she whispered. Then in a loud defiant voice she screamed, "No! No! Stop you freak! Stop!" Then she let out a howl of anger that sounded like she was being cut in half.

'Good girl, brave girl,' Cambarre thought. He didn't think many women would have had the presence of mind to pretend they were being attacked to increase the time they had to get away.

The men at the campfire laughed loudly, one of them raucously shouting, "Leave some for us, will you!" And they all laughed again. The drunken men didn't know that while they were laughing the young couple had made their way to the edge of the forest. As Cambarre led Jonayla back the way he'd come, they almost ran into one of the men relieving himself in the bushes not more than a few feet away from his hidden spearthrower. Cambarre made a decision to turn north, putting as much distance as possible between them and those men.

He knew that he was leaving his spearthrower behind and that he only had a broken knife, but if they were lucky they would be able to loop around and make their way back west to the Chimu settlement by daylight.

But that is not what happened...

Before they had made it beyond earshot, they heard shouts of anger from the direction of Brukeval's camp. Then they heard men crashing around in the forest searching for Jonayla. Without a word, Cambarre grabbed Jonayla's hand and they ran straight north; away from any civilization, away from both friends and enemies. North was the unknown and a direction that was less likely to be searched.

The couple thrashed through the forest, headlong, getting scratched and bruised as they went. Jonayla was only wearing a loincloth so her legs and midriff were covered with scratches before they stopped to catch their breath. They listened carefully and could hear men shouting behind them but it didn't sound like they were coming their way.

"We should find a hiding place and wait until morning, then head west to the Chimu," Cambarre said, still panting for breath from their long frantic run.

"Can we find a stream or pond first? I'm covered in blood and it feels disgusting," Jonayla said.

"What! Where are you hurt?" Cambarre asked in anguish.

"No, no, it's not my blood. That man was on top of me when you killed him and he bled all over me. I must look frightening," she replied as she looked down at herself. Even in just the filtered moonlight it was obvious that she was covered in blood, from her shoulders to her thighs. There was even a big smear on her forehead.

"I'm sorry that I had to wait until that man attacked you before killing him, I couldn't think of any other way to do it. We had to have some sort of distraction because there were just too many of them for me to take on alone," Cambarre said, looking at Jonayla's blood spattered body. A body that - even covered in another man's blood - looked very shapely to him.

"Well? Jonayla said, one eyebrow raised, hands on hips. "Are we away, or do you just want to stand here all night and look at my body?"

"Um, sorry," Cambarre said, glad that it was dark enough to hide his flush of embarrassment. "Let's go, we'll stop and both get cleaned up at the first water source we find and then we'll find a good hiding place till morning."

They went as silently as possible in the dark, always heading north. They knew which way was north by the moss on trees in the daylight and by a bright star that was always in the north at night. After about an hour of steady travel they came across a stream and followed it to an overgrown area with a pond half obscured by bushes and overhanging trees, where Cambarre signed a halt. "This would be a good place to get cleaned up," he said. "I think it might also be good hiding place over on the far side of the pond. You see that opening in the bushes? It looks like there's a little hollow back there. You can only see it from where we're standing and if we break off some branches we could cover that small opening."

"Yes, it looks safe," Jonayla said and without another word stepped into the pool and sank down submerging herself completely under the water. Cambarre, quickly undressed and, taking his bloody tunic into the water with him, also submerged his body into the cool clear water.

They had no soap, but just rinsing off the blood, sweat and dirt they had accumulated over the past few hours was refreshing. When they were clean, Jonayla swam over to sit beside Cambarre who was still in the water. He was sitting on a submerged rock ledge at the edge of the pool. She needed his closeness as reassurance. It had been an upsetting day and night and the stress of the capture and threats and then the death of a man on top of her like that made her shiver with the shock of it.

Cambarre could feel her body trembling and put his arm around her as they sat in the cool water together. The contrast of cool water and Cambarre's warm body was pleasurable to Jonayla and she settled back in the crook of Cambarre's arm, relaxing for the first time since her capture by Brukeval.

The combination of her fright and Cambarre's rescue was an intoxicating experience for the young woman, whose experience with men was limited to conversation. Sitting beside the handsome young man, both dressed only in their loincloths was causing internal desires to surge through her body. On an impulse Jonayla leaned over and covered Cambarre's mouth with hers in a long passionate kiss.

Cambarre's hands, as if with a will of their own, moved to Jonayla's bare breasts. He moved closer, gently pushing her back against the moss covered bank, kneading her soft warm globes as they kissed. Their passion quickly building beyond their

collective control, it was as if instinct took over and thoughts of any consequences were suspended.

Cambarre moved further over Jonayla, pulling her further up onto the bank so that only her feet were still in the water. Cambarre lifted her legs as Jonayla spread them apart, her eyes closed, all her senses heightened. Cambarre reached between their bodies then Jonayla gasped as she felt his eagerness penetrate her. There was only a moment's pain as she adjusted to this new experience and then intense pleasure as her lover began to move in her, hugging her strong perfect body to his.

It was like nothing Jonayla had ever experienced before, nothing like her times with Lorala. They had pleased each other, but that was like play compared to the intense oneness of this new and wonderful experience.

As Cambarre's thrusts became more urgent and little moans of pleasure escaped his lips, Jonayla was transported into another world, a world of intense pleasure as if she and he were one. It felt so right, so complete.

A beat began to pound within her head as pleasure filled her body, like nothing she could have imagined. From deep down in her being she pulsed; she began to buck against her lover, thrusting back against him, experiencing a release so complete, so overpowering, that it brought forth tears of joy.

Afterward, they clung to each other, gasping for breath. No words were needed between them. They knew for certain what the other had felt what they both were feeling. Finally Cambarre said in a very soft voice, "Please Jonayla, be my mate. When we get back to the Summer Meeting, please become my mate."

Jonayla closed her eyes and snuggled close to her strong young lover. In a quiet place deep within herself she heard a soft chant that played again and again within her soul, "The Mother was bearing. Her life She was sharing..."

Smiling contentedly she murmured, "I thought you'd never ask."

-O-

They woke in each other's arms the next morning to sounds of men combing the forest. Jonayla came awake first and shook Cambarre by the shoulder, His eyes opened. He knew instantly that they were in danger. "We should keep heading

north and quickly. With no weapons all they have to do is find us and then I'd hate to think what would happen to you," Cambarre whispered.

"Don't you worry about me, there's no way I'll let them capture me a second time. I would rather die than submit to those animals," Jonayla whispered with conviction in her voice.

Cambarre looked at her in the filtered light that shown through the leaves into their hiding place and remembered the night before. He hugged her to him and vowed, "You won't die unless I'm already dead. I promise."

Jonayla looked up into his eyes and replied, "You won't die unless I am already dead. I promise."

Cambarre smiled broadly then whispered back, "How many children do you want?"

Jonayla suppressed the comeback that was on the tip of her tongue. She had complete confidence in her own ability to survive, but she liked that he wanted to protect her with his own life. It was touching. She couldn't think of anyone else who felt that strongly about her other than maybe her parents and her brother. It gave her a surprisingly content and happy feeling deep down. And even though they were being chased by bad men, she felt almost joyous to be here with Cambarre at this moment.

"Come, Jonayla, let's get moving north. We should try to put some distance between us and them. I think if we go far enough north; they'll give up and then we can head west and back to First Place," Cambarre said, feeling confident with his plan.

Jonayla had a pang of worry, "What must my mother be thinking? She can't leave my father in his condition, but she must be mad with worry that I haven't come back."

"Yes, but she will know that I'm out looking for you because I told Joharran that when I left camp yesterday," Cambarre replied, trying to calm her fears. "Joharran or one of our hunters should have found our horses by now and will be searching for us."

The sounds of the men searching were becoming louder. "We should go," Cambarre said, taking Jonayla's hand and then guiding her to a faint game trail. "Let's take this

trail; we'll gain real distance if we move fast. If we're careful not to disturb the trail too much, they won't notice that we went this way."

Jonayla took the lead with Cambarre right behind her. They jogged up the pathway without a break for several hours and then stopped by a small stream to drink some water. They continued for another hour, coming into an area with low hills, fewer trees and less brush. Jonayla stopped and looked back at Cambarre with a question in her eyes.

He'd been watching her body move easily before him, appreciative of her curves and her smooth muscles at work and almost ran into her when she stopped abruptly. Jonayla smiled at him with a knowing look on her face, making him blush. 'How could she have such an effect on me?' he wondered, not for the first time. He was the one who was supposed to be experienced, so how could she make him feel so awkward with just a look?

"Cambarre, don't you think we should turn west now. We haven't heard any sounds of pursuit for a long time now and I don't think we want to enter those hills in front of us, do we?"

"No, you're right, let's start west. If we pace ourselves we should be back at First Place by tomorrow morning or if you want to stop during the night to rest, we'd still be there by mid-day." Cambarre gave Jonayla a look that suggested he wouldn't mind stopping with her for the night on the trail.

Jonayla laughed and stood on her toes to kiss him. "Yes that would be enjoyable, but I would really like to get home as soon as possible, I know how much my mother must be worried and I don't want to cause her more suffering than I need to. I'll make it up to you when we get back."

Cambarre was chagrined. What was he thinking, putting his own pleasure ahead of Jonayla's mother and the others that would be worried about her. "I-I'm... sorry Jonayla, I didn't think..." There he was again, feeling the fool. 'I have to stop saying stupid things or I'll end up losing her affection,' he thought.

"No Cambarre, I feel the same way. It would be wonderful to spend time together alone, like we did last night. Or rather, it would be wonderful to be alone together without worrying about being murdered by bad men and without making my mother cry. We'll take time when we get back. I want to, very much," she said, meaning it fervently.

They began a grinding jog west. It was good they could jog instead being forced to run. They could both jog all day if necessary, while a full out run would tire them out in a short time. They made their way along the edge of a narrow valley that ran between the densely forested areas on their left and the hills to their right. The valley soon opened out in front of them for as far as the eye could see. There was nothing but tall grass and open sky.

She was just beginning to think that they should stop and see if they could find some of the white fungus that grew on the north facing of some of the tall pines. Jonayla knew it would be filling but not at all tasty. Then she saw someone standing in front of them in the distance. The man blended into the scenery. He was standing bent, conforming to a boulder that rose up behind him, but Jonayla had been trained by her mother to spot the unusual, things that others would pass by because they didn't expect to see them.

Jonayla stopped suddenly, saying over her shoulder to Cambarre, "There is someone just to the right of the trail, standing by that big rock."

Cambarre looked in the direction that she had indicated but could see no one, then suddenly the man moved and Cambarre could see him. It was almost like magic, one moment the man had been part of the rock then he separated himself and took living form. Then Jonayla was walking toward the man. "Wait Jonayla, he's a flathead."

"No, he's not a flathead Cambarre, he's Clan," Jonayla said over her shoulder to him. "Stay here, we don't want to threaten him. We need to get past these people and I'm sure with everything that has gone on, they don't trust any of us. Let me talk to him and see if I can convince him that we're no threat."

'Stupid again,' Cambarre thought. Of course Cambarre knew that she was able to talk sign language to them. He'd seen her talking to Groog and interpreting for him at meetings, but until now he hadn't really paid much attention to it. Now it seemed like a good skill to have and he was pleased that Jonayla could make herself fully understood by them.

-O-

Ayla watched Jondalar with tears streaming down her cheeks. What would life be like if she lost him? It was a real possibility now. It had been nearly half a moon

phase with no improvement; in reality he was losing not gaining strength. Now there were few moments when Jondalar was coherent. The fever from the inflamed wound was consuming his body before her eyes.

She had done everything she could think of from cleaning to lancing the wound, but nothing seemed to help. The only good sign was that there were no red lines running down his arm, which would mean that it would have to be removed, but that was little consolation if the fever ended up killing him.

Ayla leaned over and kissed his sweat-soaked brow and whispered in his ear for the thousandth time, "I won't let you die Jondalar, you'll pull through. Be strong for me." Then rising again she began mopping his face and neck with a woven cloth soaked in cool lake water. As she sat there rocking back and forth slightly, feeling completely miserable, Joharran hesitantly came over to her and cleared his voice as if to gain her attention.

"I'm sorry to bother you Ayla," he said, "but I'm worried about Jonayla. I know you have been concentrating on my brother's wound, and I don't want to distract you, but Jonayla didn't return to camp last night."

"What?" Ayla looked around her as if in a daze. "What do you mean Joharran?"

"She went out hunting yesterday and didn't return. Cambarre returned in the afternoon and asked if I'd seen her and when I told him that she hadn't returned yet he said that he would go look for her. But he hasn't come back either."

"Why didn't you tell me this last night?" Ayla asked, sharply.

"You were so distraught and I figured that you couldn't go because of Jondalar. I didn't want to add to your distress and I hoped the hunters I sent to search would have found them by now and brought them back," Joharran said.

"But they didn't," Ayla finished the sentence for Joharran.

"No, they came back just a few minutes ago and said both horses were found, but not Jonayla or Cambarre. While searching the area they ran into some of Madroman's followers and there was a brief fight. Our hunters retreated and returned here to let me know."

"I see, so my daughter and her man are captives... or worse..." she couldn't seem to focus. It felt like days since she'd last slept and her daughter's situation was another deep blow, numbing her further. Ayla thought for a moment. What could she do? If she left Jondalar's side he would die, she knew it. He might die anyway, no matter what she did, but she just couldn't bring herself to leave him.

"Joharran, would you find Groog for me? I need to talk to him. Maybe his people can help in the search. You're right, I can't leave Jondalar at the moment. He is hovering at the edge of the Spirit World and I'm trying desperately to keep him with us, but I don't know if I can," her voice quivered for a moment. "Can you also send another runner back to the Nineteenth Cave. They should have been here by now and if we can get enough people here to deal with these followers of Madroman then we can finish with this and get back to our own territory."

Joharran nodded agreement and hurried away to do as she had requested.

"Zelandoni, here is the fresh wash infusion you asked for," the Donier from the south held out a wooden bowl full of an acrid smelling astringent.

Ayla looked up at her friend. It was surprising how short a time they'd actually known each other and what close friends they had become. It had been less than two moon cycles since they had been rivals and now they were friends who really cared for each other.

"Thank you Zelandoni," she said, trying to smile. Ayla removed the most recent poultice that she had packed the wound with and began to wash the inflamed flesh between neck and shoulder. Iza had always said that a wound such as this needed to remain open so the poisons inside could escape, so that was what she was doing. It had worked in the past, but it didn't seem to be working now.

Ayala was undecided to the point of agony, she wanted to stitch up the wound as she had done all those years ago when Baby, her Cave Lion friend, had attacked Jondalar and his brother, but she kept remembering Iza's insistence that a deep wound remain open so that it could drain. So with a sigh, Ayla loosely placed a new poultice over the affected area to draw the heat and sat back as Groog was crossing over to her from the other side of the camp.

"Mog-ur," he said signing, "How is your mate this morning?"

Ayla signed in reply, "Not well Groog, I wish to ask for your assistance. Would you return to your people and ask their help to look for my daughter and her man? They were east of here, south of Clan territory when they disappeared. We think they may be in the hands of the renegade Chimu that follow the false Shaman."

"They are not here. I noticed this but was unable to talk to anyone to find out why. I will go and talk to my Clan as you request Mog-ur. I hope to be the one to bring them back safely to you," Groog nodded his head respectfully.

Ayla looked up at the burly man of the Clan. Just then he reminded her of Brun, the cave leader of long ago during her childhood. These people of the Clan were so much more straightforward than those of her own people. They had their nuances and subtleties, but when they said something, you knew it was the truth. There was no trickery or lies perpetrated on one another like Madroman and Brukeval were doing. Those two perverse men had turned her life upside down with their insanity.

"Thank you Groog. How far do you think you will need to travel to get back to your cave?"

"I will be there before the sun sets," he replied.

"That close? I wanted to meet your Mog-ur, but that will have to wait for now. You will tell him that he has a friend within the Others, won't you? Even though I'm a female, I will be able to help your people through this and we will have peace in the end. You know that don't you Groog?"

Groog nodded, "Yes, I know that for certain Mog-ur. I have learned many things since I first met you, some of those things will be hard for my people understand, or even believe, but I have seen them with my own eyes." He hesitated a moment then continued, "I will need my hunting spear in case I run into the bad men, then I can leave."

"Didn't you make a spear? What happened to it?" she signed.

"The Chimu took it away from me when we came here," he replied in sign.

"You should have told me," she signed.

"Joharran!" Ayla called the leader. "Would you please see that Groog has his spear back? He is going to his people and will ask them to help us look for Jonayla and

Cambarre. They know the area much better than we do and the more people looking, the better chance we'll have of finding them."

"Yes, that's a good idea." Joharran signaled Groog to follow him. Groog looked at Ayla and signed, "Good hunting," which was the closest thing that the Clan had for goodbye and then he turned and followed Joharran.

Ayla prayed to The Great Earth Mother that Groog's people would find Jonayla and Cambarre. Then she dipped the cloth in the cool water again and began to tenderly mop Jondalar's sweat-soaked body.

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Groog felt excitement as the forest gave way to the familiar hills of home. His Clan had lived in these hills for generations, only moving from time to time to a different location in order to allow the necessary natural resources to recover.

His cave consisted of exactly three handfuls of people and the only reason they could sustain those numbers, Groog reflected, was because of the richness of the land. To their north were copious hills that rose up slowly to the distant mountains where grains and berries were plentiful and to the south of the long narrow valley was a lush strip of dense forest that ran east and west as far as the eyes could see.

The diversity of the landscape offered much wild game and naturally harvestable plants and nuts that always gave them a surplus to sustain them through the winters. At this time of year all the growth was at its bursting fullness and Groog, as he passed through the surrounding vegetation, could smell the lavender and thyme as well as see nut laden trees that his people had harvested for generations.

It was good to be home. Recently there had been times when he thought he might never see these familiar sights again.

Suddenly as he topped a low hill, he saw the smoke from his home cave and his heart lifted in joy at the thought of seeing his friends and family again. Quickening his pace, Groog held up his spear and shouted. Instantly several hunters were at the lip of the cave, weapons in hand. When they recognized Groog, they held their left hands up in a hunter's greeting and one of them disappeared back into the cave opening. Moments later the cave leader Mongar, stepped into view as did the Mog-ur beside him.

As Groog approached the men he greeted them with raised hand. "I have returned from the Others and have much to tell you," Groog signed.

"So you have been in the midst of the Others all this time?" Mog-ur asked.

"Yes Mog-ur and I need to speak to you about something I have learned there. It has to do with the Spirit World and I think you will find it significant."

Mongar looked at the two men standing beside him and felt he should leave them to talk. "I will want to discuss what you've seen and heard before too long. We must stay vigilant while these wild men are in our lands. But I see that you need to talk alone so I will give you time to talk to Mog-ur about the spirits, but don't take overlong." With that said, he abruptly turned and walked back into the cave and to his hearth.

Groog looked at his Mog-ur, the man that would train him to one day be Mog-ur in his own right. He began hesitantly, "Mog-ur, the Others have a powerful Mog-ur who is called Ayla... She is a female... but more powerful than anyone I have ever seen."

Mog-ur broke into his earnest apprentices' rush of words, "Groog, that is not possible. Everyone knows that the Others have no Mog-urs and to have a female as a Mog-ur is against nature. Let us not speak of this again."

Groog was unable to remain silent, "Mog-ur, this woman 'Ayla' was adopted to Creb's hearth!"

Mog-ur grunted, showing shocked surprise. "Have you lost your mind Groog? What have these Others done to you? They are nothing more than violent wanderers plaguing the countryside and to even mention Creb's name in connection to them is to anger the spirits."

"But it is true, Ayla knew everything about Creb and she was trained as a Clan Medicine Woman by Creb's sibling Iza. She healed my broken leg and I've seen her heal others. She wears a medicine woman's otter pouch and speaks Clan as well as you and I do."

Mog-ur was silent for a moment, taking in everything that his young apprentice was saying. One thing he had learned above all others during his long life, that had given him his power and prestige, was the ability to listen and not to jump to conclusions.

Most of the other Mog-urs in the Clan were set in their ways and did and thought only what they had been taught to do and think and what they remembered from the ancestral memories.

He was the first among all the Mog-urs in his Clan of seven caves, simply because he could imagine that things might not be what they seemed. That some things might change, even if the memories said otherwise.

Groog was still telling Mog-ur about his experiences with the Others when he, signed the younger man to silence. "Groog, why do you assume this woman is powerful? Just because she has told you a story and because she is able to speak properly? There have been ones from the Others who have lived with us in the past and she could be one of those. She could have learned our language and our legends and may be trying to trick you?"

"I know you are not used to anyone telling you something that is not true, but I have learned that these Others seem to be able to do just that. When we first had contact with these Others that have encroached into our lands, there was some sort of mutual understanding between our people. Then suddenly they were trying to kill us, for no apparent reason. So why do you think this woman is any different than the others of her kind?"

"Mog-ur, I have listened and watched them for over two full moons and I have learned that they are not all bad like those that fight and kill. Even the Others of the caves to the west of us are not like these killers that are our enemies.

"The female Mog-ur is not lying to me that she cares about what happens to us. In a way she is of the Clan. If you met her you would see what I see and hear what I hear. I have seen her talk to birds and make them come to her. She is the one who brought horses to do the bidding of the Others. Before her no one of the Others had ever commanded a horse. I have seen her make fire by striking two stones together; she even gave me a fire stone." Groog reached into the folds of his wrap and brought out a chunk of flint and another stone that the old Mog-ur thought looked familiar.

"I too can start a fire with these just by striking them together. Her power is so strong that she can transfer it to others. The woman is also the spiritual leader of the Others. The cave she comes from has almost as many people living there as all the Clan in all seven caves in the north and it is only one of many caves.

"This Mog-ur painted her face with the Ursus symbols and chanted the sacred words that only men of the Clan could know. She is powerful beyond anyone I have ever known," Groog fell silent, realizing that he might have just insulted his Mog-ur by his eager proclamation of this woman's spiritual power.

"Hmm, I believe that you are convinced of this female's power, but I still think it could be a trick." Mog-ur spoke from experience.

"Mog-ur, what truly convinces me is that she reminds me of you. She does not claim any power and readily shares her knowledge with others. Where the power shows is not in what she says, but in her actions. She does things that make me realize that her power is so much more than she shows.

"But what is even more important is that she was the one that insisted her people come north to our land to confront these killers and to stop them. Right now she cares for her mate who was speared by one of those killers and now he hovers near the Spirit World and may die if she cannot bring him back with her medicines."

Their leader, Mongar, now interrupted them, "You two have been in conversation for a while now and I thought that maybe I should join you. I would like to know what these Others are planning and if Groog might be able to enlighten me about them."

"I was sent home to ask for your help Mongar. Their Mog-ur has a daughter. She and possibly her man are missing and may be captives of these wild men that roam the forest and fight with us. The female Mog-ur must remain with her wounded mate. Until more of their kind arrive, they don't have enough hunters to track the wild men through a land they do not know," Groog replied.

"SHE? Did I understand you to say that the Others have a Mog-ur who is female?" Mongar asked with raised eyebrows.

"Yes Mongar," the Mog-ur interjected in reply, "Apparently the woman is a powerful Mog-ur with strange and mysterious powers beyond even those of mine. Groog, would you show us the fire in those stones?"

Groog knelt and piled some leaves on the ground in front of him then took some dried moss from the fold of his wrap. The Mog-ur explained, "These stones were given to Groog by the female Mog-ur. He says that she transferred some of her magic to them so that anyone can start a fire just by striking them together."

Both men watched as Groog struck the stones together. A brilliant long-lasting spark seemed to fly from his hands into the bit of fluff and a wisp of smoke instantly appeared. Groog leaned over the little pile and blew on it and a tiny flame sprang to life. Both older men caught their breath and wide-eyed they looked up at each other.

Groog, still crouching beside the little flame, looked up at the leader of his cave and his Mog-ur and said, "This is but one small thing the Others Mog-ur has brought to her people. Besides the horses they ride, she and her mate created the new weapon that makes small spears fly through the air farther than any man can throw. I have even seen her knock down two Ptarmigan at once with a sling." He fell silent, thinking that he'd said enough.

Mog-ur thought for a long moment then replied, "If half of what you have seen is true, this female might just be more powerful than anyone we know." He refused to include himself, at least in his private thoughts. "And if, as you say, this Mog-ur has understanding of the Clan and wishes to help us with these wild men from her people, then I think we should try to help her in her quest to find her daughter.

"Groog, tell us about this child. No wait, Mongar, call the hunters to us here, so all may hear. And when we have heard what there is to hear, send them out to look, but send two of the most experienced men to the two caves nearest us and repeat the story and ask that their hunters search their surroundings for the female Mog-ur's daughter and if her man is with her they both need to be brought here."

Mongar was doubtful, but respected his Mog-ur enough to do as he requested. Nodding his acceptance he turned away to gather the men so they could hear what Groog had to tell them.

-O-

Ayla had laid out the entire contents of her medicine pouch onto a supple expanse of Chamois hide to inspect her medicinal herbs and roots. She hoped that there might be something she had forgotten, something that would trigger a memory from long ago that might help Jondalar.

Her eyes caught sight of a string of beads that must have been at the bottom of the otter pouch. She recognized it immediately and reached out to pick it up. Holding it to her lips she murmured Jondalar's name over and over again, tears streaming

down her cheeks. This was her Matrimonial necklace, the one given to her by Zelandoni, who had once been the First Zelandoni and was her friend. It was a symbol of their mating, the necklace all mated couples received after their trial period was completed.

As she looked at the bedraggled string of beads, memories flashed through her consciousness, memories of the first time she'd looked into Jondalar's impossibly blue eyes, of their first lovemaking, their matrimonial ceremony and the day she had brought Jonayla into the world and the look of awe on Jondalar's face when he held her for the first time.

Ayla wiped the tears from her face with the sleeve of her tunic and turned back to the medicinal herbs and roots spread out before her. She knew that there was nothing there that would jump out at her. She knew deep down that she had tried everything that she had learned in a lifetime of caring for others. Now it was up to Jondalar, he would recover or he would not. He had always been a favorite of The Great Earth Mother and if She wanted to take him away from her, there was nothing she could do about it.

A soft chant broke into her consciousness and she looked back over her shoulder to see what was happening and suddenly realized that the other two Zelandoni and their Acolytes were chanting a healing prayer for Jondalar. Her eyes misted again as she gratefully nodded to them, then she turned back to mop Jondalar's brow with cool water once again.

-O-

At dusk, the hunters from the Nineteenth Cave arrived. The runner had made it to the Zelandonii Summer Meeting with news about the conflict and Jondalar's wounding. This had brought others along with the hunters of the Nineteenth Cave, people who felt a special bond toward Ayla and Jondalar. Many of these people stopped by to check on Jondalar and to encourage Ayla.

"Remember us Zelandoni?"

Ayla looked up to see two men and a woman standing a few feet away.

"Remember back to your first Summer Meeting among the Zelandonii? You let all three of us help with the travois when you needed to cross the rivers and streams on the way there. My name is Latinar," then he gestured to the man next to him,

"and this is Tarmidar," then looking around his friend he pointed to the woman with them, and that is, "Lamiae. Lamiae and I have been mated for almost twelve years now and we have two children, the girl is named Ayla... after you."

Ayla's eyes widened in surprise at this.

"When we heard about what happened up here we wanted to come and help. You have always been an example to us and we wanted to do anything we could to contribute. I think you'll find many other people who came feel the same as us." Latinar looked down at Jondalar, noticing that he'd lost weight and had a gray pallor, he mumbled, "We just wanted to let you know that we wish you and Jondalar well."

Ayla looked at the three people before her and remembered a time when they were all young and happy, when life stretched out before them and everything was new and exciting. That was a time when so much was still to be experienced. She smiled and gratefully acknowledged these people, "I truly am grateful that you came and I appreciate that you have reminded me of a gentler time. Thank you."

They were interrupted as the cave leaders came over to the gathered Zelandoni. The chants had continued for several hours with the other two Doniers and their Acolytes just a few feet away.

Joharran, leader of the Ninth Cave, Manvelar, leader of the Third Cave, Trivodan, leader of the First Southern Cave and Tormaden, leader of the Nineteenth Cave stood before Ayla. Tormaden spoke first, "Zelandoni, we have brought with us fifty of our most reliable hunters. More would have gladly come, but I felt there might be a problem feeding more. Having been told that these troublemakers were only twenty or so strong, I thought a combined party of seventy hunters would be enough."

Joharran took it from there, "We have decided to organize into groups of ten and begin to search to the east of here. Our first priority will be to recover your daughter and Cambarre, but we will also look for these renegades that roam the forest and if we find them we may find your missing ones at the same time."

As if planned, Trivodan took over from Joharran, "If we find this Shaman and his followers we will signal the groups and close in on them and take them captive. If they resist we will overpower them no matter what must be done to do so. It is one thing to kill flatheads but when they start killing their own people and take Zelandonii hostages it is time to stop them, permanently!"

Ayla didn't correct Trivodan's attitude toward the Clan, now was not the time. "Thank you. Please begin to form your groups and be ready to search with the new day. You are helping not only our people but those of the Chimu who will join you in the search. Those you call 'flatheads' are also searching the forests for Jonayla and Cambarre. So between all of us, we should be able to conclude this conflict soon and hopefully deal with those who caused it. Tell all our hunters that men of the Clan are our friends in this. None are to be harmed.

"Keep in mind," Ayla finished, "that Madroman and Brukeval are the instigators of these atrocities and those from the Chimu community that followed them are for the most part just deluded people. Please remember that when you confront them."

The leaders went off to call a meeting of all the hunters in preparation for the next day's search and to plan for the confrontation that was bound to follow.

-O-

Mageb and Durg had been covering the home ground south of their cave for several hours with little expectation of seeing anything unusual. This was the area that the Others never came into because they were afraid of the Clan, at least that was what Mageb told Durg.

Mageb was the lead hunter and Durg had only passed into manhood two winters before, so what Mageb said was what things were and there was very little reason to argue any point with the older man. Durg found that, most of the time, Mageb turned out to be right in the end.

Durg was becoming tired of standing in one place while Mageb went in search of anything unusual. He understood why he should stand there, but it didn't make it any less boring. Mageb had explained that he would go to the east and then "drive" anyone who might be hiding at the edge of the forest toward the west so that Durg could stop them.

At first the nervous excitement of a possible confrontation with one of the Others had kept his attention. After a while his mind began to wander. Then he became unhappy to be the one to just stand around waiting.

Just as Durg was about to stalk off back toward the cave, no matter how mad Mageb might become by his disobedience, he saw in the distance two figures come out into

the open from the forest to the south of him. Durg immediately shaped his body to the large boulder beside him to disguise himself from casual view. He watched as the two people of the Others came toward him, he was relieved to see that they did not notice him. Just as he realized that they may actually be the man and woman that their leader had ordered them to seek out, the woman stopped and stared directly at him.

Durg didn't move, not even a muscle, not even a blink of the eye. How could that young female from the Others see him? He was a trained hunter and could blend into his surroundings and fool even a grazing antelope. But it soon became obvious that she had seen him, so he finally straightened up and stood away from the rock.

It didn't really matter that they had seen him. After all he thought, they were the ones that he was looking for. He only wanted to surprise them with his hunting-craft, apparently that was not to be.

Durg stood still as the woman signaled to the man to stay where he was and began to stride toward him. It was strange to Durg that a female would tell a man what to do, even a man of the Others. In the Clan, a man would be the one to make first contact, he would protect his woman from a stranger.

As the woman approached he could tell that she was not afraid of him, or at least if she was, she had presence of mind to hide it. Jonayla had to dredge up from memory the way Clan women were supposed to ask Clan men for permission to speak. Her mother had told her how to do it more than once but she had never thought it important before.

When she stopped several yards away and knelt in the position of a woman requesting audience from a man, Durg was surprised. He felt uneasy that this person from the Others knew a correct sign of respect, he'd always been told that they knew nothing and were brash unthinking creatures, little better than beasts.

Durg swallowed nervously but posed confidence as he approached the kneeling female and looked down at her. She had golden colored hair. He had seen others with similar light colored hair but he'd never been this close to one of these Others before. He fought the urge to reach out and touch this one's silky golden hair.

Other than the hair there was nothing redeeming about this female. She was skinny and he could tell that she was over-tall. Realizing that he had made her await his

signal long enough to show her who was in charge, he reached out and tapped her shoulder, giving her permission to speak.

Jonayla had been about to stand and start signing to the man of the Clan, she wasn't used to waiting to speak and thought he was being a bit too arrogant for his own good. But he finally tapped her shoulder so there was no reason to offend him and maybe make him mad at her. After all, they did need some help and these were the only people they might be able to trust at first sight. That is if those Shaman followers hadn't already made them mad enough to kill on sight. It was a risk she had to take.

Jonayla collected her thoughts and looked up but not into his eyes, that was not acceptable, she remembered just in time. "This woman would ask the Clan hunter to help us find our way west. We were captured by bad men from the Others in the forest behind us and we're not sure where we are. Can you point us in the right direction to find the long narrow lake where others of our people await us?"

Jonayla knew the right direction but wasn't absolutely sure where they were and felt it couldn't hurt to ask for help, rather than just the right to pass through.

"This woman would also ask if you could provide some food. We lost our weapons while escaping the bad men in the forest." Jonayla, stopped and waited for a response. She had kept it simple in case this man had the same trouble understanding her as Groog had when they first conversed.

Durg, stood still. This woman spoke his language as if she were a man. She seemed to have a good vocabulary but lacked the nuances of gender and phrasing. He looked her over again as subtly as he could, to make sure she was really a female. He decided that she was, but she talked so boldly, like any hunter might. Maybe she had learned to speak from a man of the Clan and she didn't know the right phrasing. That had to be it. He was still impressed that she could speak a real language and not just that gibbering he'd heard from others of her people.

Then they both turned toward a loud call, "Durg!" It was Mageb, stepping from the forest. He stopped when he saw the female kneeling in front of Durg. His gaze quickly took in the man of the Others some distance away. He walked rapidly to Durg's side.

Mageb signed, "These are the two we were looking for. What are you doing? We must take them to Mongar and Mog-ur as they instructed us to do."

"This one was telling me..." Durg began.

Not listening, Mageb broke in, cutting Durg's explanation short. "We don't need to know their story. It is not up to us what happens to them, we're just supposed to bring them in. Now get to it, you take the woman and I'll go and bind the man."

As Mageb began to turn away, his eyes widened when the woman reached up to take hold of his wrist. She signed an apology, but then went on to tell him in his own language that she and her man would follow them willingly.

For a moment Mageb was shocked and frozen into immobility by the fact that this female of the Others could speak a real language and that she and her man would go with them without a fight. Then he looked up at Durg and saw his mocking eyes and an expression that all but said, 'I would have told you if you would have let me.'

With a growl, Mageb signaled the woman to bring her man along and to make it fast, they needed to be on their way. Jonayla rose to her feet and signaled Cambarre forward. Both Clan men held their spears at the ready, now was no time to start trusting these Others; they may try to do something crazy. The man didn't seem to have any weapons, nor did the woman, so Mageb grunted and made the sign that they should follow him. Durg brought up the rear.

Chapter 24: The Cure

Jondalar was no better; his wound was more inflamed than ever. For the first time, Ayla acknowledged in her heart that he might die. As she knelt beside him, her mind wandered back to their first meeting when he'd been even more severely wounded. Why had he recovered from those multiple wounds and not this single one? He had been attacked by a Cave Lion and every healer knew how dangerous Cave Lion claws could be, but he had recovered. If she could only understand what was happening to him now, why no matter what she did, his body would not respond.

It had been over a full a moon phase since Jondalar and Matagan had been attacked. In that time Matagan had completely recovered, his wound had healed without the heat of illness. But Jondalar just kept sinking deeper into fever and his flesh was melting away almost before her eyes.

For the first time in years, Ayla wasn't sure what to do. She would continue to tend to Jondalar but deep down in a quiet space within her mind she realized that if he didn't rally soon, she would be carving his Élan on his grave marker. Her eyes misted in tears for what seemed like the hundredth time. How could this be happening?

Her fear and confusion were so great that she'd stopped worrying about why they were all there. She hadn't thought about the reason they'd come to the north for some time now. The others would have to deal with that. She was about to lose her lover, best friend and the father of her children. She suddenly wondered how she would cope with that. And on top of it all, she had no idea where her daughter was, or even if she was still alive.

Just then, through her misery and fear, she heard a commotion from outside the cave. Voices were raised, first in challenge, then in excited welcome. Ayla knew she should go see what was happening but her strength had been sorely tested over the past several hands of time. She only looked up when she heard running feet and heard Jonayla's voice, "Mother! Mother! I'm back!" Her daughter reached her as she stood, dazed with a mixture of grief, exhaustion and relief.

As Jonayla ran to her, she was shocked to see the tired grief filled expression on her mother's face. They came together then, daughter hugging mother desperately. Ayla weeping with joy at the realization that at least her daughter was back and safe, she realized for the first time just how much of her fear and uncertainty had been for

her daughter. Suddenly, she felt renewed strength and determination. She would bring Jondalar back to the world of the living. To make her family whole again, she must find a way.

"Jonayla, I was so worried! I'm so happy that you're back. Did Cambarre find you? Are you both alright?" She was suddenly worried that she would hear more bad news.

"Yes he did find me, he actually rescued me - and yes, we are both alright. I'll tell you all about it later but first I've brought a Clan Mog-ur and a Clan Medicine Woman back with me. The Mog-ur wants to help and thinks that his Medicine Woman may have something that might help father." She looked down at her father, eyes widening in shock and concern at how much weight he'd lost and the sickly pallor of his skin.

Her father had always been a little larger than life to Jonayla. He was the epitome of what a man should be, strong yet caring and so accomplished. He had designed the first spearthrower and had found and brought back so much knowledge to the Zelandonii, not to mention mating with her mother and being the best father anyone could have.

Now he was unconscious, laying there a mere husk of his former self. Jonayla was suddenly fearful that she might be too late. She had assumed that her mother would have treated the wound successfully by now and that she would bring the Clan people more to introduce them to her mother than for any real help they might be able to offer.

Needless to say the discovery that Clan people had arrived to help their First Zelandoni heal her wounded mate was a surprise and made a ripple of comment pass through the community.

Ayla hugged her daughter once more and then turned to the two strangers who stood beside Groog at the cave entrance watching them. Groog had found Jonayla and brought her back. She would have to thank him properly, later.

The newcomers became uncomfortable and tense as more and more people of the Others surrounded them. Seeing this, Ayla made the welcome sign and beckoned them into the cave. She could instantly tell that the older man beside Groog was Mog-ur. His totem mark was the Bison; it stood out on his left cheek. She also saw the hunters mark at his throat, 'So he was a hunter too,' Ayla thought. Creb had

been left with a crippled arm and leg because of an attack by a cave bear when he was a child. Though he was physically unable to hunt, it hadn't slowed him down. He had made up for his physical infirmities by overcoming them and using his hard earned abilities to speak to the Spirit World and to become his people's spiritual leader.

The three people of the Clan came forward and Ayla knelt before the Mog-ur but didn't look down in submission as a normal Clan female should, but more as a young hunter might to show respect to a holy man and an elder. She was not Clan and she knew that now was a critical moment in any future relationship with these people. She needed to establish herself as an equal to this Mog-ur if she was to accomplish anything for their future with her people. They must understand that she was not just a submissive female who had no power to effect change.

Ayla did not wait for a tap on the shoulder to speak, "I am 'Ayla' - Mog-ur to the Zelandonii. These people have come from the south to stop those who would kill Clan people."

The man's eyes widened in surprise at her perfect ability to express herself in the ancient ceremonial version of the Clan language, he had not expected it, even though Groog had warned him. This female's daughter had also impressed him with her ability to speak, but her efforts were stilted without any real knowledge of the nuances of the language. This one, however, spoke as if she were born to the Clan.

He was so surprised that he didn't even think to discipline her for looking into his eyes so boldly. By the time he thought about that, it was too late to say anything because she had explained that she too was Mog-ur of equal rank to him in her own people's eyes. How should he respond to this? It was difficult to know who to deal with among these strange people who let females make men's decisions.

"Mog-ur," Ayla continued. "The daughter of my mate's hearth tells me that your Medicine Woman may have something that might help cure his wound." She gestured toward Jondalar who was lying on a pallet beside an interior wall of the cave, deathly pale and at the moment, unable to move.

The Clan Mog-ur had been told about the female spiritual leader's wounded mate. He hadn't quite understood what Groog had told him, but now he would have to speak to the female - or not. After a long moment he decided that he must.

"Our Medicine Woman is very knowledgeable in cures, more so than any other in our Clan. She has learned new cures using plants and roots that seem to grow only here. She will tell you more. I understand from your offspring that you too are trained as Medicine Woman?" He had a hard time believing this, but would wait and see before making any judgment.

"Yes, but I'm at a loss to stop the burning fever. What has worked before is not working now. There is some poison from the wound that I cannot get at and he is being consumed by it," Ayla replied.

The Mog-ur looked at this woman of the Others for a moment, trying not to let her see his thoughts in his expression. He wondered about this one, she obviously was a leader among her people, he could see how others - even men - treated her with a certain respect. He decided that he would do the same, for now. If, as Groog had implied, she was the one who had talked her people into coming here to intervene with the wild men from her people, then he would give her the chance to prove her worth. It was just hard to think of her as a leader; it was so foreign to his understanding.

"Dula will discuss a cure with you," he signed, signaling the Clan Medicine Woman to move forward and assist the injured man.

The woman reacted immediately at the Mog-ur's gesture, moving to kneel beside the prostrate man of the Others and placed a hand - palm down - on his forehead. Ayla looked at the Mog-ur and signed, "My daughter will make you comfortable while your Medicine Woman helps me with my mate. I am grateful." Ayla looked at her daughter and signed, "Please find food and drink for our guests."

Jonayla tried to show equal respect to the older Clan man, but wasn't completely sure how to act around him. She gestured that he should follow her to the hearth and asked one of the Chimu women in charge of food distribution to cook some bison without too many spices and to bring some cool drinking water from the inlet stream. The Chimu woman stood and stared at the strangers for a moment. Then as if awakening from a daze, she hurried off to do as Jonayla had asked.

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The Clan medicine woman, 'Dula', looked up at the female from the Others who was standing beside her. This woman was supposed to be some kind of Mog-ur according to her offspring. She wasn't sure what to make of this woman who

obviously commanded both women and men of her own kind. She had been fearful when this woman had talked to Mog-ur, looking at him boldly like she was a male. But Mog-ur hadn't reacted to her indiscretion and had even responded politely. It was all so confusing.

Putting those thoughts aside, she looked down at the man of the Others. It was obvious from his appearance that he was very close to the Spirit World now. His eyes were sunken into their sockets and she could see that he had lost a great deal of flesh from his frame. This woman's daughter had said that her mother was a Medicine Woman, but if she was, then she was losing this man no matter how well she had been trained. Dula wondered how well that training could have been, considering that she wasn't one of the Clan.

Dula signed, "What have you done for this man up to now?" To her surprise the woman of the Others recited all the standard treatments that any well trained Medicine Woman would have employed. As the strange looking blonde woman went through an extensive list of medicinal herbs and roots, using the proper names and descriptions, Dula became aware that talking to her was like talking to any other Clan Medicine Woman. It was amazing to find such a foreign looking female discussing the proper care for wounds and using all the right terms.

Finally the woman of the Others fell silent and looked into Dula's eyes beseechingly as if begging her to tell her where she had gone wrong. Unfortunately, there was nothing that she would have done differently. The only thing she had that might help was a mysterious medicine that she had stumbled upon only a short time ago. It had worked well to tame the fever illness in several of her people she had treated. It was a fungus found only in the forests here, as far as she knew. It had been found by accident. When Dula had tried it on a wounded hunter's leg that was severely infected she had seen almost immediate improvement. She had quietly added the fungus to her list of cures.

Dula knew that she should have shared her new knowledge with the other healers but new ideas that weren't part of Clan tradition were usually frowned upon and besides, she wasn't sure if she could find any more of this particular fungus. She had been looking for more of the fungus ever since her initial success, but so far had not been able to find any. Maybe this Medicine Woman of the Others who was also supposed to be a Mog-ur, might accept the use of this new medicinal. It was worth a try, she thought. Dula looked down at the man who was obviously dying and then at the woman and made up her mind.

"I have a new medicinal for fever such as this. It seems to work where other cures do not. I am the only one who has used it and it is not a traditional medicine. Would you want to try it on this man?" she indicated the fever-ridden man lying in front of her.

Ayla looked at Jondalar, desperate for any hope, then asked, "What is it?"

Dula opened the flap of her otter pouch and withdrew a small lump wrapped in leather and tied with three backward knots. Ayla made a mental note of the knot pattern. She would use the same pattern if she found the fungus in the future. "This is a fungus that I found that controls fever brought on by wounds. It works especially well on open wounds that are poisonous. It must be ground up and made into an infusion then fed as a tea through the mouth. I have seen very good results when I have used it. It does not work for fevers that are not wound caused. I think it will work for this man." She indicated Jondalar's poultice covered shoulder wound, "I would uncover the wound once he has taken the medicine so it can dry."

"This infusion isn't placed on the wound, but is offered as a drink? It will reduce the fever?" Ayla asked. She had never heard of anything like that before.

The contents were grayish lumps of fungus. It had a pungent smell, reminding her vaguely of the sacred root from Creb's Memories Ceremony. "This smells similar to the sacred root for the Memories Ceremony," she signed absently to Dula.

To Dula, this woman's casual comment was like a bolt of lightning from a clear blue sky. What had she just said? Dula forgot herself and stared at the female Mog-ur. Sitting back on her heels Dula signed, "What do you know of the Memories Ceremony?"

Ayla looked at Dula and saw the fear in her eyes. "I was Medicine Woman for my Clan far to the east. I was taught how to make the sacred memory draught. The one who was supposed to make it was too ill to attend the Clan gathering where the ceremony traditionally takes place. Her true daughter was too young to perform the task, so Creb who was Mog-ur requested that I make the sacred drink." Ayla knew that this would sound strange to a real Clan woman, but it was the truth so there was no reason to conceal it.

Dula scrambled to her feet, and scurried to her Mog-ur who was now sitting by the guest hearth drinking some water. Ayla watched as Dula scuttled down beside the Mog-ur, who quickly tapped her on the shoulder allowing her to speak. Ayla couldn't

see what the Clan Medicine Woman was telling him from where she stood, but after a few moments he looked past Dula directly at her. As the Medicine Woman continued to sign, the Mog-ur's eyes widened in surprise and finally he rose to his feet and came toward her.

Ayla felt she should kneel as a well-mannered Clan woman would, but she fought the urge. She was no longer Clan, she reminded herself. She was the equivalent of Mog-ur and needed to maintain a certain status if she were to get the Clan's help in stopping the wild men.

This would be a test of that ability to convince, and a test of this Mog-ur's ability to adapt. As he approached, Ayla had the strange feeling that maybe this man of the Clan would be able to see beyond the memories and accept. She wasn't sure why she felt this. It might have been his expression, or her wishful thinking.

The Mog-ur was old and he had the look of one who was confident in his abilities, someone who was used to obedience upon his command. There was something of Creb in his look just then. Creb was still close to her heart no matter how long ago he had departed from the earth to walk the Spirit World. There was an ancient look reflected in this Mog-ur's eyes, the look of someone who had experienced the other side.

The Mog-ur now stood before her, waiting for her to kneel and to look down, but when she didn't he signed, "The female Dula tells me that you were Medicine Woman of high rank and that you mixed the sacred root for the Mog-ur Memories ceremony. Is this true?"

"No, I was not of high rank, but I was adopted by the Mog-ur of our Clan whose sibling, Iza, was first among Medicine Women throughout all the Clan to the east and she taught me. One Clan meeting was held when Iza was too ill to attend and her true daughter was too young to make the memories drink. Since I knew how to make the memories drink, Creb asked me to make the draught for the ceremony."

"Creb! That is what the female Dula has told me. I do not understand how you would know Creb. The manifestation of Creb is only shown once in a generation. Why would he show himself to you who are not even of the Clan? Tell me, what do you know of Creb?" The Mog-ur looked quite agitated.

It was a surprise to her that these people would have known about Creb. She knew that they could communicate over vast areas, but her Clan had been nearly a year's

travel away by horse. "Creb adopted me. He was a human like you and not a manifestation; I considered him as my father and teacher. He was flesh and blood and I was there when he went to the Spirit World. He lived with his sibling Iza who treated me as if I were her daughter. That is why Iza trained me, she always said that she thought I could have been her spirit daughter because of my love for healing."

Ayla was fighting back tears. She knew the Clan did not understand tears, but she couldn't help herself.

"So you were adopted by a Clan. That perhaps explains why you speak the real language. But to be taught the Medicine Woman craft, and by one of high enough rank to make the ceremonial Clan Meeting draught is unprecedented," The Mog-ur said doubtfully.

Ayla could understand why he would doubt her statement, but it was true and there was more that she would say. "I had the totem of the Cave Lion, which is unusual for a female, but it led me to become, 'The Woman Who Hunts'. It also made me strive to do more than I was allowed," she brought her hand to her throat to indicate the small scar that denoted the hunter's mark.

'The Woman Who Hunts' was in Mog-ur lore and known only to Mog-urs. "We will speak no more of it." The Clan Mog-ur then looked for a long time at the hunter's mark, then finally signed, "And the totem mark?"

Ayla was wearing leggings with her loincloth and untied the legging covering her left leg and pushed it down her leg to expose the four parallel lines carved into her thigh from her encounter with a Cave Lion at a very young age.

He grunted, then signed, "That is not a normal totem mark, there is no ash mixed in and it is larger than any I have seen before. Why is this so?"

"I was attacked by a Cave Lion when I was very small. The beast clawed my leg and left these scars and Creb said that it was my totem mark and that no other was necessary," Ayla replied, looking into the Mog-ur's eyes, trying to show him that she spoke the truth by her open expression.

"We will talk more of this after your mate has been treated. 'Dula,' the Mog-ur signed, "let us see if your medicine will help the wounded man of the Others." He turned and walked back to the guest hearth and sat, now watching the female Mog-ur closely.

Dula hurried to her patient and Ayla followed behind her. Ayla knelt, piled some starter fluff in the small circle of stones she used to contain a fire for heating water and then unceremoniously struck the flint against the firestone, creating a long bright spark that jumped into the fluff. She leaned forward and blew on the spark that was nestled in the fluff and a tiny flame flared up. Then Ayla set small twigs onto the flame.

Satisfied that the fire would take, Ayla then reached for a Bison hide water bowl and filled it with water. Then she placed heating stones in the small fire with wooden tongs. She sat back to wait for the stones to become hot enough to place in to the water bowl.

All during this time Dula had been watching Ayla. With the exception of the magic fire starting stones everything the other woman did would have been exactly what she would have done. She could tell that this woman was used to the healing arts, and that she had much experience, possibly even more than she herself. Dula decided that she would have to watch carefully to judge just what level of knowledge this foreign woman of the Others had. It was strange to see someone who looked so alien performing tasks as a medicine woman and who also could speak like a Clan woman, even if she did not look or act like one.

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Ayla looked down at Jondalar's sleeping form. It had only been a few hours since Dula had administered her medicine. She had sucked the special infusion up into a foot long hollow cattail stem. Then she placed a fingertip over one end. Then placing the stem between Jondalar's lips, she removed her fingertip, allowing the infusion to enter his mouth. He swallowed as an unconscious reflex.

She had repeated the process twice since then and as dusk approached Ayla could tell that Jondalar was resting easier than at any time since his fever had begun. It was obvious to her that this fungus was a powerful substance that fought the fever caused by poisons in the body.

Ayla returned to the guest hearth to sit with the Mog-ur and his Medicine Woman. "My mate looks much better. The fungus you brought is working well Dula. I was at my wit's end, having tried everything I knew to control his fever. The poison was too powerful for any of my cures to work."

Dula signed to Mog-ur that she would speak if he would allow it and he nodded his consent. "It is a thing I discovered by accident. I was trying to cure a fever in one of our hunters who had been clawed by a mountain lion. His wounds had not been treated for several days before he returned to our cave and by then they had gone bad.

"He was not getting better and I too was at my wit's end to think of anything I could do to help him. I thought to try a concoction of Aconite, Marigold and Wild Hops, mixed with Black Birch Bark. When that is finely ground, it looks surprisingly like this fungus when ground. I was tired, I had been up for a day and a night, cleaning the wound and tending the hunter's fever. That is no excuse for my mistake, but the mistake saved his life.

"I had found the fungus some time before and had been experimenting with it, but had found no use for it, until then. When I mistakenly dosed the wounded hunter with the fungus instead of what I thought was the mixture, he almost immediately responded to the draught. I was mortified that I had made the mistake, but when he recovered I was elated. Since then I have used the fungus to good effect on similar wounds."

"I would trade you fire stones for the knowledge of this fungus. It sounds like a very useful medicine that will save lives," Ayala said hopefully.

Dula looked at the Mog-ur. He said, "You may have some, but no payment is necessary. It is of nature and should be shared."

"The firestones are also of nature and should also be shared. There is no magic in them, other than that Ursus, who we call The Great Earth Mother, has placed within them. They are a gift and were discovered by accident. I was knapping flint when, in my tired state, I reached for a stone that I thought was my hammer stone but turned out to be a firestone. When the firestone and flint were struck together they formed a long lasting spark. I immediately thought that a spark like that could start a fire. So you see, it isn't magic, just another wondrous thing that our guiding spirits give to us if only we have the eyes to see."

They were interrupted then as Joharran came to the guest hearth to report the day's activities to the First Zelandoni. He and the other leaders, Camma of the Chimu, Manvelar of the Third Cave, Trivodan, of the First Cave of the southern Zelandonii and Tormaden of the Nineteenth Cave had just returned after a day of searching with their men for the Shaman and his followers.

Suddenly, those at the guest hearth heard the noise of returning hunters as the camp came alive. Ayla looked up at Joharran standing before them, "Greetings Joharran," she said and also signed for the benefit of the Clan people beside her. "Did you find anything today?"

"Yes, we found tracks and we have hunters following them. Once they catch up with the followers of Madroman, we'll go there in force and take them captive and bring them back here." He looked over to where his brother lay and asked with a worried expression on his face, "How is Jondalar?"

Ayla smiled, "He is doing much better." She made the formal Clan introductions, verbally to Joharran, while signing for the benefit of her Clan guests, then explained what had happened while he'd been away. "Medicine Woman Dula has found a special medicine that puts out a fever almost like water thrown on a fire. Or at least it seems to be doing that. We gave some to Jondalar only a short while ago and his fever has already broken and he's resting comfortably."

Joharran looked relieved, "I was preparing myself on my return to hear that he was walking the Spirit World, so this is excellent news."

"Yes, and we have the Clan to thank for it," Ayla said.

"Yes," Joharran said, turning to the Mog-ur and his Medicine Woman. Joharran didn't know how to converse in Clan talk, but the Zelandonii had been using a modified version of Ayla's Clan talk in their hunting expeditions for years now. So Joharran did know words that were used to signal when silence was necessary and some phrases. He signed to the Mog-ur, "I am grateful, I am in your debt."

The Mog-ur looked startled when it appeared that another of the Others was speaking to him using Clan language. Ayla noticed his surprise and explained that her people used Clan signs when they hunted and that Joharran couldn't really speak his language at any length. But the fact that the Others used his language when hunting was a complement as far as the Mog-ur was concerned. These people from south of the river were indeed different than his perception of the Others.

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Ayla woke at dawn, even though she had stayed up late the night before talking to Mog-ur. She'd had the opportunity to explain how Zelandonii society was structured

and although the Mog-ur had to struggle with the strange concept of female leaders and both males and females as hunters, he seemed to have accepted this as another strange fact about the Others.

After checking on Jondalar and finding him awake and alert, but still very weak, Ayla felt a heavy weight had been lifted from her. For the first time in several moons Ayla felt 'herself' again. She hadn't realized how much Jondalar's condition had been affecting her, not until the strain of his illness was removed.

Sitting with Jondalar, Ayla felt at peace. She now felt confident that everything would work out. But this scare was making her rethink what was important to her. What it came down to was that when all was said and done, what she really wanted was to be with Jondalar and their children, to be Jondalar's mate and helper and to be a mother to her two children. All of this extra responsibility that she had taken upon herself, to lead the Zelandonii here and to be the giver of Doni's gifts, to act as the intermediary to the Great Earth Mother, was... maybe not as important as a family life.

Ayla reflected on this as she helped Jondalar to sit up so he could eat some boiled grains mixed with berries. She had always been concerned with the community she belonged to and maybe it was only natural that she strived to accomplish as much as she could, but did she always need to be the leader? Wasn't there more to life than serving the community?

Ayla thought back over all the times she had been too busy to be there for Jondalar and even too busy for her children. Back when she was an Acolyte she'd almost lost Jondalar by sheer neglect. He had taken up with an old lover, that woman Marona. She realized even back then that he wanted to get her attention, to let her know that he was dissatisfied with the way their relationship had changed.

Poor Marona, dead these past five summers. She had played her tricks once too often with the wrong man and had suffered for it. So had the man and his family, the compensation he had to pay for his violent actions had been ruinously high.

"Zelandoni?"

Ayla looked up from the little fire she was tending, "Yes?" she replied to Trivodan who was leader of the First Cave of the Southern Zelandonii.

"We are about to have the morning meeting with the leaders and Zelandoni and I wondered if you would be able to attend, now that..." he nodded toward Jondalar, "now that your mate is doing better. We could use your experience, especially since that Mog-ur from the Flat... err, Clan is there. Someone needs to make him understand what we need from them."

"Yes, I will attend. Let me finish making this medicine and I'll be there. Please ask Jonayla to attend too, so that she can interpret for the Mog-ur."

Just then Dula stepped from behind Trivodan and signed to Ayla that she would finish the infusion and give it to Jondalar. She had been able to tell from the man's body language that he wanted Ayla to follow him. Ayla nodded and greeted the medicine woman, letting her take over the preparation. "Jondalar, I think you will be up and around in a few days, so I will leave you in Dula's care for the moment and attend this meeting."

"Yes, I think I'll be fine and it's time you were involved in this search again. After all, we were the ones who convinced our people to get involved in the first place." He paused, moving a bit trying to find a more comfortable position, then he smiled and said, "I love you Ayla and when this is over I think we should get away together, maybe just the family. What do you think?"

It was almost as if he had been reading her mind. "Yes Jondalar, I would like that very much." She leaned down and kissed him on the lips. Then turning toward the outdoor hearth she walked with Trivodan to the meeting.

Chapter 25: Captured

Camma noticed her first. The Zelandoni, although not overtly muscular, was very fit and radiated a sense of strength and easy confidence. Camma knew a leader when she saw one and felt a moment of disquiet as the attractive blonde woman walked among them, looking at each of them as if to acknowledge each in their turn with an ease and grace that Camma had to work to achieve.

Camma was used to leadership, but the Chimu were a small people compared to the Zelandonii, and to be at ease in ones manner toward others, to just assume that everyone present would follow you, that was something she would have to learn, she told herself. 'Yes, there was much I can learn from this unusual woman,' she thought.

The other two Zelandoni as well as the cave leaders traveling with them were at the main outside hearth when Ayla approached. Camma stood and greeted Ayla, hands held out to take hers. "We're glad that your mate is doing better Zelandoni. It is good that he will recover. I would like to speak for the Chimu people and say thank you. We thank you for all you have done for us and we honor your suffering in our cause."

After a brief pause, she continued with regret in her voice, "Looking back, I wish we had responded differently when those two men first arrived among us, but they fooled us all into believing they were from the Spirit World. By the time I understood that they were tricksters, some of my people had sworn their loyalty to them.

"We have learned a hard lesson, but with the Zelandonii's help we will come through this and be stronger for it, and, I might add, a less gullible people in the future."

Ayla gripped the Chimu leader's hands tightly in return, showing her own gratitude with a smile. "I speak for the Zelandonii when I say that we appreciate your hospitality and as far as gratitude is concerned, you owe us no thanks. These troublemakers came from our lands as outcasts. It is only right and fitting that we drive them from yours." There were nods and sounds of agreement from the Zelandonii leaders.

"Have we any information on the whereabouts of the people we seek?" Ayla asked as she turned to the task at hand.

"Yes First Zelandoni, they've been seen and we know where they are camped. I have two hunters from the Nineteenth Cave watching them now, in case they move," Manvelar said.

"How far away are they now?" Ayla asked.

Manvelar responded carefully, "We could be near their camp by nightfall. It appears that they are leaving the area. We can't be sure, but since their capture of your daughter and her escape with Cambarre's help, they seem to be on the run, moving farther east each day."

"I wonder if we should just let them go," Camma said hesitantly. "That way there wouldn't be any more violence and the possibility of more deaths..."

"I understand your wish for peace," Ayla replied. "But Jondalar and I have traveled through the eastern territory and we know those people. I wouldn't wish Brukeval and Madroman on them. Besides, we should try to reclaim the misguided men who still follow them. I'm not sure they are still happy about having pledged themselves to that pair."

"Then we leave to follow and capture them?" Camma asked, looking around at the group of leaders.

"Yes, let's get this over with, once and for all," Joharran said. "Zelandoni, if we leave within the hour we should be near enough to confront them by tomorrow." Joharran looked at Ayla gesturing toward Groog, "Maybe you could ask the Clan man to send their hunters into Long Valley to cut off anyone fleeing north into Clan territory?"

"That is a sensible idea Joharran," Ayla agreed. She knew that Joharran had suffered over his brother's condition. He hadn't been able to do anything to help, other than to search with the others. She could tell by his expression that he was eager to contribute something meaningful. He wanted to turn his strength and experience into physical action.

"I will discuss it with Groog's Mog-ur," she looked at the Mog-ur and nodded. "I may have to go with him to speak to the leader. In the Clan, only the leader makes a decision that could put his hunters in danger."

-O-

Jonayla had been interpreting what was said for the Mog-ur who stood to the back of the gathering beside Groog. He was silent and unmoving with his arms folded over his chest. Although to the people around him he gave the impression of impervious stoicism, in reality he could feel their stares and their apprehension. As a Mog-ur of the Clan, he was used to eliciting some fear and respect so this was not unusual, but the rude stares that were furtively directed at him by these leaders of the Others was disconcerting.

No one would know of his discomfort, other than Groog and Dula, and if she had been there and of course the Other's Mog-ur. Because the Clan's form of communication was dependent on subtle nuance and on barely perceptible changes in expression, gesture and posture, one who was familiar with it, could discern the subtlest reactions in another, where any Zelandonii or Chimu, for that matter, wouldn't notice a thing.

Now that the decisions were made by the leaders and everyone had gone to prepare for departure, Ayla signed to Groog and Mog-ur to follow her to the nearby stream, where it was quieter so they would be able to communicate without interruption.

Ayla stepped over to the Mog-ur and faced him, "Mog-ur, we will find these men who have caused your people harm and we will subdue them. If you would return to your people and ask them to stop anyone fleeing to the north we should have this unpleasantness done before sunset tomorrow. Do you think this will be agreeable to your leader?"

Ayla noticed that the Mog-ur was no longer looking at her as if she were some strange exotic being. She had finally convinced him through her interaction with the leaders of her people that even though she was female, she was a leader among them. It amazed her how nimble this man's mind was. She knew how hard it was for most men of the Clan to accept a different way of thought other than what had been passed down to them in the memories over many generations.

"As you have said, I am Mog-ur and I intercede with the Spirit World for the people of the Clan. It would be best if one of your leaders came back with me to discuss

what it is you need from my people." He said this knowing that being a female would not help her cause with his leader.

"I see. Well, it will have to be me, because the only man who can speak enough Clan to be understood would be Jondalar and he isn't well enough to travel yet. Do you think your leader will speak about necessities with a female?" Ayla was curious what this man would say.

"I will explain to Mongar that in your world, you are a great spiritual leader, a Mog-ur of Mog-urs. Maybe he will listen."

"Very well," Ayla replied. Looking at her daughter who had followed them, "Jonayla, you will need to stay here and care for your father. I will need to go with Mog-ur, Dula and Groog back to their cave."

"Yes mother." Jonayla was disappointed, but she knew that her mother was right. Dula couldn't stay behind on her own, plus the fact Dula's Clan might need the Medicine Woman even now. Jonayla knew that her mother would worry if her father didn't have one of them overseeing his care.

Cambarre was close by. Ayla had noticed that the two young people had remained close to each other since their return. She wondered what their relationship was now, after their adventure and escape from the Shaman's camp. She would have to ask her daughter when there was time. For now she would ask Cambarre to come with her as escort for the Clan members and as travel companion when she left them to rejoin her people. The young man had proven himself capable and besides, she wanted to get to know him better. If he and Jonayla were now such good friends, perhaps even sharing pleasures, she thought it wise to spend some time with him.

Ayla looked over at the young man, "Cambarre, would you accompany me on the trek to the Clan cave? I would like a man who can think fast on his feet and can use a weapon in his defense. Once we finish talking with the Clan leader, I would like to have a capable travel companion with me when I return to our people through the forest. We may find ourselves at risk of running into some of the renegades. Will you come?"

"Yes Zelandoni, it would be an honor to travel with you," Cambarre said, actually feeling honored to be asked. If he admitted it, he did admire the First Zelandoni and

would indeed like to travel with her. He looked over at Jonayla to see how she felt and saw that she looked happy with the idea. "When do we leave?"

"Within the hour. First, I must speak with the cave leaders to let them know what I will be doing and see that Jondalar and Jonayla are all settled. Then I'll come to collect you and our Clan friends, and we'll be ready to leave." Ayla thought for a moment. "You do use hunting signs, yes?"

"Yes Zelandoni, I know all the signs for hunting."

"Good, that means you can communicate on a basic level with the Clan people, since the hunting signals came from their language." She smiled at the young man's realization that he'd been using Clan signs all these years.

-O-

It was just past mid-day and the sun was directly overhead when Groog signaled a halt. He turned to his Mog-ur and signed, "There are people ahead, waiting in stealth."

From the hill where they stood the Mog-ur looked intently down into the glade that they would pass through, but could see no one. Ayla tapped him on the arm and signed, "They are to your left. See the largest tree with the trunk that is as big across as a man is tall? There is someone hiding behind it. There is also someone at the far side of the open area where the little stream flows. That person is completely hidden now, but I saw movement there too."

Groog looked at the female Mog-ur with growing respect. He realized that she had seen everything he had, that she was truly a hunter as accomplished as he. He'd already known that she could use weapons, but now in just a few words she had proven that she could also recognize signs that only a hunter would. "What should we do?" he signed, now looking at Ayla. A Clan hunter was asking a female what he should do. The realization that she had won Groog's full respect warmed her.

"We have to assume that whoever is hiding there means to ambush anyone traveling this way. The only people willing to do something like that would be the Shaman's men. I am surprised that there is more than one group of them out here. I was told that their camp was some way to the east, so there must be at least two groups. "Actually that might be good," Ayla mused. "Splitting up makes them weaker."

"I don't think they know we are here yet, so we have two options. We can go around them undetected or we can confront them. I feel confident that with three men such as you," and Ayla looked at each man in turn, "we could take them. I would hate to leave them here to molest someone else less prepared to deal with them. Groog, what would be your guess as to how many people are down there waiting?"

Groog looked down the hill into the glade for a long moment before answering. "It is impossible to tell for sure," he signed silently. "If there are some good hunters among them they would be well hidden, but I would guess there are no more than the fingers on one hand."

"That's my guess also," replied Ayla. "I will walk down the trail while you and Mog-ur go into the forest to the right and Cambarre to the left with weapons ready. They will most likely feel confident enough with five against one to try to capture me rather than hurt me. So when they show themselves, you can all step out with weapons raised ready to attack from the sides and from behind."

"Zelandoni, there is risk in that plan. What if they don't wait but use a spearthrower instead?" Cambarre asked, frowning with worry.

"Cambarre, we're all in this together in equal partnership with equal risk. You are all well versed in the use of weapons, but I feel that I'm best at the sling and in this case a sling is less obvious than a spearthrower at the ready. I think it should be me to take the trail."

Cambarre remained silent. How could he argue with her? He felt, of all of them, she was probably the most accomplished with each of the weapons they had with them. After all, she and Jondalar had introduced the spearthrowers to the people in the first place and everyone knew how accomplished she was with a sling. He'd never seen anyone who could use one with more skill than her.

Ayla was about to move when the Mog-ur tapped her on the shoulder. Ayla turned to look at him and he gave her the sign of luck, from one hunter to another. She knew that he was giving her the respect that one man would give another and she was warmed with gratitude, but then the Clan Mog-ur went one step farther, eliciting a gasp from Dula, the Medicine Woman.

He spoke her name quietly, "Ayla," and then he signed, "My personal name is "Brog," speaking his name out loud, he continued to sign, "I am First Clan Mog-ur for

seven caves. Six other Mog-urs address me by my name. I now share it with you as an equal. You may use my personal name from now on when addressing me. Good hunting, "Ayla."

"Brog... It is an honor to speak your name in friendship," Ayla replied, using the correct formula for such an occasion. She had never thought to actually be in a position to recite the formula of equal friendship with a Clan man, but was greatly touched by this sign of respect. Ayla smiled in her mind, 'Wonders never cease...'

In the Clan way, she would say no more, but nodded her gratitude and stepped out of the woods and began to walk down the trail, while her companions melted into the forest on either side.

-O-

Madroman wasn't happy to have been sent away from the main group. Brukeval was becoming more and more dictatorial, to the point that Madroman wondered who was in charge. At first he had enjoyed the power he'd had over these people in the north. It had been fun to make them fear him. Brukeval had encouraged him and supported him.

Everything had gone well until that red-haired leader of the Chimu began to doubt his powers. That had irritated him. Maybe it had made him reckless because he'd confronted her, but he hadn't been able to frighten her. Eventually he had to leave their community and live rough with his few followers.

That's when he should have cut his losses and traveled east. It would have been easy then. It was still early summer and he could have crossed the big glacier and found a more receptive people where he could have started over. But no, Brukeval wouldn't hear of it. He'd made threats and he knew that Brukeval would act on his threats if he felt himself crossed.

So here he was, squatting beside a stream in the middle of nowhere waiting for no one in particular and wishing he had something to eat. He'd been instructed to cause fear and confusion by ambushing a few people walking alone close to the Chimu community. Brukeval felt that it would cause them to split their forces and give him an advantage in dealing with the searchers.

Madroman, on the other hand, thought it only a matter of time before they were caught and punished. He didn't like that thought, not one bit. Maybe if he just

slipped away in the night and headed east by himself? Even though another year had gone by since he'd first thought of escaping, it was again around the right time of year to tackle that glacier...

There was movement from higher up the hill. It was a woman - on her own - walking down the path. He could not see a spearthrower, a knife or any other weapon. The woman looked unsuspecting and vulnerable.

Madroman almost yelped out loud when he recognized the woman. It was Ayla! The First Zelandoni! What was 'she' doing here? He felt fear and uncertainty. Maybe he should get away while he could. She was trouble and always had been, from the first moment he'd met her he'd felt afraid of her. Of course much of his fear was caused by her strange ways and her even stranger companions. He was glad when he'd heard that her wolf companion was dead. That dirty beast had always given him an evil eye.

He drew some strength from the fact that his original fear of the woman had been a reasonable fear of her animals and not the woman herself. She was just a woman, if you took away all her friends and strange companions. It might be gratifying to bring her down and humiliate her, maybe even making her his slave to clean up after him and maybe even force her to share his furs on cold winter nights... He was thinking ahead and smiling.

Yes, he had four strong followers who would do as he commanded, so why not. He stood and whistled loudly to alert the others and was gratified to see two of his men jump up with their weapons at the ready.

As he watched, his smile of satisfaction changed to shock as the object of his recent fantasy turned and without warning brought down both men that had jumped up to ambush her. To Madroman, in his shock at her attack on his men, it had appeared to be magic. In reality, it was only her skill with the double shot technique she had perfected with her sling over the years.

Out of necessity Ayla had developed the dried mud projectile that she had used to bring down the two men. Even though they could kill, if aimed just right they would only temporarily disable when hitting hard bone and disintegrating on contact.

Before the other two men could respond, Cambarre grabbed Madroman from behind causing him scream in fright. He began to babble in fear. Begging whoever

was holding him so roughly, not to hurt him, that he would do whatever they wanted but to please not hurt him.

The other two men who had been part of the ambush saw that there were men behind them in the shadowy forest with spears. They looked with disgust at their Shaman as he begged for mercy like a little child begging not to be spanked. After a moment they threw down their weapons and stepped out onto the trail.

-O-

Reluctantly, Cambarre agreed to his Zelandoni's request that he escort the four Chimu men back to their people. Groog would accompany him and the captive's hands would be tied to insure their cooperation. Once he had delivered the Chimu to First Place, he would gather a couple of volunteers who were accomplished with a spearthrower and with Groog as their guide, bring them back to the Clan cave where Ayla would wait for them.

When Cambarre asked about Madroman, Ayla had responded that she felt he would be held more securely by the Clan than by the Chimu. There might be someone at First Place who would help him escape and she was certain that no one from the Clan could be suspected of sympathy for the false shaman.

She gave Cambarre last minute instructions just before he was to leave, "You should be able to make it back to First Place before dark and then back to me at the Clan cave by late afternoon tomorrow. Also, please have someone send several runners to our people tracking Brukeval's group, to inform them that we now hold Madroman and four of his band.

"Come mounted this time and please bring Summer Child with you. The only reason we walked this time was to maintain the Mog-ur's dignity. I don't want to head into the forest to the south on foot if we don't have to."

Cambarre nodded and began to herd his captives, with Groog's help, back toward the west and First Place. Calling as he left, "Be safe, I'll be sure to let Jondalar and Jonayla know that all is well."

Ayla turned toward the east and grasping the rope end that was attached to a loop around Madroman's neck, she signaled that it was time to leave.

-O-

As they traveled northeast toward the Clan, Ayla and Brog discussed what should be done next. Ayla wanted the Clan men to watch along Long Valley, a treeless valley that stretched for as far as the eye could see from sunrise to sunset. She wanted them to stop and hold anyone fleeing their way. Brog responded to her with some doubt. He felt, with some reason, that the leader would not accept instructions from a female, even a female leader of the Others.

Brog suggested that he should be the one to bring up the plan, but he also advised that Mongar had been offended by Ayla's daughter when she and her man had been brought in earlier. He'd felt that she was too manly and spoke to him with too much force. "Mog-ur" Brog signed, "Mongar did not allow any hunters to assist in bringing Jonayla and Cambarre back to First Place. Groog took it upon himself to bring them and to bring our Medicine Woman and myself. Groog and I could do what we wished and Mongar said he would not interfere.

The Mog-ur had to admit that when he brought back two more of the Others to his cave, Mongar would likely become more intransigent in his views. "We will just have to see what he says. I think when you ask him you should try to impress upon him that you are a leader among your people. If he will not help, then I will add my voice to yours and we will see." Brog became quiet as they reached the open valley that traditionally marked the boundary between the Others and the Clan.

They needed to stop for a rest. Madroman was limping and whining that he was tired and thirsty. Ayla let him sit and gave him her travel cup full of water. As she stood in front of him waiting for him to finish, Madroman asked in a plaintive voice, "Zelandoni, why are you taking me to the flatheads. They'll kill me. Is that your intention? To let them do your dirty work? If you'll let me go, I'll cross the glacier, I won't even talk to Brukeval. I'll just leave, I promise."

Ayla looked down at the man squatting before her. "Madroman, if I let you go you would cause other people trouble."

Madroman shook his head, "No, I've learned my lesson. I have wanted to leave here for more than a year. It was Brukeval, he wouldn't let me. I promise that I'll cause no one any more trouble. Just let me go. Please!"

"I'm sorry, but that isn't up to me. You have caused the death of people, both of the Clan and the Chimu, so it will be up to their leaders what happens to you. Now please get to your feet, we must go."

"They'll kill me, those flatheads! You're as good as killing me yourself by taking me there," Madroman whined petulantly.

Ayla pulled him to a standing position using a tug on his neck rope. "Madroman, these people you keep calling "flatheads" are more honorable than you have ever been. You can stop worrying about their revenge on you. They don't think that way. They don't normally kill people who have done bad things. They just drive them out to fend for themselves.

"If they now want to kill anyone, it is because they learned that from you and your followers. If I were you, I'd worry more about what our cave leaders will do with you. If it makes you feel any better, I will not let anyone harm you. That is, until the Zelandonii and Chimu leaders decide what to do with you and Brukeval."

When Madroman continued arguing, Ayla said sharply, "Silence! We have discussed this enough. Just keep your mouth shut and try not to show the fear you feel. It won't help you to show your true feelings to the people you're about to meet. And believe me when I tell you that they will be able to tell what you feel just by your facial expressions and body language."

-O-

The first sign of habitation wasn't smoke or movement or even the noise one would expect from a community of people, but of one man, spear in hand, stepping out onto the trail some lengths ahead of them.

Brog raised a hand in greeting and the man nodded in recognition, gesturing that they continue on. Ayla looked down as she passed the man as a well behaved woman of the Clan would. What to do now? She needed the Clan hunters to help close off the northern escape route but could expect a closed mind from their leader, even with the support of their Mog-ur.

As they followed a bend in the trail and the Clan cave came into view, Ayla stopped in thought. It was several moments before Brog realized that he was walking ahead of the female. He also stopped and looked back at her questioningly. "Why have you stopped?" he signed. "We are here."

"Yes, but I have been thinking about what you said to me about the Clan leader. Once I would have come meekly to him and asked for his help as a female clan

woman, but from what you have said, he might not agree to help even if you yourself asked.

"I've learned the hard way that sometimes the best way to convince people is not to be meek, but to show certain strength. I have strength and I believe that the Great Earth Mother, whom you call Ursus, the Spirit of the Cave Bear, has given me power and understanding of that power.

"Brog, I ask you to take Dula and walk ahead of me to your cave. I will follow you shortly. I think I can convince your cave leader that he should listen to my request. This is important. We all want this trouble to be over with and if we work together it will accomplish two things. It will create peace and understanding between our peoples and it will stop the violence that this person and his companion have caused." Ayla nodded at a trembling Madroman.

"Please tell your leader that I will be arriving very soon and I will be bringing the leader of those who attacked the Clan as my prisoner." Quickly Brog, what is Mongar's Totem sign?"

"It is the Mighty Bison." The Mog-ur, although he'd only known this female of the Others for a short time, believed that she would do as she said and that she would somehow convince Mongar to help. It worried Brog on some level that this female of the Others seemed to be so powerful. Just what he'd seen of her in this short time and what his apprentice Groog had told him, made him think that her power rivaled his own, or maybe even eclipsed it.

Did these Others have more like this one, he wondered. If there were more like her, it was a sign that Ursus favored these Others, maybe even to the point that he favored them over the Clan. If given the chance he would try to discover more about this one called Ayla and try to find out if there were more like her among the Others.

As Brog approached his people's cave, women sitting at the open space in front stopped their work to acknowledge their Mog-ur with respectful nods. They had been performing the daily tasks of working hides, grinding grains and weaving or carving utensils, but now set them aside as Dula sat down with them to tell them about her adventures. She would refrain from speaking about some of what happened on the trip, not sure how to even explain some of the things she had seen and heard.

Mog-ur continued into the cave and to the leader's hearth. "Greetings Mongar," Brog signed.

Mongar, looked at his Mog-ur and grunted, "So you're back. Did your journey go well? Were you able to return that loud young female of the Others and her silent man to their people?"

"Yes Mongar. I also met their Mog-ur who is directing all the Others in their search for the wild men who have killed and caused violence."

"This female Mog-ur that the loud female talked about? I doubt that she leads the men, you must have been mistaken or deceived."

"Mongar, I am not an inexperienced child to be easily led. I am The Mog-ur, to whom the other Mog-ur turn. I lead them in the Spirit World ceremonies. Do you really think I cannot understand what is real and what is not?" Brog fixed the cave leader with a stony stare.

"Well," Mongar said stiffly. "It is done and we will not have to see any of them again if they are successful in their hunt for the wild men."

"You will be seeing one of them very soon I think. Their Mog-ur has captured the false Shaman of the wild men and brings him here as we speak. You will have the opportunity to meet the female Mog-ur and decide what you think for yourself."

"No! I will not meet some female of the Others pretending to be a Mog-ur. No! That will not happen!" Mongar signed with agitation.

Just then gasps were heard from the women at the mouth of the cave. Suddenly there was silent scurrying past the leader's hearth as the women ran to the back of the cave to hide.

The hair on the back of Mongar's neck stood on end and he experienced an unreasonable fear, one that he couldn't put a name to. Then he heard a voice call his name. "Mongar, Mighty Bison!" It was a female voice.

A female voice calling his name and his totem. That was not done. Only hunters could call him by name and only Mog-urs used his totem name. Mongar turned and moved past Brog, grabbing his heavy hunting spear. He would teach this woman who claimed to be Mog-ur how to address a man and a leader.

Mongar stopped dead in his tracks as he came out of the cave into the daylight. He felt the blood drain from his face and goose bumps rise. What was this! What was he seeing?

Standing a few lengths away from the opening was an apparition standing beside a kneeling man of the Others with a rope around his neck.

Was this the female Mog-ur? It was definitely a Mog-ur! There before him stood a woman of the Others, but one like none he had ever seen before. Her face shone white as snow and she had the blood red markings of a Mog-ur when they went searching the Spirit World. Mongar had been involved in searches a few times, especially when they were asking the Spirits help when looking for a new cave.

He'd never seen anything like this before. It was shocking. To see a female whose face was that of a Mog-ur was uncanny and fearsome. She began to sign in the formalized movements of the ancient unspoken language used to communicate with spirits and with other clans.

"I am Ayla, protected by the Cave Lion and I honor Mongar who has always honored the Spirits, and whose totem is the Mighty Bison. A man who has always kept the traditions of the Clan. A man who is a strong leader, a wise leader, a fair leader, a hunter and provider. A man who is worthy of the Mighty Bison totem. I greet you."

'No man in his clan had a Cave Lion totem, not many men in all the clans did,' Mongar thought to himself. 'A Cave Lion totem... a woman? Unheard-of...'

As if reading his mind the strange apparition before him pulled her left legging down to show four vivid stripes carved into her thigh. The totem sign of The Cave Lion. On the left side instead of the traditional right side, on an arm or shoulder, which would have been the correct side and place for a female.

"My totem was not given to me by the Clan," she signed. "I received these marks from the Cave Lion himself when I was only a small child. Now I look into the Spirit World and lead my people in their worship of the Great Earth Mother who you call Ursus."

"Hear me Mongar, leader and protector of your people. Ursus speaks to you. You can hear his wishes inside your own thoughts. You don't need my signs to do what is right for your people. Help the Others by capturing and holding any of the wild men passing through Long Valley. That is all that is asked of you."

Brog, now standing behind his leader, was jarred by a feeling of uneasiness, the same feeling he had experienced when he first had contact with this female Mog-ur. If he'd had a concept for it, he would have called what he was feeling a sense of foreboding, yet it was tinged with a strange unnerving hope.

Brog stepped up beside Mongar and signed, "She is not Clan," he reminded him, "but there is no doubt her protection is strong or she wouldn't be alive. She would have been killed by that cave lion." The thought crystallized in his mind. The cave lion! It marked her, but it did not kill her... Then another thought burst through and a chill of recognition crept up his spine. All doubt was swept from Brog's mind. He was sure.

"This female could help us. She can stop the wild men. She has the power to do this. She asks only that we stop fugitives of their hunt from fleeing past us to cause trouble another day. Look, she has already brought us the false Shaman leader of the wild men. Let us do as she asks Mongar." The Mog-ur decided that he'd said all he could. If Mongar still held out because Ayla was female, then so be it.

Mongar stood very still, full of indecision. It was hard to think of this person standing a few lengths away as female. Of course he knew instinctively that she was, she had the curves and the stance of a female, but her words were spoken as if a hunter spoke them. He noticed then, that she even had a hunter's mark at her throat. How could that be?

How could that be? Females didn't hunt. In fact if a female even touched a man's weapon, she could be given the death curse. At the very least she would be beaten and the weapon would be destroyed as useless. Everyone knew that a weapon touched by a female could no longer be used accurately. It would be confused and would no longer help the hunter to kill his quarry.

Almost against his will he signed to the female, "Why do you wear a hunter's mark at your throat?"

Ayla wasn't sure now if she would be able to get through to the leader. He hadn't responded to her face paint as much as she'd hoped. Yes, he'd been shocked, but he

hadn't responded to her request. And now he was asking about something as unimportant as a hunter's mark. Then it suddenly occurred to her that he was testing her. He'd never seen a female with a hunter's mark before and wanted her to prove she was a hunter.

Maybe this would be the key to the big tough looking leader. If she could prove to him that she was truly a skilled hunter, then maybe he would listen to her. Releasing Madroman's neck rope, she turned around and walked to the farthest range of her sling's ability, then turned and signed to the leader to hold his spear high.

Mongar looked at his Mog-ur who nodded encouragement. He turned back to see the female had pulled a sling from her pouch and had placed a stone in it. She was much too far away to hit something as narrow as a spear shaft. What was this female thinking?

He held his spear up. This would end now and he would be able to turn away when she missed and speak to her no more. Even though it would be no shame missing an impossible shot, she had been the one to suggest it. He would give her no other chance to engage him.

His musings were abruptly interrupted as the spear was knocked from his hand. Mongar stood where he was, totally surprised, looking at his empty hand. Then he looked outward to see the female signing for him to pick the spear up and hold it again.

"No," he signed, "Come to me, we will talk." He was convinced that this person was who she said she was. He still did not know how to deal with a female Mog-ur, but he knew that he was not going to stand around and be made to look foolish by one. Better to deal with her at his hearth. He would have Mog-ur with them also. Mongar turned, signaling Brog to bring the Other's Mog-ur to him, then he walked to his place within the cave.

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Mongar stood with angry eyes as Ayla and Brog stepped into the ring of stones that denoted his hearth area. His mate crouched by the small fire, holding their baby in a sling wrap as she dropped heating stones into a willow bark water container. Ayla could smell mint, alfalfa, and nettle leaves from the steam that rose into the air.

"Brog," Mongar spoke the name gruffly to get the Mog-ur's attention. He signed, ignoring Ayla, "What do you expect us to do for these Others who have caused us nothing but suffering? You bring this... this female who paints herself as a Mog-ur would and slings stones at sticks that shouldn't hit their mark... It is not seemly to see a female using weapons; it offends the people, the women of the Clan and is unsettling. So I ask you, what do you expect of me 'Brog'?"

The Mog-ur looked uncomfortable, but looked squarely into his leader's eyes. "This woman leads the Others' in their fight against the wild men. We all want the wild men gone. She has captured the leader of these wild men as a show of good faith and has brought him to you. What more must she do to prove her power to you?

"I say we should help the Others. All they want from us is to capture any fugitives that may come our way. To hold them and turn them over to their hunters for punishment when all is done."

Ayla could see the leaders face as he tried to understand how to deal with a situation outside the memories of his ancient people. There was nothing to compare it to, no experience to draw from and it made him exceedingly uncomfortable to be placed in a position to make decisions with no clear-cut ancestral memories to draw upon.

Ayla realized that this might be the first time the Clan leader had been placed in a position to make a decision that he couldn't balance against one made by a predecessor. She wanted to reassure him, but felt that if she said anything now, he would close his mind to any further discussion. She would just have to rely on Brog to do the communicating and remain silent unless spoken to.

Mongar stood still for a moment, and then he looked at his mate who was unobtrusively signaling that the tea was ready. He nodded to her and she filled cups with tea and handed them around. When she came shyly over to Ayla, she nodded in recognition of one woman to another and Ayla automatically returned the sign, making the leader's mate stop for a moment in surprise, then scurry to the back of the hearth area again.

Mongar had seen the subtle play between the two females. He had to admit that even though this woman of the Others looked strange to the eye, she was fully Clan in her actions. He tensed with anxiety that she knew Clan ways, but still expressed a bold male presence that was so unsettling that deep down inside he felt a foreboding that could almost be defined as fear.

He had a momentary urge to take his heavy hunting spear and thrust it through her heart. Doing so would stop this female Mog-ur in her tracks. But he knew if he did, there would be open warfare between his people and hers. Killing her would show recognition that he believed she was who she said she was. He didn't want that.

Finally Mongar came to a reluctant decision. "We will help the Others as you suggest Mog-ur. Now leave me." Mongar began to turn away, then stopped. "When will this female be leaving here? And what are we supposed to do with the wild man she has captured and brought with her? You said that we should hold him captive?"

"Yes Mongar, he was the wild men's leader. You will find that he is not very brave and that he should be easy to hold with little effort. The Others will come and collect him and any of the other wild men that come into our valley that we hold for them. They will punish them more severely than we would, or so I am told."

"How could their punishment be more severe than cursing them with death? The Death Curse is the ultimate punishment," Mongar said, confused.

"I am told by Ayla, that her people know ways that are harsher than ours, even harsher than the Death Curse. I know not what they mean but will see what they do when the time comes and explain it to you. As our leader you should know about these things."

"And what about her?" Mongar nodded toward the still silent Ayla.

"The Other's Mog-ur will leave tomorrow when some of her hunters come to her, led by Groog."

Mongar frowned. "It is not good that the Others come to our cave like this. They will be able see where we are and what strength we have. What if they decide to become wild men too?"

"I don't think we have much choice but to trust these people who have come from the south. We want the wild men caught and these people have come to do that. Until they came we had to fight almost daily. If we must, we can always move farther east, but I don't think they will bother us once the wild men are caught," Brog said confidently. He only wished he felt as confident as he tried to sound.

Mongar nodded, looked sideways at Ayla again and then turned away making the dismissal sign and walked to the back area of his hearth area to his mate.

Brog signed that Ayla should follow him. They put their containers of tea down and followed Brog to his hearth area, where Ayla took the opportunity to wash the white and red ocher clay from her face, not wanting to scare the children or adults more than she already had.

Being the Mog-ur, his hearth was where visitors would stay and therefore it was a bit larger than the others. Ayla looked surreptitiously down the row of hearths, noting that there were four more on either side of a central pathway. She couldn't see much of the interior of the cave and had to make her count of hearths by counting fires.

The sights, sounds and aromas brought back childhood memories. The Clan had rescued her from certain death and she had formed lasting attachments. She had now been among her own kind for almost twice as long as she had been with the Clan. No matter how long she might have been away from the Clan, she would always be grateful to them.

Ayla thought even now, all these years later, that she was still attracted to Clan people. They were more straightforward than her people. They concentrated on living and honoring their ancestors and Ursus and they didn't insert themselves into other people's business.

It was strange how attractive these people were to her. Even though she recognized the physical differences between her people and theirs and she was attracted to her own kind, she still thought that Clan men had a rugged manly appearance that her kind lacked. She loved Jondalar and thought him handsome and he could always make her want him just by giving her a certain look, but he wasn't a Clan man.

No one, no man could make her as complete as Jondalar did, but even so, being with Clan felt like coming home. Clan women felt like sisters, there was a special sense of family that she didn't quite experience with her own kind. The Zelandonii were more competitive and there were social conventions that the Clan would never even dream of.

That night, the two Mog-urs talked about their lives and experiences. Compared their religious ceremonies and beliefs. Ayla, having experienced the Clan ways tried to show Brog the similarities between their two people. She explained what it took to become a Zelandoni and that the First Zelandoni was the voice, instrument, and surrogate of the Great Earth Mother, or as he knew it, Ursus, the Sacred Cave Bear of the Clan.

Brog was mated to Shura and they had a boy and a girl, Bran and Ulla. Both children were still of the hearth, but Bran was only a season away from manhood and remained silent with big brown eyes that followed his father's every move. Ulla was the image of her mother and copied her every move. Ayla smiled to herself as she watched the absorbed child - who couldn't be more than six summers - help in the preparation of dinner.

They were preparing reindeer steaks and to everyone's surprise and delight Ayla contributed some sea salt to the meal. Salt to the Clan in this area was a luxury and Shura was very grateful.

It was late afternoon when they ate, and the food was delicious. Ayla had not realized how hungry she had become. With all the walking and then meeting the Clan people, she hadn't eaten since early morning.

Once Madroman had been settled at the back of the cave where the root vegetables were stored, Ayla was able to relax by the Mog-ur's fire. By now she had become a curiosity to the Clan children. Ulla had begun to treat her as a wise old aunt and a few of the other children had adopted her as a person of interest. She looked strange and exotic but she acted like a Clan female and could talk like a normal Clan woman.

At first their mothers would call them back, but the children would sneak back to the Mog-ur's hearth to listen to Ayla's stories. She couldn't resist the small ones. Children had always been an important part of her life. Now after many years of experience around children and keeping them interested and entertained, she had become an accomplished story teller.

She told her favorite story. The story of Durc, but now she added details that had never been told before. She was Durc's mother and Durc was her son. She put herself in the story because she felt it was her story. After all, she had lost her son, much as that other mother had lost hers. Only she was the one who left the clan and her son Durc became a great hunter, well respected for his abilities.

Even the Mog-ur was fascinated by her version of the story and asked her why she had changed the legend.

"Because I had a child whose name was Durc, a name given to him by Creb. I too lost my son, the difference was that he didn't leave his people, as in the legend. I have been told by one who met him late last summer that he lives and is a hunt leader in his clan. They are Clan who live twelve moon cycles travel from here, on the other side of the world."

"Oh. You had a child when you were with the Clan to the east?" Brog asked with interest.

"Yes I did," Ayla replied. "I was unmated, but had a son when I was eleven summers old. He was half Clan and half Others. But unlike many of mixed essences, he was strong and vibrant."

Brog looked thoughtful, then asked, "It sounds as though you miss him. Why then did you leave him?"

It was an unusual question and an obtrusive one that would normally not have been asked, but he couldn't hold it back, he was eager to know about this Durc, the child of this strange and mystifying female.

"I was turned out of the Clan by what I now realize was a jealous and vindictive new leader. He was the son of Brun and because he was the son, in time he became the leader of our cave. He'd always disliked me and when he was made leader, almost the first thing he did was to turn me out." Ayla refrained from speaking about being cursed with death.

The custom the Clan had of avoiding direct queries was so long-standing, it had become a law in ancient times. She would have told about the death curse if the Mog-ur had directly asked, she would not refuse to answer. It was impossible for people of the Clan to lie or for that matter for her to lie to them. Their form of communication, dependent on subtle nuance and on barely perceptible changes in expressions, gestures, and postures, made any attempt immediately detectable.

"I was only a girl really and didn't know if I would survive on my own so I left my son with my sister. Uba wasn't really my sister but she was Iza's daughter and we grew up together and we loved each other like sisters." Ayla's eyes misted for a moment

as she thought about Uba and wondered what sort of Medicine Woman she had turned out to be. She hoped that she was the First among her peers as her mother had been.

"There is not a day that goes by that I do not think of my son Durc. Even though he was only a young child when I left him, he is as important to me as the two children given to me by Jondalar."

Brog thought that the woman's statement about her mate giving her children was a bit strange, but he understood a mother's grieving, even if not exactly what she had meant. What now interested him even more than the legend child was the fact that this female Mog-ur used counting words so easily as if she understood everything about them. Could this be true? If it was, it proved to him without a doubt that she was truly the Mog-ur to her people. He decided to find out what she knew.

Brog casually asked, "You have mentioned counting words several times. What do you know about them?" He said no more, letting a silence prevail to encourage her to fill the void.

"Yes, counting words. The first person to show me how they worked was Creb," Ayla said.

Brog was rocked by this information. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. Could this be true? Would the Mog-ur of all Mog-urs show a child of the Others something as sacred and secret as the counting words. Words that governed the seasons and the world they lived in?

He tried to cover his shock, by asking as casually as he could, "Why would Creb teach a young girl counting words?"

"Oh, I already understood what they were and I was using them to myself when one day he discovered that I understood how they worked. He explained how to count beyond the few counting names I'd devised and to understand the concept. He also told me to keep this knowledge to myself.

"To the ones you call the Others, counting words are shared by all. Even small children use counting words. In fact, for the Others, it would be impossible to trade and plan hunts without them. My people are very numerous in the south and we combine caves to hunt, sometimes we have as many as fifty people involved in a hunt and that takes careful planning when you have that many people involved."

Brog wasn't sure if he understood how many fifty was. He would have to think about that later when he was by himself and had the time to concentrate on the problem.

Brog felt tired. He was certainly tired of feeling confused and that is what this female Mog-ur caused in him, confusion. He needed to lie down. Maybe after a night of sleep he would understand more and feel more confident.

"I think we should sleep now," he said. "It is getting late and we certainly had a busy day today. The children have gone to their sleep, so now I think we should share in their wisdom and do the same." Brog bid Ayla good sleep and climbed into the sleeping furs that Shura had prepared for them on the far side of the banked fire.

Ayla fell asleep to the comforting sounds of Clan life, the small sounds of people settling in for the night, a child's plaintive cry, the rustle of sleeping furs as others found their places for the night. A soft glow was still present from the newly banked fires. The cave was at peace.

Her last thought was of Madroman and what might eventually have to be done to him.

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Ayla woke before dawn, roused by the small noises that Shura made as she left her furs to begin the day. Ayla climbed out of her sleeping furs and noticed that the banked fire had gone out during the night. Shura noticed it too, she shrugged her shoulders and was about to go to the next hearth to obtain a live coal, when Ayla had made an offer to help.

Shura began signing that she should be the one to go to the next hearth because it might startle them if she, a stranger, went unannounced. But Ayla cut her explanation short and indicated that she herself would make a new fire.

Shura looked at the two stones that the other woman held in her hand. They looked like plain stones, one was flint. Her curiosity was piqued when she saw the foreign woman kneel before the cold hearth and pile a few twigs over some fire starting material that she took from a belt pouch. Shura was pleased to see this Mog-ur using the same fire starting material that she herself did.

Shura stepped back in momentary fear when a large, long-lasting spark jumped from the woman's hands into the pile of willow fuzz and ignited with a flare and when she leaned forward and blew on it, a flame bloomed into life.

She had never seen magic like that before and looked on wide-eyed as this female Mog-ur of the Others piled larger sticks on top of the twigs. A fire had been started with a flick of the wrist. Surely, it was a sign of this woman's power. She'd heard from Brog that she was considered a Mog-ur among her own people but she hadn't quite understood. Females were not Mog-urs and Mog-urs spoke to the Spirits and everyone knew that women were never to even look at a Spirit Ceremony, much less represent the people to the Spirits. Shura was confused and rapidly becoming fearful.

Ayla had noticed that the water skin was almost empty and was preparing to take it outside to be refilled when she saw that Shura had stepped away from her and was hugging herself with a look of fear in her eyes. She suddenly realized that her use of the firestone had frightened Shura. The stones were in such common use among the Zelandonii now that sometimes she forgot that there were people who didn't know about them.

Even though she'd shown Dula and Brog the use of the firestone, they wouldn't have had time to tell everyone yet. Ayla held out the two stones and indicated that Shura should take them into her own hands.

At first Shura shrank away from Ayla's outstretched hands. Then, when it became obvious that the other woman would stand there until she took the stones, she slowly reached and grasped them in her own hands. Shura looked closely at the stones, then she looked questioningly at Ayla.

"They are only stones. But when you strike the flint against the firestone they make a spark. If you aim the spark at something that is easily set alight, then you can start a fire from the spark. It is a gift from the Great Earth Mother who you know as Ursus. I found out by accident that these stones make a spark when struck together. It isn't magic, I found the first firestone by a stream and since then I've found many more just lying on the earth waiting to be picked up.

"I gave a firestone to Dula and to your mate, Brog, and I showed them how to make the spark. You'll see, in time everyone will use them, just like my people do. It's not magic Shura, it's just a gift from the earth, something that nature made and that people can use." With that, Ayla emptied the water from the skin into a large birch

container made to hold water for heating, then slung the empty water skin over her shoulder and walked down the central pathway, politely keeping her eyes on the ground before her.

She hadn't looked at anyone as she moved through the cave toward the opening, yet she could hear the early sounds of the Clan women beginning their morning tasks. Even though she wouldn't want to live this simply after having lived with the Zelandonii for so many years, it did bring back pleasant memories of belonging and the loved ones who had loved her.

As Ayla stepped out of the mouth of the cave she stopped for a moment to breathe in the fresh air. The dawn was breaking on the horizon and light was beginning to creep toward Long Valley. This was a lovely time of year. In this climate the summers were never more than four full moons and with little more than a full moon phase to go before the chilly weather began, this was the nicest part of the summer.

Ayla took a deep breath and then turned toward the stream and the place where the Clan drew their water.

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Shura stood and watched the strange woman of the Others as she walked away from her. She had noticed that the woman kept her gaze down when walking by other hearths. The younger one who had been brought in days ago had no such politeness about her. She and her mate had stared at everything and at everyone as if they were children who knew no better. But this woman knew Clan ways as if she were one of them.

She looked down at the stones she still held in her hands and felt an excitement that she was unfamiliar with. She had felt this way when she had first mated with Brog and again after each of her children had been born. These simple looking stones were status and important status at that. The only other people in her cave that had such a thing were the Mog-ur and the Medicine Woman. Not even the leader had one of these. She looked down wonderingly at the two small stones in her hand.

Shura suddenly thought, what if the woman of the Others hadn't given the stones to her? What if she would want them back before she leaves? She sighed. If that were the case, then she would give them back. At least her mate had been given a stone. And who knew, maybe she would be able to keep these. The thought of having her own firestone was intoxicating.

By the time the sun topped the horizon from far away, all the people of the Clan were up and at their daily chores. Mongar had assembled his hunters, and while Ayla and Brog stood by at the back of the group, he gave them their instructions.

"This female leader from the Others," he gestured toward Ayla, "has brought a request from her people to stop any of the wild men of the Others that try to elude their search parties. If they try to escape by crossing our valley, we are to capture them and bring them back here, uninjured if possible, to be held with their leader. The hunters of the Others are our friends in this, none are to be harmed and they will not harm us."

The assembled men nodded and there was no dissension. Within moments the men broke away to take up their weapons and filed out of the cave. They had been instructed to go in pairs and to stay within shouting distance of other searchers.

Ayla wished that she didn't have to wait for Cambarre and the men that would come with him, but it would be foolish to traverse the forest by herself. She decided to check on Madroman while she was waiting. Once Cambarre arrived she would want to start south immediately.

Ayla walked down the central pathway to the back of the cave. Madroman was sitting on the ground with his hands tied together, with another tied rope around his neck, fastened to a stake driven deep into the earth. There was a hunter at the last hearth closest to Madroman who was set to watch him. The man didn't move or try to stop Ayla as she approached the disgraced Shaman.

"Zelandoni!" Madroman whined when he saw who had come. "Please don't leave me here. They'll kill me when you've gone, I know they will!"

"Why do you think that?" Ayla said, truly surprised. Then a thought occurred to her. "Is it because that is what you would have had done to a man of the Clan if he were in your power? Maybe that is exactly what you have done in the past."

Madroman groaned in fear. "Please Zelandoni. I'm one of your people and you're the First Zelandoni. You are responsible for all of your people! Don't leave me here to be murdered by these animals!"

"You should be grateful that I'm leaving you here, instead of with the Chimu. They would most certainly give you rough justice. The people of the Clan will not hurt you so long as you don't try to escape. They will hold you here until someone from our people comes to collect you. These people who you call "animals" would never consider killing out of revenge. They have unwritten laws that, at worst, would drive you away, but never kill you outright.

"Madroman, we will return for you and bring you to the Chimu for their judgment. That is all I can do for you, even as the First Zelandoni. I have to answer to the people and what they determine to be just."

Ayla walked away, still hearing Madroman's pleas for mercy mingled with demands for his rights as a member of the Zelandonii. But even though she heard his voice, she shut her mind to his words. This was something that would be faced later, after the others were captured. Some of them would have to answer to members of the Nineteenth Cave for the damage and hurt they had caused and some would have to answer for the lives they had taken.

Chapter 26: Brukeval's Truth

It was mid-day before Cambarre, along with five others, came into view. Ayla immediately recognized Summer Child and felt her spirits rise. She hadn't realized how much she missed the offspring of her beloved Whinney. Then she realized who was riding beside Cambarre. It was Jonayla! She was supposed to be at the Chimu cave caring for her father.

Ayla ran from the cave toward the valley below. The group saw her and urged their horses into a gallop. The Clan watched the scene from above with trepidation as the horses raced toward the female Mog-ur of the Others. She showed no fear as the horses were brought to an abrupt halt beside her. The loud young female of the Others, who had been there before, jumped from the back of one of the horses and the two women embraced.

Mongar looked on in amazement. He'd seen these Others riding horses a few times before, but always from a great distance. The Chimu didn't have horses. Until recently no one had ever seen people riding horses. It was unnatural in Mongar's opinion that people would do such a thing. He had to admit that it was a powerful sight though. A horse was a large animal and anyone riding one looked large too.

He could see that riding a horse would allow a person to travel faster, but deep down inside he also knew that it was unnatural and that the Spirits would be angry. He would be sure to discourage anyone from the Clan who might want to try such a thing, although it was hard to believe that any man of the Clan would want to.

-O-

"Daughter, what are you doing here? You are supposed to be watching over your father," Ayla said, as the two women came together in an enthusiastic hug then stood back looking at each other.

"Father wanted me to come. The Doniers are there in the main camp and he is doing much better. He's sitting up and I think if the southern Zelandoni wasn't there to stop him, he would be here with us now. But you're right, he's not well enough to ride yet; of course try and tell him that." Jonayla made the face she always did when she talked about her parents and the antics they always got up to.

Ayla laughed and hugged Jonayla again and then she hugged Cambarre and smiled at him. "Thank you for bringing my willful daughter to me Cambarre. I forgot for a moment that I needed her to look after me!" They smiled at each other as the group dismounted.

Cambarre had news of the searchers. Apparently the few remaining followers of the false Shaman were hiding out in the forest directly south of their current position.

"I have the Clan's promise to stop anyone that tries to flee north through Long Valley," Ayla assured them. "Once we have watered the horses I suggest that we head south immediately. I want to conclude this as soon as possible so we can get back to normal life. Do you agree?" She looked at Cambarre, who flushed. He had never been asked his opinion by a leader before and just nodded his agreement.

-O-

Dula watched from the mouth of the cave as the six Zelandonii rode south. She felt a mixture of relief and guilt as they disappeared into the forest, appearing as little dots on the southern edge of the valley before being obscured by trees. She looked down at the two rocks in her hands with a frown of worry. The Other's female Mog-ur had never asked for the firestone back and she still possessed it.

She looked at the distant forest wall, now empty of people and sighed. She would now have to go to Mog-ur and tell him what she had done. Maybe the stone had been given to her as a gift. The woman Mog-ur of the Others had not said to give it back. Dula decided to try it before talking to Mog-ur, to see if she too could make a fire starting spark.

-O-

They were six now: Ayla, Jonayla, Cambarre, Latinar and Tarmidar. The last two Ayla had known since her very first Summer Meeting with the Zelandonii when they had trailed behind Whinney holding up the travois as they crossed the streams and rivers. The sixth was Matagan, who had insisted on coming even though he had been wounded in the arm when he and Jondalar had been attacked by the Shaman's followers.

As the group reached the edge of the thick forest Ayla took charge. It wasn't because she was senior to everyone else in the group. She took the lead because it was her nature to do so. Even if there had been older men in their group, Ayla would

have still instructed them. Her woodcraft skills were superior to most Zelandonii who had been brought up in a group dependent culture. Even though they understood the natural world around them, none of them had to live entirely on their own for years as Ayla had.

"We should spread out into a line but keep each other in sight," she said. "I don't think we will run across anyone, it's a big forest and we're not covering much of it, but you never know. We need to stay close enough to each other so if one of us does run into something the others can come to the aid of whoever needs it."

The plan had been to travel south in a search pattern until they met up with their people. If they didn't cross the path of their people by the time they reached the hills that bisected the forest, they would make camp and send out two scouts, one northeast and one northwest, to look for their people.

As in many plans, things didn't work out as expected. Almost immediately their group hit rough terrain. It soon became impossible to stay together or to even keep track of each other. Ayla was situated to the far left of her fellow travelers and before she could warn the others that it would be a good idea to regroup and travel single-file, she found there was a small but steep ravine between her and Matagan, who was closest to her right.

Ayla decided to get past the rough patch and the steep ravine and then head west and gather up her companions. This was not a safe way to travel, or to search for men who would be hostile to their presence, but at this point there was no other choice.

Summer Child was beginning to be restive, tossing her head and rolling her eyes in unease. The ground was becoming so broken with unexpected dips and crevices that Ayla soon decided to dismount and lead her horse. She began to wonder if turning back would be the best option, but how would she let the others know. She shouted at the top of her voice, "Matagan!" Then waited for a response and when none came she realized that going forward was the only option open to her.

Ayla felt foolish, how could she have led her people into such a bad area? And to lose sight of each other. They were breaking all the rules of good woodcraft and it made her feel even more uneasy when she thought of the dangers of floundering around like this among the boulders and the profusion of trees.

Realizing she was now alone in unknown territory, Ayla was about to prepare her sling, pulling it loose from around her forehead, where she had the habit of wearing it, then she froze.

"That's right, don't move!" Brukeval said in a menacing voice.

Ayla's heart sank as she realized, against all her training and experience, she'd let her guard down just enough to get caught by the one man she needed to protect herself from. He had a spearthrower poised and ready to use.

Ayla looked around her quickly and realized that if she tried to dive for cover she would make an easy target for the man. He was an accomplished hunter and knew well how to use a spearthrower.

Tilting her head to one side, Ayla replied, "Brukeval. Why? Why have you caused all this trouble? What has it gained you?" She looked searchingly at Jondalar's hearth cousin, a man she'd been attracted to once, when they had first met. His obvious Clan features bespoke the mixture between the two races. But that attraction soon was replaced by fear and unease when she found that he was so full of hate for the Clan and even other Zelandonii.

Brukeval smiled. "Throw your sling to me. Carefully! Then take your spearthrower out of its holder, using two fingers and throw it also." He waited while Ayla hesitated. Then he angrily shouted, "DO IT NOW WOMAN!"

Ayla startled and quickly did as he demanded. She tossed the sling to the ground at his feet and then carefully pulled the spearthrower from its sheath and threw it to the ground between them. All the while she was complying with his demand she was trying to think what Brukeval might do next and what her response should be.

She was sure of one thing; she would not let this man capture her to be used against her people as some sort of hostage. She would risk her life if necessary to get away from him. She thought about her companions, they would come through the other side of this rough terrain and wonder where she was. It was only a matter of time before they came in search of her. Whatever she must do, needed to be done before Brukeval injured or killed someone looking for her.

"So, where are all your followers now Brukeval?" Ayla asked in a challenging voice.

"Dead or captured. I admit that your Zelandonii and their friends from the Chimu are efficient hunters, but not so efficient that they could catch me. Now, with you under my control, I will be able to demand some things before traveling east or north or whatever direction my little heart takes me," he sneered.

"Brukeval, you know that we can't just let you leave," Ayla said with a sad note in her voice. "You've done too much harm and we can't let you go elsewhere and do the same to other people as you did to the Chimu."

"I just helped Skytalker enforce his spiritual control over the Chimu. I assume you've caught him?" Brukeval asked.

"Yes. But to blame Madroman for this situation is foolish. We all know who controlled the Shaman's followers. And we all know, including you, that Madroman was no Shaman and no Zelandoni, no matter what tricks he used to appear so," Ayla said with an edge in her voice. "So I ask you again, why did you do all this harm to people who had done nothing to you?"

"Nothing?" Brukeval trembled with anger. Ayla was mentally preparing herself for an attack, but it didn't come. Then almost sadly, he replied, "Everywhere I go I am ridiculed. Don't you think I know that? I've fought everyone going back to my earliest memories to prove that I'm human and not some kind of unthinking animal."

"Don't you think I know I look something like those flatheads? I can't help it. The Great Earth Mother made me the way I am. I don't need my resemblance to those abominations thrust into my face everywhere I go."

"The Chimu were no different at first. They commented on my looks and there were jokes made at my expense. I wanted to smash some faces when I first encountered these people, but I held myself in. Where would I go from here if I turned them all against me?"

"Then Madroman showed up. We hadn't traveled together, it was just coincidence that we'd both left the Summer Meeting at the same time and both headed north. That fool had 'inked' Zelandoni marks on his forehead and was pretending to be one. That's when I realized that he could be my chance to get some respect."

"Brukeval, I always thought you had more sense than Madroman. He is a simple conniver, but you had respect among the men. You're an accomplished hunter who could provide for a family and you're a man of ability. To pair up with someone like

Madroman was beneath you," Ayla said with feeling. She honestly couldn't understand why he would lower himself to subterfuge and tricks to gain respect.

"Ayla, you're the fool!" Brukeval barked. "I loved you from the first moment I met you. I think I still do. It's because you treated me like a man who would be attractive to an attractive woman. That first time we met all those years ago was life changing for me. I knew you were committed to Jondalar and I envied him that. But the fact that I could see the acceptance in your face was enough for me. At that moment I would have moved the earth for you.

"Then I found out that your reaction was only that you thought I was a mixture with flathead blood in me. I wanted to convince you that I wasn't, but I soon learned that your only interest in me WAS that you thought I was a mixture. If you hadn't been a flathead lover, you wouldn't have given me a second glance."

Brukeval gripped his spearthrower, white knuckled, remembering their meeting of long ago. "All I wanted was for you to treat me like a Zelandonii man, but you wouldn't let go of that mixed essence belief. You kept throwing it up in my face, again and again. It got to the point that I wanted to strangle you to shut you up.

"But I couldn't hurt you. I never could have done that. You know why? Because deep down inside I've never let go of the dream that you and I..." Brukeval was choked with emotion as he continued, "That you and I would someday mate. That we would have children and that I would be the proud provider for those children."

Brukeval stood over Ayla, who had complied with his command to sit on the ground, and looked down at her with moist eyes. She looked up at him and felt grief that she'd caused this man so much pain. But, she thought, it wasn't really her that was the source of his pain. It was his own hatred of who he was. There was nothing she could do that would change that. It had to come from within him.

"I'm sorry if I caused you to suffer Brukeval. All I've ever been is honest in my thoughts and words. I can't see what you see when I look at Clan people. To me they have as much dignity, maybe even more, than the Zelandonii. They care for their young and worship the spirits. It's true that they live a simpler lifestyle, but that's not so bad. They provide for their needs and care about each other. They saved my life when I was small and they didn't have to.

"In fact, I caused them more trouble than anyone else in their community with my strange way of thinking. Even so, some of them loved me and treated me as their

own. How could I not honor them? How could you think I would remain silent when people ridiculed them?"

"You remained silent when people ridiculed me," Brukeval said quietly.

"I did not! But I also knew that no matter what you said; that you were a mixture between them and us and I saw nothing wrong with that. I'd had a son of my own who was a mixture and I loved him, and even though he's a man now and I haven't seen him since he was five summers old, I still love him and miss him." Ayla expected Brukeval to explode in anger and even disgust at her for having given birth to a child of mixed race. He just looked away, thinking, 'But she couldn't love me.'

Ayla could have launched herself at him at that moment of inattention, but she didn't. She doubted that she could overpower Brukeval. Like a Clan man, he was well muscled, so much so, that it would be pointless to try to overpower him. More importantly, they were communicating on a personal level for the very first time, talking truths. Maybe she could convince him to give himself up, maybe there was a chance that he would change enough to regret what he'd done?

Brukeval looked back at Ayla, still sitting on the ground. She was looking up and directly into his large brown Clan eyes. The two were both frozen in the moment, neither wishing to say more. Brukeval just wanted to drink in the vision of the object of his dreams and fantasies. He didn't want her to say anything that would spoil this moment. He only wished that he could snap his fingers and they would both be back in that valley where Jondalar had been found by her. He'd heard the story many times.

What if he'd been the man she'd found first? She would have fallen in love with him and she would now be his mate and her children would be his. If fate had only smiled on him as it always seemed to smile on his hearth cousin, Jondalar.

Ayla was feeling pity for Brukeval, she wished there was something she could say or do to make him whole, but she knew that he would have to heal himself if he were to heal at all. He would have to accept himself - for who and what he was - and try to be content with that.

Just as she was about to speak they both heard thrashing sounds coming from the forest to the south. There was more than one person coming their way.

Brukeval looked up, alert, weapon ready. Then he looked down at Ayla. His expression changed as he stared into her eyes. They were wide and impossibly deep, he looked so strong yet vulnerable as he stood over her.

Ayla knew the moment when Brukeval had made a decision, his jaw firmed and he gripped his spearthrower so hard that his knuckles turned white. "I'll admit it," he said. "I've always loved you Ayla. And the fact is I can't have you..." He looked up at the sound as several people broke into the open not far from them. "I would rather die than live any longer with ridicule and shame of what I am."

Brukeval raised his spearthrower as if to slam a spear into her, but he held back, he looked into her eyes, his own eyes misty with tears, then his body was slammed backwards as a spear materialized in the center of his chest and within the same breath another took him in the throat, tearing a great chunk of flesh away. A gush of blood spewed from his neck wound, covering Ayla as if she were painted in the substance.

Ayla had realized in the moment before the spears struck him, that Brukeval had raised his weapon not to hurt her but to appear threatening, just so the others would attack him. She was about to scream the word "NO!" when the spears hit him and she was covered with his blood. All she could do then was weep for him, for what he had suffered and for those who had suffered because of him.

Matagan had thrown the first spear as he broke free from the thick forest and saw Brukeval with spearthrower raised, standing over the Zelandoni. He didn't try to analyze what he saw, he just threw. So did Cambarre who had thrown the second spear at almost the same moment. Tarmidar was the first to reach Ayla. He took her into his arms as she sobbed her grief and despair, bloodying his tunic as she grasped him for comfort and support.

The group of six had traveled through the rough terrain, finally meeting up with each other on the far side of the forested area only to discover that their Zelandoni hadn't made it through. Fortuitously, Camma and the men hunting the Shaman's followers were heading back to First Place with their captives when they ran across Cambarre and the four others.

Jonayla had come with the others to look for her mother and when she came into the clearing she screamed at the sight of all the blood coating her mother's body. Cambarre grabbed her as she was about to become hysterical, and told her that it

was Brukeval's blood and that her mother was unhurt. Camma and the rest of her group arrived right after Jonayla did.

Jonayla recovered from her shock quickly and hurried to her mother. "Thank you Tarmidar, I'll take over here," Jonayla said, as she reached for her mother.

Still sobbing quietly Ayla hugged her daughter. After some time, her tears stopped and she gathered her resolve. Jonayla took her mother to a nearby stream and helped her out of her bloody clothing. While Ayla washed herself, Jonayla did the best she could with their clothing. There would always be stains in the leather but it was clean enough to wear for the time being.

Ayla sat naked on a large flat rock as her daughter whipped her tunic on some large rocks in the stream. Then both tunic and leggings were wrung out and tossed repeatedly into the air to dry them while keeping them supple enough to wear. Soon Ayla joined her daughter in the drying treatment of their clothing. They had already donned tunics and were pulling on their leggings when Cambarre found them. Jonayla went to him and hugged him close.

Ayla had known before at some level that the two had become a couple. Seeing them so comfortable together made her realize that they would mate. She looked again at her daughter and suddenly realized that they must be sharing pleasures together by now. She wondered when that had started. Would she soon have her daughter's children to love and teach? The thought was a pleasant one, to have several generations of family to call her own would be wonderful.

She'd never forgotten how it had felt to be 'Ayla of no people' and to have no one to call family and to be totally alone. She looked at her daughter speculatively, wondering if she could be with child yet. It had probably started back when Cambarre had rescued Jonayla. They'd been on their own for days and on the run with only each other to rely on.

She could imagine the closeness her daughter would have felt for the handsome young man who had rescued her from the violence that she'd been subjected to by the Shaman's men. She would have felt the same attraction if it had been Jondalar rescuing her from the same fate.

If Jondalar hadn't been hovering close to the Spirit World, she would have noticed sooner that Jonayla and Cambarre had become so close. But her worry for her mate had covered her daily activities with a terrible pall of despair that had made her

unobservant and even uncaring of anything else. She shuddered at the thought of that period of time, at how helpless and useless she had felt.

Thinking of Jondalar made her want to get back to him. She needed to hold him in her arms in the worst way. She missed the intimacy and the quiet moments they shared together, lying in their furs talking quietly while stroking each other in a leisurely unhurried way.

It had been too long since they had shared pleasures with each other. She wondered when Jondalar would be up to doing that with her again. 'Well, the sooner we get back the sooner I can make him healthy again, but first we must bury Brukeval', she thought to herself.

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"You can all leave if that's what you want to do," Ayla said in a strained voice. "But I will bury this man. I will not leave him to rot or for wild animals to tear apart. We have buried the others who were killed or died, so why not Brukeval?"

"Because," Camma replied. "This man deserves no such effort on our part. It would be some small justice that he not reach the Spirit World, but be condemned to wander the forest. Let his body be eaten by wild animals, none of the Chimu will mourn him."

"Camma, do you really want Brukeval's spirit wandering this forest? Until a dead person's spirit is led to the Spirit World it may try to inhabit another person's body, or even an animal's body. Is that what you want?" Ayla replied, relying on her spiritual knowledge to convince the Chimu leader. In reality, it wasn't this that made her want a proper burial for Brukeval. It was the pain and anguish that he'd lived with all his life and her inability to sooth his soul and her feeling of responsibility toward him.

"Well, no I guess that would be a foolish thing to make happen. But he doesn't deserve a grave post with his Élan marked on it. Let everyone forget where he is buried, let the people forget him completely," Camma concluded firmly. Ayla wasn't going to argue with her at this stage. She could understand the Chimu leader's anger and knew that to argue further would only delay them. With so many Chimu in the group, Ayla felt that she should keep her thoughts about Brukeval to herself for the time being and said nothing more.

Joharran and a few of the Zelandonii men dug the grave. Because this was not a sacred burial ground they didn't need disguises. Until the body was interred, the Spirits would not know what their actions meant.

Brukeval's body had been wrapped in a hide used as a travel tent. There had been fragrant pine boughs placed around the body and then the hide had been tied in-place to create a makeshift shroud. Ayla and her daughter, who was her Acolyte, had stayed with his body and had quietly sung the Zelandoni Fugue invoking The Great Earth Mother's protection for the departed soul.

None of the Chimu would attend the burial but there were enough Zelandonii to make a respectable showing. They were there more because of their Zelandoni's request than because Brukeval had once been one of them.

Jonayla sang the Mother's Song, loud and clear, raising her voice to the sky. Jonayla's voice was pure and vibrant as she closed her eyes and sang with every fiber in her. Everyone stood silent and listened, even the Chimu who were standing some distance away were entranced by the beauty of the song. After the song concluded, there was utter silence and then one by one the people left the clearing. Those who had placed the body in the burial pit began to shovel in the mounds of dirt that were piled around it.

The interment ceremony had been brief but correct. The grave tenders, the men who had dug the burial pit and lowered the body into it and then filled it, had filed away from the site. They would go directly to the nearby stream and wash their bodies and clothing as best they could. That way the smell of death would be disguised enough that no lingering spirit of the dead man would seek them out as something familiar and to follow.

Chapter 27: Farewells

Ayla wanted to get back to Jondalar as soon as possible. She needed to reassure herself that he was doing well. She also knew that she should be the one to go to the Clan to retrieve Madroman but in her eagerness to see Jondalar she delegated the task to Joharran with Jonayla as interpreter.

Thinking about what she'd heard from the Clan Mog-ur, Brog, Ayla cautioned her daughter. "Jonayla, when you speak to the Clan leader, or any Clan man for that matter, don't look them in the eye. You're a young woman and to a man of the Clan young women are supposed to know their place, you haven't earned the right to address them without permission and to look at them in the eyes is considered rude. Do you think you can do that?"

Jonayla sighed. She didn't want to go to the smelly old Clan cave again, but she wanted to let her mother go straight back to her father. She instinctively knew how much her mother needed to see him. "Yes mother, I'll be a good little Clan girl and act all submissive to make them happy. But I'm only willing to do that for you, not because I understand why they treat their women so harshly."

"Clan women don't feel they are being treated harshly. It is the way of the Clan and has been since ancient times," Ayla tried to make her daughter understand, but when Jonayla rolled her eyes, showing her exasperation with her mother's lecture, Ayla just smiled. She thought to herself, 'there's no reason my daughter needs to worry about how the Clan live, she's Zelandonii not Clan and she's a good, brave and intelligent girl who I'm very proud of.'

"Yes, I can see you already know what to do, so I'll stop nagging." She leaned close and kissed Jonayla on the cheek and said quietly, "And I'm as proud of you as I can be, you're everything I could ask for. And... I'm happy for you and Cambarre. He's quite handsome isn't he?"

Jonayla pulled away from her mother and looked into her eyes searching for sarcasm in her expression and finding only sincerity, she smiled and nodded, "Yes, he's quite a man, mother. I'm lucky that he loves me."

Ayla looked over at Cambarre who was talking with a group of men and replied, "He's lucky too, you know. You're quite an accomplished woman and he better

realize that he'll have to work at it to keep your love." Again she smiled at her young daughter, knowing that time changed all relationships. But now, when everything was new and exciting, it was a time to enjoy finding out about each other and what it was like to become a couple.

Those thoughts made her think of Jondalar again, she needed to see him so much. Ayla kissed her daughter again and mounted Summer Child, then called to those who would be returning with her to the Chimu and Jondalar.

Jonayla reined Grey around to face the opposite direction, leading Cambarre and Joharran toward the Clan cave to pick up Madroman then return to First Place.

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It was a little more than mid-way through Buck Moon phase and the Zelandonii leaders were gathered with the Chimu in council. The hostilities were over and the men who had left their people to follow the false Shaman had been brought back. Many had died, either from the fighting or from the hardship of living rough.

The Zelandonii were anxious to return to the Summer Meeting. The Red Moon phase was about to begin and everyone needed to pitch in to gather the bounty of summer in order to have as secure a winter as possible. The Chimu also needed to concentrate on hunting meat and gathering the earth's bounty for the coming winter.

It was decided that before the Zelandonii left for their Summer Meeting, most would ride northeast for a day then turn west for a hand of time, then south, driving game toward the Chimu hunters, while also killing what game they came across to add to the Chimu winter larder.

Camma stood at the close of the meeting and thanked the Zelandonii for this unexpected kindness and for their help in overcoming the false Shaman troubles. She pledged her people's friendship and promised to send representatives from the Chimu to next year's Zelandonii Summer Meeting. She said that she would lead their group herself and would like to speak to the council of leaders about trade and a closer relationship between her people and theirs.

She had traded with Jonayla for two of her three horses and would ride to the Summer Meeting, she said. Jonayla had taken trade in future goods to be delivered

next summer and Camma would make sure that she was well compensated for her generosity of spirit.

"We have very high quality flint mines that your Knappers would find valuable and recently we've found large deposits of fire stones, some the size of boulders, which we are pleased with because it allows us to shape out firestones for easier use.

"I'm sure we would very much like to have more Zelandonii horses," she looked meaningfully at Jonayla. "I see a long and prosperous relationship between our two peoples," she concluded. There were nods and voices raised in agreement by the leaders and Zelandonia attending the council.

The meeting broke up shortly after Camma finished speaking and Ayla found herself in the middle of a new discussion. Madroman had been brought back to First Place as a prisoner. The Chimu did not want to have anything to do with him, so it had been decided that he would be brought back to the Summer Meeting and that in a council of all the Zelandonii leaders, his fate would be decided.

Ayla had several personal things she wished to do before returning south. She also wanted to be alone with just her family on the return journey, so she fended off all suggestions that she lead the returning Zelandonii or that she arrive ahead of the others with only the leaders to take credit for their success.

"I don't feel that I did anything to take credit for," Ayla replied. "Yes, I was the one who originally saw the need, but Tormaden, leader of the Nineteenth Cave and the other leaders actually caught most of the trouble makers. Joharran of the Ninth Cave has been in charge most of the time while I was tending Jondalar's wound and Joharran was assisted by Trivodan, leader of the First Cave of the south and Manvelar who leads the Third Cave. Let them ride back and tell their stories. I need to travel slowly for Jondalar's sake and I would also like to spend time alone with just my family. I thought I'd lost a family member more than once since we've been here," Ayla said, waving away the other leader's urgings.

Finally it was decided that the other two Zelandoni would be responsible for the telling of events that happened in the north and that they would all travel back in one group. They would stop some of the people from the Nineteenth Cave off at their cave on the way so they could begin to repair the damage caused by the false Shaman followers and to prepare for their people's return from the Summer Meeting.

The next morning the Zelandonii who had not gone on the hunt left for the Summer Meeting. As the people formed their traveling groups and readied to leave the Chimu, Ayla called the Doniers together. She looked at the southern Zelandoni and smiled, thinking back to only a few full moons ago when they had been strangers and rivals.

"I would like to hold one more meeting with all the Zelandonia in attendance before we all leave the Summer Meeting for our winter homes. We should discuss the problem of Madroman before turning the issue over to the leader's council. Also we should make the magic fungus known to all the Zelandonia and their Acolytes so all eyes will be looking for more of it around their own home caves. This new medicine is important and the more people searching for it, the sooner we'll find more. And finally," Ayla frowned, "I have made some decisions and would like to share my thoughts and receive the thoughts of my fellow Doniers before acting on them.

"The meeting should take place twenty days from today and held where my task began, at Revelation Cave on Sacred Mountain. It is close by the Summer Meeting, yet a place where we will not be disturbed by the daily tasks imposed upon us by everyday life. Our meeting might resolve several conflicts that fester and would let us each go to our home places and think about the future of our people over the coming winter.

"I would propose that we meet again when the snow melts and before the next Summer Meeting, to discuss what each of the Zelandoni has decided is important to the people and plan what might be best for our people so that we can present a united face to the leaders at the Summer Meeting. If you would make the other Zelandoni aware of the meeting upon your return, I would appreciate it."

The southern Donier stood silently as Ayla spoke. She had a sense that there was disquiet about the woman who now received her wholehearted support. "Zelandoni," she started, then looked around. "Would you walk with me, I have something personal I would like to discuss."

Since all was said now, Ayla wished the others well and the two women walked toward the stream that flowed into a nearby lake. One, blonde haired with a golden complexion, and the other with dark hair and a darker complexion. "Are you concerned with the people's reaction to your childhood with the Clan?" the southern Donier asked. "I know the people's prejudice, but a past which you had no control over is insignificant compared to who you are today and what you've done for the Zelandonii."

"Thank you Zelandoni," Ayla replied. "I am not concerned what people think of me personally. I have always been different and have always had to stand up for myself. I am used to it. I only want what is best for the people, but we will talk of that later."

"Yes, of course," the southern Donier replied. "It's just that... it's just that we need a strong leader to bring the people together. There are still those in the south who think they will not have a full voice if they continue to tie themselves to the northern caves. And now we have the possibility of the Chimu to add to the confusion..."

"Yes, exactly. That is why we must have a real conversation between all of the Zelandonia and an agreed upon way forward. Don't you think?" Ayla asked. She thought of this woman as her friend and ally and hoped that when the time came the Donier would support what she had to say.

"Very well," the Donier agreed. "I will inform the others of your wish to meet at Sacred Mountain. I assume that you will be back within half a moon? Even traveling slowly it's no more than a few days travel."

"Yes, it will take half a moon phase. Just between the two of us, I want to stop by the Clan cave one more time and I need to do one other thing that I feel is important and very personal. But yes, we should be there before the end of Red Moon."

The southern Donier looked into the other woman's gray-blue eyes and as always found strength there, a determined, competent look in those eyes that always reassured her. "Farewell, my friend," she said and gripped her colleague's hands.

"Farewell and I will see you soon," Ayla responded warmly.

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As the Zelandonii rode south, Ayla and her family bid their goodbyes to the Chimu and especially Camma. "We will meet again, next summer," Camma said. "I look forward to seeing you then."

Ayla looked into the other woman's eyes, "The Great Earth Mother willing, but if not, always know that I honor you. You have led your people well. It's not an easy thing to go against what everyone else thinks is the right thing to do, but you did just

that and because of that, brought your people through a rough time. I'm proud to know you," Ayla said and gripped the tall redheaded leader's hands in farewell.

Camma was a strong and attractive woman, who moved with bold confidence and always had. But for some reason she felt less sure of her own abilities when compared to this older and much wiser woman who was so accomplished that it made her feel like a young inexperienced person just starting out. "Thank you Zelandoni."

"Thank you Camma." Ayla replied with feeling, then she turned and walked back to her waiting family members. She was about to mount Summer Child when a call rang out. Melodene ran up to Ayla and held her hands in both of hers. "I needed to thank you Zelandoni, for what you did. I think if you hadn't rescued me from the men of the Shaman I might not be alive today."

Ayla smiled, "You helped us overcome so much Melodene, so I must thank you. Without your help we might have lost people to an ambush and certainly would not have found First Place and Camma." They hugged then Ayla mounted her horse and nodded to Melodene, then to Camma and turned toward the east.

Ayla, Jondalar, Jonayla and Cambarre rode away, finally disappearing into the forest surround and down a trail that would lead to Long Valley and the Clan.

-O-

Jondalar was still weak, although feeling better and stronger each day. He didn't want to hold them up, but Ayla insisted that they ride slowly. "I want to have this half-moon time for just us," she said. "There's no reason to hurry. I want to visit the Clan one more time to talk to Dula and Mog-ur, I have something there that is unfinished and that I must see too. Then I want to visit Brukeval's grave."

That statement surprised Jonayla. "Why would you want to venture anywhere near that bad man's grave mother? Besides, we gave him a funeral and buried his body under a rock cairn. He caused so much pain and almost killed you and father and would have done the same to me if not for Cambarre."

Ayla looked at Cambarre, "Yes, have I ever thanked you for saving my daughter?"

Cambarre looked at Ayla and smiled, "I saved my mate. How could I not? Or at least we will mate before leaving the Summer Meeting this season," he concluded with a broad smile.

Ayla looked at the handsome young man. He looked wild and free, with his sun reddened face and wide smile. A few strands of his blonde hair had escaped his ponytail and were flying loose in the breeze. Ayla could understand the attraction that her daughter felt. "Yes, well, I think you're "mated" already, if I'm any judge," she smiled as the two young people looked at each other slightly embarrassed.

"And I'll be happy to call you a member of the family Cambarre," Ayla concluded.

"So will I young man," Jondalar said. "I feel that I now have two sons. And I too thank you for saving our daughter from those mad men."

For once Jonayla remained silent, but she smiled contentedly. She was happier than she'd ever been before. With all the dangers and disasters they'd just come through, now was a time for rest and to be together. She finally acknowledged to herself that she'd felt her father would die from his wound. It would have happened if not for the Clan's medicine woman.

"Mother, if we're going to the Clan cave, will you ask about the fungus that the medicine woman used on father? It seems to be very powerful and would be a good addition to our medicines."

"Yes Jonayla, that crossed my mind too. And I have something of value with me to trade for some of their magic fungus. We'll see when we get there."

Jonayla was mystified. She knew her mother had nothing of value with her, certainly nothing that was equal to the value of the magic fungus. 'What could she have?' thought Jonayla...

-O-

They made Long Valley by mid-day and decided to camp in the late afternoon by a stream that was a landmark denoting a half day's slow travel left before reaching the Clan cave.

Jondalar had to admit that he was tired and Ayla made him lie down on their furs while the rest of them made camp. The weather was so clear and mild at this time of

year that they didn't feel the need to erect a travel tent. They had camped close to a grove of trees that served as a wind break and the campfire warmed them as evening settled.

Ayla was happy. Just the feeling of togetherness made her glow. She only wished that Durcan could have been there with them. She missed her son's lively personality, he was always so full of boyish energy and so inquisitive and she missed that greatly.

As they traveled, Jonayla and Cambarre had each killed a rabbit that they roasted for their dinner that night. Ayla had spotted some tubers along the trail back in the forest and had dug them up for later use. Between the meat and tubers they were all nicely full by the time the light of day began to fade into dusk.

As dusk turned to night, Ayla crept into the furs next to Jondalar. It was the first time they'd slept together in weeks and it felt good to be so close to him. Ayla snuggled up to Jondalar's back and hugged him to her. They talked quietly for a few minutes about the day's travel and as Ayla rose on one elbow to look over at Jonayla, she saw that her daughter and Cambarre were together under their furs.

Ayla had known that they were together but to see them as an adult couple, together as lovers, was a jolt. It had been less than three full moons ago that Jonayla had come to her worried that she would never find a man and now here she was, a woman with a mate. As she lay back down, hugging Jondalar to her again, she murmured in his ear, "I wonder when we'll have young children in our dwelling again..."

They both could hear the rustling of the young lovers on the other side of the fire. Ayla hugged Jondalar close, hoping that they would soon be together like that again. Jondalar would have to recover his strength and his wound would have to heal before that sort of exertion could again be thought of. Ayla longed for that type of exertion. She snuggled tightly against Jondalar again. When the intimate sounds from the other side of the fire finally quieted, Ayla drifted off into a dream filled sleep.

-O-

They were up with the dawn. Jonayla heated grains and berries for a quick breakfast. Ayla made an herb tea from mint and dried lemon balm leaves with a dash of linden flowers. Jondalar and Cambarre broke camp and got the horses ready

to go while breakfast was being made. As the sun rose above the horizon they had finished eating, and were on their way.

At first Cambarre was a bit surprised at how well Jonayla's family was organized when traveling. It seemed like each member knew instinctively what the other was thinking. He wasn't aware that Ayla and Jondalar had developed a way to do things on their year-long journey and had taught that routine to their children.

Cambarre watched in amazement as each family member went efficiently about their tasks; the making of breakfast, breaking camp and packing the carry baskets. He tried to help by fetching water and firewood but could tell that even if he hadn't been there, those things would have been accomplished without a word needing to be spoken.

The young couple rode in the lead allowing Ayla and Jondalar to travel at their own pace. They watched as their daughter and her man ranged ahead of them. From time to time the young people would direct their horses to an outcropping of rock or copse of trees to investigate. They looked - for all the world - like children on their own at play.

Ayla smiled to herself. Her daughter was growing up. She had been the same age when she'd met Jondalar and she'd already had Durc. Now she was going to be a mother of a mother at thirty-six summers? The thought made her momentarily feel old, but the thought of Jonayla having a newborn quickly replaced that thought with one of joy. Ayla of the Zelandonii, mother of Durc, Jonayla and Durcan, mated to Jondalar of the Zelandonii and soon to be an elder to another generation of Zelandonii.

Those thoughts made her think again about what she'd planned in the quiet space within herself. Tears came as she thought about her child having a child, then she smiled and wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her tunic and stopped trying to second guess herself. What she had planned was the right thing for her and Jondalar and when he was well again she would broach the subject with him. Until then, she would just enjoy the moment and enjoy her family's closeness.

The sun was almost directly above them in a clear blue sky as they crested a low rise in the terrain. Ayla recognized the area first, and her daughter took only a moment longer before turning on her horse and calling, "We're here mother. The cave is over by the hills to the north, you can see smoke from their outdoor hearth."

Ayla had been there before and didn't need Jonayla's directions, but she just smiled and nodded. Jondalar looked in the direction that Jonayla had indicated and pulled his horse to a stop. "What now Ayla?" he asked. "It will probably disturb them if we all ride our horses up close to their cave."

"Yes, I think that just Jonayla and I should approach them since we have already met them and I think it would be best to walk up to them. But first I need to prepare for the visit," she said, as she slipped from Summer Child's back. "When I've prepared myself, we'll ride to within sight of the cave and then Jonayla and I will dismount and walk toward them. I'm sure that people riding horses would alarm them, but I think if the horses are kept far enough away it shouldn't frighten them too much."

They had halted by a stream and Jondalar watched as Ayla pulled a folded water bowl made from Auroch hide and placed it on the grass, then she sat down in front of it filling it with water. Jondalar had wondered what Ayla meant by 'prepare herself' but hadn't asked. Now as he watched he saw her pull several small containers from her medicine bag and when she opened one and began to smear it onto her face he understood.

"Ayla, why are you painting the Mog-ur signs on your face? Won't that alarm the Clan men more than even the horses would?"

"I am a female Jondalar. It would be better if a man could approach them, but you're the only man among the Zelandonii who could even speak to them and your language ability is limited. I need to speak to Dula and the only way I'm going to do that is get permission from their leader. The only way he will give me that permission is if he thinks I'm something more than an ordinary female."

Jondalar smiled, "You are something more than an ordinary female Ayla. I wish you would let me come with you, I don't like you and Jonayla going up there by yourselves."

"If you came with me, Mongar would only talk to you and we would have the communication problem. I would have to translate for you and I think I would not get to talk to Dula, their medicine woman, and that is very important to me."

"What's so important about talking to a medicine woman Ayla? It's not as though you don't know as much about healing as she does, you probably know more than she does," Jondalar said.

"I had to use all the magic fungus that Dula gave me to heal your wound Jondalar. I would have lost you to the Spirit World if it hadn't been for Dula's magic fungus. Apparently it is rare and hard to find. I would like to have some more of that fungus before we leave here so that I can compare it with samples we might find."

Ayla had been smearing the bear fat mixed with white chalk onto her face as she talked. She now looked down into the bowl of water to see her reflection. With the bright blue sky above, her reflection jumped out at her so she could see herself in detail.

It was always startling to see her own reflection. Even after all these years, Ayla subconsciously thought of her appearance as awkward and ungainly. She tried not to think of herself that way, but as a small child that is how she'd felt among the Clan. Now when she had an occasion to see her reflection, she was always surprised that she so looked ordinary... just like anyone else of her kind.

Now with her face painted a stark white she looked strange, almost like a ghost. She reached for the other small container that held a paste of red ochre mixed with bear fat and began to paint the ceremonial lines of Ursus upon her face. One red line from center of her forehead, down her nose and down across her closed lips and down her chin. Then carefully, watching her movements and refreshing the paste as she went, she made a circle of red around each eye and then crow's feet at the outer edge of the circles.

Jondalar had come to a stop not far from Ayla and watched her, fascinated with what looked like a private ceremony. Each movement she made seemed to be done with a formal and solemn forethought as if it were a Zelandonia ritual. It was unsettling to see her painting her face with the strange designs, but at the same time it also seemed right.

Jondalar's musings were interrupted as Ayla said, "There, I'm done." She looked at her reflection one more time and then rose to her feet as she always did, without aid of her hands, using just her legs and lower body strength, rising from the ground to a standing position in one smooth motion. Jondalar had always tried to imitate his mate's unique ability to do that, but he sighed as he pressed his hands to his knees as he slowly stood. It would be some time before he could again imitate Ayla's moves. Healing needed time.

-O-

Mageb was the first to see them. Ever since the troubles had begun with the Others, the Clan had posted lookouts within sight of their caves. There had been a few instances in the past when the wild men of the Others had attacked their caves and they were determined that it wouldn't happen again without warning.

Even though the wild men were supposed to be gone, it would only be prudent to continue a watchful eye to make sure that there was no longer any danger. That was why Mageb was first to see the others coming. It was his turn to watch from the high ground above the cave for any signs of unusual activity.

He became alert when he saw four antlike figures on the horizon and when he realized they were heading toward the cave he jumped up and ran as fast as he could down the path and around to the opening of the cave, where he beat the drum with a tattoo of three beats three times to warn everyone near and far that strangers had been sighted.

Mongar and Brog were the first to emerge from the cave, with other men behind them. What they saw made them stare open mouthed. It was a sight they hadn't seen before. When Joharran, Cambarre and Jonayla had come for Madroman they'd left their mounts out of sight at Ayla's urging. She knew that the sight of horses with people riding them would distress the Clan to the point of distraction.

Their task had been to take Madroman away and reassure the Clan people that the trouble was over, not to intimidate them. The Chimu had no horses so they were something not seen much before the Zelandonii had arrived from the south.

Now, on this occasion, it was important that Ayla be allowed to speak to Dula one more time. To display her power over wild animals might throw Mongar off his stride long enough to get him to allow her access to the medicine woman for a few moments.

The Clan people looked out over the valley as four horses came toward them with Others riding on their backs. A fifth horse was being led with a rope and had large bundles on its back. Mongar made a growling noise, one of anger and aggression. Brog reached out and gripped his arm, making Mongar look at his Mog-ur. Brog signed, "It is the female Mog-ur. See the light-haired one? She is the female Mog-ur. She leaves her horse behind and walks to us. That is her loud daughter that walks beside her."

Mongar remembered them both. He had hoped never to see them again. He didn't know how to act toward a female Mog-ur. It wasn't natural to have to deal with a female Mog-ur and he resented it. Why were they coming back here, what could they want from the Clan now? He'd held their cowardly Shaman for them and he had posted men along the valley's edge as they had asked. What more did he have to do?

The people murmured nervously as the two females of the Others approached. The older and taller one had Mog-ur ceremonial signs painted on her face, the stark effect of the snow white and blood red made Mongar shiver. The female looked like a spirit, one that had power, one that could make trouble for the Clan. He gripped his hunting spear, knuckles turning white as he thought about attacking her. If he could kill her, maybe his Mog-ur would be able to deal with her spirit.

As if the apparition had heard his thoughts, she stopped walking and looked straight into his eyes. Then she signed in perfect Clan, "I come to speak to your Mog-ur and your Medicine Woman. Mongar, I offer no violence and wish no harm to the Clan. I only wish to speak to those I have spoken to before. Once I have spoken to them I will leave you in peace."

She stood tall and silent watching him as he stared back at her. At first he thought he could stare her down. In his experience no female had ever stared him in the eye before and to have one doing it now was unnerving. Finally he turned away, not wanting to admit that her staring eyes had made him look away.

As he walked back into the cave, he signed to Mog-ur that he should deal with the female of the Others as he wished.

Feeling an inner excitement, Brog signaled Dula to follow him and walked away from the mouth of the cave toward the woman who led the Others. Nothing like this had ever happened to the Clan before. It was unheard of to have Others come to them like this. Other than those wild men, there had been almost no interaction between the two peoples. Both lived separately and in peace within their own caves.

Brog felt an unfamiliar nervousness as he neared the two females. The tall painted one watched him with unblinking eyes until he stood before her. Then she signed, "Brog, this woman would ask you for something and would give you something in return."

"What is it you wish to have and what is it that you wish to give?" he responded in the same ritual cadence of universal trade signs.

"I wish to have more of Dula's magic fungus that saved my mate from death. I would try to find more of it but need enough of it to compare with other fungus. I used up all that Dula gave me on my mate," Ayla said. "In return I want to give you an equal amount of sacred memory root."

The earth moved under the Mog-ur's feet and he staggered slightly. Dula gasped out loud in fear and surprise and reached out to support her Mog-ur. Had she heard correctly? Could this Mog-ur of the others have any of the sacred root that every Mog-ur of the Clan sought? It was impossible to believe, the root was no more. It had not been seen for a generation of summers.

Brog tried to get hold of his emotions. He needed to know if what had been said was true. Maybe this woman Mog-ur meant something else. "The sacred root no longer exists! If it did, the Mog-urs would have it," Brog stated firmly.

"I have it," Ayla stated just as firmly.

"Let me see it," Brog demanded.

Ayla reached for her medicine bag and pulling the flap back, took out a red colored clan-style amulet pouch and handed it to him.

With fingers that felt too numb to untie the intricate ceremonial knot - a knot that signified the sacred memory root - Brog finally managed to open the pouch and looked inside. Then he handed the pouch to Dula who also looked inside. After a long moment that stretched out between them, the medicine woman handed the pouch back to Ayla.

Dula then opened her own medicine bag and pulled out a soft deer hide pouch containing the fungus and handed it to Ayla. "This is all I have left. It is a poor trade for something as valuable as the sacred memory root, but it is all that I have left."

Ayla opened the folded hide and saw that there was little more than a finger's length of fungus left. She transferred her gaze to Dula and said, "I will take the trade, you may have all of the sacred root, for this that is left of the fungus. And if I am able to find more of the sacred root I will share it with you."

Brog stirred as if waking from a dream, "Why would you be so generous? This is a good sized root and the magic fungus is small and almost used up?"

"Because you were willing to use almost the last of your magic fungus on my mate to save his life," she replied, "you are welcome to the root. I admit that I have tried it several times and I have found that it is not for people of the Others. We don't have your memories and we become lost on the other side."

"You don't know how much this means..." Brog signed, his eyes showing deep emotion.

"Yes, I think I do. As I said, I've tried it myself and I was met there once - on the other side - by Creb and we traveled together for a short time. I know what a trained Mog-ur of the Clan can do with it. I wish you well." Ayla raised her left hand, "I am going now." This expression was the closest gesture people of the Clan had for "good-bye." Most often, even that was omitted and they simply turned away and left. She began to walk back the way she had come.

Ayla stopped and turned back at the sound of her name, 'Ayla!' Mog-ur signed, "Wait! I have something more I must give you before you leave." He turned and disappeared into the cave.

Moments later he reappeared holding a heavy Clan spear. Hurrying back, he stood in front of Ayla and held the spear out in both hands, indicating that she should take it.

"What is this? You know that we use spearthrowers. A Clan spear is too heavy for me to use," she responded, but took it in both hands and looked at it. It wasn't a normal thrusting spear. It was like a hunting spear, the same weight and thickness, but it had carvings all up and down the smooth blackened shaft.

Ayla's fingers played across the indentations as she rolled the spear shaft in her hands trying to tell what the signs meant. "This is not a normal spear," was all she could think to say.

"No, it has magic. It is very old and it saved my life once. The strong spirits that it contains will keep you and yours safe so long as you carry it. It is the most valuable thing I have to give and I give it to you."

Ayla didn't want a big spear like this, an awkward thing to carry with her, but she knew that it would be unacceptable to refuse a gift from the Mog-ur. She also knew

that now that she had touched it Mog-ur couldn't take it back even if he wanted to. She bowed her head in acceptance.

The Clan had no term for "thank you" they understood gratitude, but that generally carried a sense of obligation. They helped each other because it was their way. It was their duty; necessary for survival and no thanks were expected or received. Special gifts or favors like the root that Ayla had given, carried the obligation to respond with something of like value; this was understood.

Ayla nodded once to the Mog-ur and then to Dula then abruptly turned to walk back the way she had come, carrying the spear as a hunter would.

Jonayla followed but couldn't stop from commenting. "Mother, you could have given them a smaller portion of the root and used it again to trade with them in the future. Why give them all of it?"

Without stopping Ayla replied, "Because daughter, they saved your father with almost the last of their magic fungus. They were willing to use something they considered precious so that Jondalar would live. They reached out and saved a man that was not their own. Could I do less for them? Should I have traded to my advantage when I know how important the root is to them? There may be no more root left in this area and without it their memories will fade and their Clan will disappear from the earth. What do you think would have been the right thing to do?"

"I guess what you did was the right thing to do," Jonayla replied in a subdued voice. "I didn't realize it was such an important thing to them. Hopefully your generosity will make that grouchy leader like us a little better."

Ayla just smiled and reached out to rest her arm on her daughter's shoulders as they returned to their men. She felt as if a weight had been lifted from her. She had done what she could for the Clan, for the people who had rescued her as a child, for the people of Iza and Creb. It might only prolong their existence for a while, but she'd done what she could for them. And maybe she would be able to find more curative magic fungus. Where there was one, there may be another.

-O-

Brog stood at the mouth of the cave as he watched the female Mog-ur and her daughter walk away. The tall light haired female who walked with the confidence of

a Mog-ur, carrying the Maga Spear like a hunter would. Her loud daughter would likely be Mog-ur of her people one day. She would be as strong as her mother, only different. Brog hoped that his spear would do for them what it had done for him. He didn't think that the female Mog-ur believed in its power and that was alright. He hadn't either when it had been given to him.

He looked down at the ocher stained amulet pouch in his hand and then at the receding figures of the two women once more, then he hurried back to the cave. He had much to do, he must call the other Mog-urs together, what he held in his hand must be made known to the other caves. This was too important to keep to just his cave alone.

Brog, just before entering his cave looked back one last time. The women had disappeared from sight.

-O-

"Jondalar," Ayla said. "I know you don't understand why I want to visit Brukeval's grave site, but I feel a need to complete the ceremony as it should have been done. As it would have been done for any other Zelandonii."

"It's just that I'm anxious to get back to the Summer Meeting and help with the hunting. We've been away for over a moon now and haven't done our share to help the Ninth Cave to put away dried meat for the winter. And there's the late harvesting of grains and tubers that you have been overseeing for the past few years," Jondalar said, sporting the familiar worry-frown that Ayla recognized and that made her smile.

"I understand Jondalar, but I feel I owe Brukeval a decent burial, one that observes all the rituals required to help him reach the Spirit World."

"I thought he'd received all that before you left him. Jonayla told me that you insisted that the proper rituals be performed before you would leave," he replied.

"Yes, but they wouldn't allow me the time to make a proper grave post or protection circle. I know you don't think he deserves our concern, but I know something about being made to feel different. The fact that Brukeval was hostile to those who treated him badly doesn't make me feel any the less guilty about the outcome," Ayla said, looking earnestly into her mates eyes.

After leaving the Clan the four rode south and were about to enter the thick strip of dense forest that lined Long Valley from east to west. Ayla knew that picking their way through the trees would curtail any further conversation so she halted the little group.

Jonayla and Cambarre had been following at a distance, having their own conversation, enjoying the quiet and leisurely pace. They rode up to Ayla and Jondalar and stopped to see what the delay meant. "Mother?" Jonayla asked. "Why are we stopping here?"

"I want everyone to understand why I'm making this stop on our way back to the Summer Meeting. I have been speaking to Jondalar about Brukeval and I want you all to understand how I feel about him and why I'm here. If when I'm done explaining, you don't agree with my reasons or don't feel you can honor his memory, then I would appreciate it if you would ride on ahead of me to the Nineteenth Cave and wait for me there.

"What I don't want is anyone who is hostile to Brukeval's memory to come with me. I know all three of you have good reason to dislike the man he had become, even to hate him, but I think I understood Brukeval better than anyone else alive today. I was close to him when he died and I heard what he had to say. No one else heard him and then he was dead and no one will ever hear him again.

"What you don't know is that in his last moment of life he told me that he loved me. He also said that he would rather die than live the rest of his life in ridicule and shame. He wasn't going to hurt me when he stood over me with raised weapon. He was making it impossible for anyone coming upon him in that position to hold back. He forced them into using their weapons on him.

"I'm not saying that he loved me like Jondalar does. I think he viewed me as an ideal and I think his need to be loved made him bitter toward Jondalar and finally toward me. But I also think that at the end he realized that he'd been wrong to react the way he had toward everyone.

"I can understand how he felt. Like him, I grew up being different than everyone else around me. I felt ugly and stupid compared to the Clan people. They were my ideal, what I wished I was. Until I met Jondalar I thought of myself as ugly and awkward because I was so different from everyone around me.

"The difference between Brukeval and me was that Clan people didn't ridicule me because of my differences. They might briefly stare, which was considered rude but not cruel. The Zelandonii children and even some adults were verbally abusive and cruel to Brukeval as he was growing up.

"The only way he could stop the cruelty was by being stronger and tougher than those around him. He grew to adulthood alone. Jondalar, even though you accepted him and were kind to him, you had things other than him on your mind. Even though Marthona mothered him when he was around, it was only a small part of his life. Internally, Brukeval was seeking acceptance from his male peers. Some did accept him, many didn't. He was rejected by females through peer pressure if nothing else.

"I think I hurt him more for my acceptance of him than I would have if I'd rejected him like all the other women in his life. When I first met Brukeval, right after my arrival at the Ninth Cave, I was surprised and delighted to see him. He reminded me of home. His appearance at that moment made me feel comfortable when everything was new and strange to me.

"Brukeval could see my acceptance of him, I'm sure of it. He even confirmed it at the end. When I treated him as a friend his face lit up and I felt that we would be close friends. Then some man was rude to him and called him a flathead and the fury in his expression reminded me of Broud, my old tormentor. I could never think of him as a close friend again.

"He knew my feelings had changed for some reason, but he didn't know why and our meetings afterward were strained, especially when I - not understanding at first why it was an insult - agreed with those who said he was a mixture of Zelandonii and Clan.

"I didn't really understand all of this until the day when Brukeval died. I was too wrapped up in my own life and that of my family's to really take time to consider Brukeval's feelings. I regret that and I want to try to set things straight between his spirit and myself. The best way I can think of to do that is to honor his memory and to make sure that his spirit has everything it needs to reach the Spirit World.

"So, if you can't attend his grave with a generous and accepting heart, I would ask you to not attend at all. I won't blame any of you if you don't want to, you were all harmed by him far more seriously than I was," Ayla concluded her speech, looking at each of them, trying to soften her words with an understanding smile.

Before anyone else could respond, Cambarre spoke. "You can't imagine for one moment that any of us would fail to go with you. I think we can forgive Brukeval for his evil acts, if for no other reason than because you ask it of us. I for one would walk through fire for you if you asked me to. Compared to that, being respectful at a ceremony honoring Brukeval's spirit would be easy." He smiled winningly and looked at Jondalar and Jonayla for their agreement.

"I think this young man has just said what I was thinking. But I think I'll have to keep an eye on him Ayla, he seems to admire you just a little too much for my comfort." Jondalar chuckled.

Jonayla looked around at the group of people that were her family and said, "If you think this is important, then I think it's important too. We will all willingly do whatever we can to help."

Ayla looked up at the sky, clouds were moving in from the east, it looked like rain. They needed rain, it had been a very dry summer. "Thank you, all of you. Let's go, it's not too far from here and it looks like we'll get some rain soon," she said as she urged Summer Child into the dense forest. The others followed her in single file.

-O-

As they moved deeper into the forest it soon became obvious that they would have to dismount and lead the horses. The tree branches made it almost impossible to ride upright as they reached down to almost man height and forced a rider to fend off branches continuously.

Jonayla had taken the lead as she was the most familiar with the area. She recognized the little stream first and knew that the grave was just ahead. "Mother, we've arrived. Brukeval's resting place is through those trees just ahead. This is the place where you washed, see that flat boulder?"

Ayla looked at the place that her daughter had indicated but didn't really recognize anything. Nothing so far looked familiar to her, but she nodded and led her horse forward into the little clearing through the trees.

Ayla had been very distraught the last time she'd been in this place. Jonayla had come upon the sad scene after the violence had taken place and had been more composed than either her mother or Cambarre.

There it was, a sad sight indeed. Ayla first noticed that an animal had dislodged some of the stones that had been halfheartedly placed over the grave. Then she noticed that a light rain had started. The trees had absorbed the beginning of the rain but now that they were in the small glade, the rain was noticeable and she could see the rocks begin to darken from the raindrops.

Ayla signed for Summer Child to stay and then walked forward to the edge of Brukeval's grave. The others stood at the edge of the glade, not quite sure what they should do. Finally after several minutes Jondalar walked over to Ayla's side. He saw misty droplets of rain water standing out on her blonde hair like little gems or morning dew, catching what light there was from the overcast sky. The shoulders of her buckskin traveling tunic were beginning to darken from the life giving rain.

Looking down at the disturbed grave Ayla said, "Jondalar, he never had anyone who really loved him. I had Iza and Creb and Uba and then you. And you had your mother and Dalanar and a host of other people, including me, who love you. But Brukeval only knew rejection, except the few times he was in the care of your mother.

"It's too sad to think about. But I want to at least let his spirit know that someone cares about him." Ayla was interrupted by Jonayla who had come forward with Cambarre.

"Mother, I'll show Cambarre the correct tree to cut for a grave post so you can carve his Élan on it, and I have some red ochre to color the caving so it will be more easily seen."

"Thank you daughter, that would be good," Ayla replied. "And thank you Cambarre, I'll stay here and find more rocks, maybe larger ones to add to the pile that protect Brukeval's grave."

Over the next hour Ayla, with help from Jondalar, found double fist-sized stones to place on the grave. They both could hear Cambarre's axe biting into wood. Jonayla had found an appropriate size tree and Cambarre had gone directly to the task and would continue until the grave marker was sized and shaped properly.

Sometime later, when Ayla was placing the final few stones on the pile, Jonayla and Cambarre came into the glade carrying a post that was five feet long and the thickness of a fully grown man's thigh. Ayla and Jonayla took the marker away to the stream and worked on it with sharp flint, sand and water to make the surface smoother.

While the women were working on the marker, Cambarre put up a temporary shelter using three of the four ground covers available. The shelter was just inside the trees where the glade met the forest and was large enough for the four adults and the warming fire Jondalar had made. A smaller shelter was built using the fourth ground cover. It provided cover for the packs and carry baskets and was placed only steps away from the travelers. The horses were tied between the two shelters and also received some of the fire's warmth.

The two women had removed their tunics as they worked by the stream and gave them to Cambarre to hang under the shelter to begin to dry. Even though it was overcast and raining, the temperature was still mild, if a bit clammy. Ayla and Jonayla worked away at the post until it was smooth as a deer's ear, then each taking an end, carried it near to the grave site.

Jondalar and Cambarre watched their women approach, admiring them as they came near. Being naked in their society was not unusual, but both men couldn't help but compare the women's physiques, the younger with the older. Their body shapes were very similar and they walked with an unconscious confidence and grace.

Cambarre was the first to pull his tunic off and hang it up. Jondalar wondered for a moment if he'd done that to encourage the women to remain bare breasted for a while longer, but then sighed and pulled his tunic off over his head to allow the sheltered fire to dry his tunic as well.

Jonayla's eyes again widened as she saw the damage to her father's shoulder. There was a puckered purplish mark the size of a man's fist just below his right shoulder blade. It looked painful and it reminded her, as it did her mother, that he'd been very close to death and that it had been caused by Brukeval's actions.

Jonayla showed Cambarre where to dig the hole that would hold the grave marker. Then she and her mother took the post to the shelter. After Ayla finished carving the sign with Brukeval's Élan, Jonayla used the red ochre with bear fat from her mother's pouch to paint the grooves that her mother had carved in the wood.

When the depth of the hole was one half of the length of the marker, Ayla and Jonayla carried the post to the head of the grave and allowed Cambarre to place it in the hole while both women knelt down beside the post and forced small rocks in around the base to secure it. Jondalar tamped down the small stones with a pole left over from the cut tree until Ayla was satisfied that it was firmly in place.

A Zelandonii grave marker had special meaning and requirements. The segment of the marker below the ground represented that part of man that was of the earth. The segment above ground represented that part of man that was spirit. The Élan on the marker spoke only of his relationships and quests. Brukeval's only real quest had been to be loved...

Both women stood beside their men, looking down at the completed grave. The stones were of a respectable size and the post stood proudly, proclaiming the deceased's Élan for all to see. There would now be a home place from which his spirit could reach into the Spirit World, a centered place of security that would be familiar and would lend confidence to Brukeval's spirit, allowing it to take the bold step to travel to the Spirit World beyond.

Jonayla, unasked, but knowing that her mother would prefer her to sing the Mother's Song, raised her clear voice in song. The song had been sung before, but with a shocked and distressed voice. Now there was a dignity to the scene. For the second time Brukeval had the First Zelandoni, the giver of Doni's gifts, the one who acted as the intermediary for The Great Earth Mother, standing with bowed head at the edge of his grave, in prayer.

As the final poignant notes of Jonayla's pure yet appropriately mournful voice died away, Ayla spoke. "Great Earth Mother, we commit Brukeval, a man of two honorable peoples and member of the Zelandonii to your care. We forgive him for the wrongs he committed in life and ask you to keep his spirit in loving care."

They stood in the softly falling rain for a few moments longer. Then Ayla turned away and led the small group to the stream where she directed everyone to wash themselves.

The water wasn't deep enough to swim in so they washed then rinsed themselves, standing in the water. The ritual cleansing after a grave interment completed, they all walked naked to the ground cloth shelter to dry off and dress in their travel clothing again. Jonayla made a restorative tea that they drank to Brukeval's memory in place of the usual feast that would normally be held for one departed.

They had been in the glade for about five hours now and it was late afternoon. Jonayla assured her mother that they could break through the dense southern edge of forest before dark if they left soon. It was decided that they would camp south of

the forest that night. The shelter was taken down and they were soon on their way, leaving Brukeval's spirit to make its journey to the Spirit World.

As they rode into the forest southward, Ayla looked back one last time, to see Brukeval's final resting place. She hoped that she'd done enough for his spirit and wished she could have done more for the man when he was alive. But in that moment she realized that there would have been nothing short of taking him as her mate that would have satisfied him.

As Ayla urged Summer Child to enter the trees at the edge of the clearing she noticed the Clan spear lying on the ground where the temporary shelter had been and quickly dismounted and walked over to pick it up. The spear would be inconvenient to carry but she didn't want to abandon it. She tied it to her carry bag again so that it ran along the side of the horse's flank and then remounted.

She was ready to leave Brukeval behind. It was over. As she turned to leave once more, she saw Jondalar disappearing into the trees and in that moment she knew that she had done all that could be done for Brukeval. Now she needed to look to the future. She followed her family south in search of it.

Chapter 28: A New Friend

The waiting was becoming almost unbearable for Durcan. He hadn't wanted to stay behind at the Summer Meeting in the first place and had finally talked Proleva into allowing Willamar to bring him north to the Nineteenth Cave so that he could be reunited with his family as soon as they crossed the river back into Zelandonii lands.

It had been three days now since the Zelandonii who had been in the northern country had left the Nineteenth Cave to journey further south. Joharran had said that his family would be close behind, maybe a day or two at most. But here it was, three days, almost dusk, and still no sign of his family.

It had been a difficult summer for him. Durcan felt the absence of his mother and father and even his sister and the fact that they were traveling into danger hadn't made it any easier to stay behind. In addition, the continual teasing he'd received from some of the other children about his mother's past had ended up in many fights.

Durcan knew that there were some adults still talking about the fitness of his mother to be The First Zelandoni because she'd had a child with a flathead man. Hadn't they heard that she'd only been eleven summers when a baby began to grown in her? And that it had been forced on her? What was wrong with people anyway? 'Why did it seem that they only heard what they wanted to hear?' he wondered.

The boy was more than ready to be among his immediate family again. He missed the strong presence of his father. His father would stop the talking; he would make the people listen to sense. Even though Proleva and Willamar had cleaned him up and soothed him after his fights, Durcan still felt like some sort of an outsider now. Even his friends would bring up the stories and they would always act excitedly scandalized that he had a mother who'd actually "been with" a flathead man. In fact, his last fight before coming north with Willamar had been with his friend Artibon. Although Artibon's sister Folrian stood up for him against her brother and her brother's friends, it still rankled that his friends continued to go on about it. At least Folrian didn't, and that made him happy.

Durcan was pacing around the large outdoor gathering place in front of the Nineteenth Cave's massive opening that was used for meetings when the weather

was mild enough. He walked around the large hearth stones that designated the fire pit. The large ring of stones were at least as wide across as two tall men standing. On his fourth circuit Durcan finally threw up his hands in frustration and ran to Lightning, jumping up onto the horse's back in one practiced motion. Without looking back he urged his horse into a full gallop toward the river north of the cave.

Willamar watched Marthona's grandson gallop away. The boy was suffering at the separation from his family. He sometimes thought it might have been better if the boy's parents had taken him with them. He knew the child had had a tough summer. It was obvious that there was an undercurrent of tension.

Willamar was sure that Durcan had heard every story going around about his mother's past. Even with the help of that Mamutoi storyteller and his troupe who constantly told the almost mystical stories about Ayla and Jondalar and their exploits in the east, the gossips still spread their lascivious stories to excite and titillate themselves and their listeners. Children listened to their elders and often repeated things that older and wiser people would keep to themselves.

The old man sighed. The boy would survive. Willamar wasn't worried that he would do anything stupid like cross the river to go looking for his family. He had explained to Durcan that his parents might come back from any direction east or west, but that they would surely come through the area of the Nineteenth Cave. This wasn't the first time that Durcan had ridden off in frustration. Willamar just hoped that all was well with the boy's family and that they would soon return.

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Durcan sat mounted on Lightning's back as he looked north across the river. The urge was strong to just ford the river and begin looking for his family. What if they'd been attacked by some followers of that false Shaman? He'd seen the man when the Zelandonii brought him south with them on their way back to the Summer Meeting. He looked like a human weasel, shifty eyes and ingratiating smile. The man had even tried to befriend Durcan, but it was obvious to the boy that he was being insincere and was only looking for some advantage.

'Madman' or something like it was his name. Lost in thought, Durcan was still on his horse, bare-chested as usual with no more than a loincloth and rawhide belt to clothe his hard young body. His every day was filled with hunting and adventure that constantly challenged his growing skills. He felt that if he could be half the man his father was that he would be considered a successful provider. For that matter, if he

could compete with his mother's skills as a hunter, he thought, he would be known as the best among his people.

Durcan considered himself skilled in wood lore and in his hunting ability. There was no higher praise than to be called a good hunter. Without hunting skills a man couldn't provide for his family and would have to rely on the support of others. That, to Durcan, was something he couldn't contemplate. He knew of men who shirked their duty to provide and he knew what people thought of them. He couldn't imagine ever wanting to be looked at like people looked at them.

With nothing better to do, Durcan reached up and loosened the sling that he'd wrapped around his forehead. He wore it that way to keep it close at hand and to keep hair out of his eyes on windy days, just like his mother always did. The boy ran the thongs of his sling through his fingers as he looked for a target to practice his aim. It was almost a subconscious thing for him to constantly sharpen his aim and to keep his skill at its peak. Durcan wasn't unusual in this, most boys practiced their hunting skills continuously. It was fun and also an important part of being a young man.

Imitating his mother's skill with a sling, he made two shots in quick succession, one immediately after the other at a large trout near the river's bank and very close to the surface. To his surprise and delight the first stone found its target and the fish began to float belly up. Durcan scrambled down from Lightning's back and waded into the water. Grasping the stunned fish, he held it out before him in excited pride, whooping with joy.

"Good shot son!" A voice from across the river shouted.

Durcan whirled around to see his father waving. A moment later his mother and sister and then Cambarre came into view. They shouted a greeting and then they were fording the river to reach him.

For a few minutes there was joyous hugging and kissing as parents gathered their sun-browned, young son into their arms and voiced their joy at finding him there. They stood for a while just looking at each other and exchanging questions and listening to answers as close family members do when catching up after being apart.

Ayla had been surprised at how her son had grown over the past two moons. He seemed bigger and more muscled, more like a man. There was a look in his eyes that hadn't been there before, he seemed to have grown up during their time apart.

Holding him at arm's length, she looked at him critically. "You look so grown up Durc. I've missed you. We all have," Ayla said, hugging him again.

"Mother, my name is Durcan, and I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't call me Durc anymore," he said. "It's just that... Well, I'd like you to use my whole name from now on."

"Alright, Durcan it is. I guess you're getting old enough to decide what you want to be called," Ayla replied. But she thought she knew why he was insisting on her using his full name and that thought hurt. She had hoped the uproar with her past might have let up while she'd been away.

Then a sudden unwelcome thought reared its ugly head. What had Durcan been subjected to while she'd been gone? Had the Zelandonii people ostracized her boy? That was hard to believe. Durcan had always been a popular and accomplished child, the people wouldn't take her past out on her boy. Would they?

They mounted and rode down the trail to the Nineteenth Cave, talking about their adventures in happy voices, glad to be together again. But Ayla was worried about her son and would ask Willamar - he was likely the one who would have accompanied her son north. She would see what he had to tell her about her son's experiences since she'd been away.

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Insects were chirping their late summer songs and dusk was just descending into night as they entered the outside hearth area that belonged to the Nineteenth Cave. Willamar was the first to spot them. He had been worried when Durcan hadn't returned and had been keeping a watch out for him.

"Willamar!" Ayla dismounted in one smooth motion and ran into the old man's open arms. "It is so good to see you!" She suddenly felt at home now that they were back in their own land again. Hugging the old man to her she sighed, content to just have him near. Willamar had always been a great influence on her, he'd been a stable male figure for her ever since their first meeting. Ayla had always considered Marthona's mate as a father figure.

"Zelandoni! Jondalar! I'm glad to see you looking so well!" Tormaden, leader of the Nineteenth Cave called from the cave opening as he hurried forward to greet them.

Before they knew it, a crowd of people were milling around, enthusiastically greeting them.

"Will you be able to stay with us for a few days Zelandoni? We would like to hold a feast in your honor," Tormaden said, gripping her hands enthusiastically.

"I'm afraid that I must head back to the Summer Meeting tomorrow. I've been away too long and there are some things I have to attend to. This has been a very unusual summer and there are issues that still need to be resolved, but Tormaden, I do appreciate your welcome," Ayla said with a broad smile.

"Then we'll just have to make this evening's meal a feast. It won't be as befits your status, but it will still be a feast none the less. We are so grateful to you Zelandoni. Your actions in bringing conflicts here to a close have saved the Nineteenth Cave from real hardship this coming winter. The little damage those renegades caused was easily repaired, but it doesn't even bear thinking what it would have been like to return to our cave, unsuspecting, after a full summer of damage and theft."

Ayla thanked the leader for his kind words and changed the subject. "We should unpack for the night. Jonayla, would you take our things to the guest hearth and Durcan would you help your sister?" Then she asked Tormaden where his First Wolf Cave Zelandoni would be this time of day.

"As usual, he is where he always is, painting and carving or planning a painting or a carving. The place looks magnificent, you won't recognize it even after just two moons. He hardly ever comes out of it. I can image what it will look like after a few more seasons, assuming he survives on the small amount of food he eats."

"Then I think, since we must leave for the Summer Meeting in the morning, that I should visit the cave now and see what our brother Zelandoni has been up to. Jondalar would you come with me?"

"Yes, I'm curious to see what has been done too." He smiled and took Ayla's hand, assuring the cave leader that they would return soon.

"I remember our first Summer Meeting together," Jondalar reminisced as they walked side by side down the path toward the cave. "It seems so long ago now. Weren't we happy back then? Our mating ceremony and the birth of Jonayla when we arrived back home. Those were exciting and wonderful times," Jondalar squeezed Ayla's hand.

"Yes, they were Jondalar. But our life isn't done yet. There will be more wonderful times ahead of us. It's just that we need to make them happen, we need to remember what is really important."

Jondalar stopped walking and, still holding Ayla's hand, pulled her around to face him. "Ayla, why do I think you're feeling troubled? I've noticed it since we crossed the river. North of the river you seemed eager to come home but as soon as we crossed the river you've had a look in your eyes, a look that I can't really describe other than to say that you look troubled."

Ayla stood on tiptoe and kissed Jondalar on the lips. "I love you Jondalar. Let's not worry about anything right now, let's go look at Wolf's cave. I so want to see it and I don't want to think about anything else right now."

"Alright Ayla, but promise me that we'll talk about what's troubling you," he replied as he walked beside her. Soon they could see a fire burning in the hearth at the front of the cave opening.

As the couple stepped into the firelight a young Acolyte who had been tending it stood and exclaimed, "Zelandoni, greetings!"

The young man looked familiar but Ayla couldn't quite place him. Then suddenly she remembered, "You're Kimadar, you helped me with Groog. So now you're an Acolyte?"

"Yes Zelandoni, I believe I've been called. I guess time will tell if it is a true calling."

"True, it takes time, but if you have a calling, don't worry, when the time is right, you will know," Ayla said to reassure the young man. "You met Jondalar when we were here last."

"Yes. Welcome Jondalar," the young man stepped forward and gripped the older man's wrists in greeting.

"Is your Zelandoni in the cave?" Jondalar asked Kimadar, smiling at the young man.

"Yes, he is meditating at this time of day, but I'm sure he would be happy to see you. I'll go in and get him," the young man said excitedly.

"If you don't mind, we'd like to go in and greet him. We're anxious to see what he's done with the interior. Is it alright if we just go in?" Ayla asked.

"Yes, of course Zelandoni, you don't have to ask, you lead the Zelandonia and we follow you," the young man said, his eyes shining with hero-worship.

"Very well then, we'll go in," Jondalar said, smiling at the young man again. He'd seen that look many times from many men over the years. Ayla seemed to bring that feeling out in men, especially younger men. He was proud of Ayla and her accomplishments, and it always made him feel lucky to be her mate when other men looked at her with such admiration.

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They could see a flame burning from three torches in their upright holders that had been placed in the center of the first and largest room that made up the cave complex. They could also see the back of a man sitting cross-legged at the far side of the flames with his head bowed.

The walls had new relief carvings on both sides now. There were carvings of spirit Élans; some of the ancient's spirits were represented and some newer ones too, including, Ayla noted, that of her predecessor's Élan.

They both looked around at the profusion of paintings both complete and in progress. There were panoramas that told stories of the Spirit World and images of animals and hunting scenes. Some of the images were still only sketches in charcoal but some were completed and showed the artist's skill of execution.

As they reached the sitting man before them, Ayla called out in a quiet voice.

The man jumped to his feet and threw his arms wide, rushing around the torches to embrace first Ayla and then Jondalar. "I hoped you would stop here on your way back!" he exclaimed. "I have something I want you to see, and this is the perfect time of day to see it. It is almost like The Great Earth Mother had a hand in guiding you here at this moment in time. Look! Look! Turn around and look!" he said in an excited voice.

Ayla looked at the man and wondered briefly if he was well. His eyes were red-rimmed and he'd lost some weight over the past few moons. But Jondalar had turned to look and gasped in surprise making her turn to look too.

Suddenly her heart thumped loudly in her chest and she could feel the blood pumping through her body, her mind was numb. She could hear the distant howl of a wolf in her mind's eye and a shiver went down her spine as if she had just entered the Spirit World as an unsuspecting supplicant.

Before her, portrayed in stone, was the most perfect replication of a gray wolf that Ayla had ever seen. It was her Wolf, from the bent ear to the special expression on his face that she'd become so used to. The pain of losing her friend came rushing back as a physical thing. Ayla burst into tears and fell to her knees sobbing uncontrollably.

Jondalar was momentarily shocked by his mate's reaction to the painting, as was her fellow Zelandoni. "What... what is the matter Zelandoni?" The Zelandoni of Wolf Cave knelt down on one side of his leader while Jondalar knelt down beside his mate on the other, taking her in his arms and rocked with her, gently, speaking soothing words into her ear.

After a time, Ayla's sobs slowed and then stopped and she wiped her eyes with the back of her hands. "Zelandoni, you are a magnificent artist. That is my Wolf. For as long as I live I will come back here whenever I can to see this image of my friend. You can't know how much I miss him. He saved my life and Jondalar's too, more than once. He was the protector of our children and an undemanding friend. His loss was a devastating blow to me, one that I wasn't able to mourn properly, because of events that engulfed me.

"I am more grateful to you than I can ever express. I'm grateful that you made this image and I'm grateful that you insisted that we name the cave, 'The First Wolf Cave'. None of these things could I have requested. I will always honor you as my closest friend, one who understands me and knows my sorrows," Ayla said this with real meaning, turning toward the man and hugging him tightly, saying, "Thank you, thank you."

There was an awkward few moments while everyone stood and looked at each other. The artist couldn't help but be flattered and honored that the First Zelandoni had been so passionate about his work. He'd thought it good, but to have such an emotional outburst by such an important leader and a woman he admired, was the ultimate compliment.

It was but a few minutes before they were inspecting the other images and galleries in the cave. Soon Ayla and Jondalar were lost in the other works that were so expertly done. The three spent some time touring the complex of rooms and nooks. The last place they visited was the small alcove at the back of the cave. Ayla had been drawn to it all along, the place of power. She always thought of it as such.

"I see you haven't done anything in this place," Ayla said.

"No, I don't think that I will. If someone does someday it will be their calling. To me this is a place where the Spirit World concentrates. There is nothing I can add to it. That pillar is the focus and I'm afraid to alter it in any way."

"Yes, I think you're right. I feel the power from this pillar that doesn't quite touch the earth but that looks as though it should. Yes. I think you're right to leave it as it is," Ayla said, with a slight shiver. She remembered once before when she'd been in this very space on her own and felt that power surge through her.

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That evening, after the improvised feast honoring their guests had been enjoyed, the people of the Nineteenth Cave began to settle down for the night. Suddenly there came a commotion from outside. A woman's voice rose in anguish and a harsh male response brought people to the cave opening to see what was happening.

Ayla joined the group watching at the mouth of the cave. One of the hunters assigned to guard the cave at night - a precaution that was now being kept - was holding a woman from behind by her arms, bending her over, marching her toward the cave.

Tormaden had come to stand beside Ayla when the noise began and now stepped forward to determine what was happening. Ayla recognized the woman as she was forced toward the outdoor hearth. The guard fire was built up enough to show her face. It was Melodene of the Chimu.

"Melodene," Ayla called as she came toward the woman. "What are you doing? Why have you come here at night?" She was mystified. Why would the woman leave her home and why was she so upset?

"Zelandoni!" Melodene cried out with relief when she saw Ayla coming toward her.

The hunter holding her let go of her arms and the two women embraced.

"I want to come with you. Please let me talk to you," Melodene pleaded. "I must leave the Chimu. It is not a good place for me anymore."

Ayla assured Tormaden that she would be responsible for the Chimu woman and led her to the guest hearth, asking Jonayla to make a small cooking fire and heat water for tea. Ayla could see how distraught the woman was and asked her, "What has happened to make you come to us in the dark like this? What has happened since we left you?" Ayla asked both questions rapidly, one after the other, as she held the younger woman's hands in hers.

"I-I'm considered a bad woman by most of my people. While the men were out with the Zelandonii, looking for the false Shaman they were occupied and didn't think about me that much. Now that everything is done, the men look at me with disgust in their eyes. They think I wanted to be a pleasure woman for the men of the Shaman, that I enjoyed it. Now no one wants me to be there anymore. Even though Camma has told them that I was forced, I still feel like an outcast and all but Camma shun me." Melodene's shoulders shook as she quietly sobbed in distress.

Ayla hugged the woman and said, "Surely things will settle down in time and if you have the support of your leader then they will get over their hostility. What about the men who have come back to First Place, what are the other men saying about them?"

"They don't like them and treat them coldly. But I am the only woman to survive and return. I can't defend myself when they say nasty things about me and throw garbage at me. I was even tripped and almost fell into a cooking fire this morning and no one said anything to the man who did it to me."

Ayla was shocked. "What about Camma? Didn't she say anything?"

"She was gone, riding one of those horses she traded your daughter for and even if she had been there, what could she do? They hate me, all of them. I need to get away from those people. It wasn't my fault," Melodene sobbed, "I had to follow my mate, didn't I? I've lost my children and my mate and I have no wish to remain there. Isn't there someplace I can go, someplace I can stay?"

"I will take her in."

Ayla looked up. "Willamar?" she said in surprise. "You would take this woman in?"

"Why not? Until she finds a mate of her own she can cook for me and help to care for my dwelling." Looking directly at Melodene, Willamar continued, "My mate walks the Spirit World. She gave me two children, raised them and then sickness took her. I now live alone and it would be good to have someone to share my time with." Willamar smiled at the distraught woman who sat across the fire from him.

Melodene looked at the old man and smiled through her tears. "I would be honored to share your dwelling. I will make you comfortable, cook and clean and help wherever I can. I don't want another mate but I would be grateful to stay with you for the rest of my life."

Willamar smiled in return, replying, "Well, it would probably be more accurate to say that you could stay with me for the rest of my life. I'm old and you're young, but at least I can give you a place to stay and offer you protection. It would make me happy to do that."

Ayla looked at the old man, the man she considered the elder of the Ninth Cave, the man who had mated with Marthona, Jondalar's mother, who in her turn had once been leader of the Ninth Cave. She watched as the woman came around the fire to sit beside Willamar and saw his face light up with a smile. Maybe this would be a good thing for both people, at least for now, she thought.

Ayla didn't think that Melodene would be content to be a caregiver for an old man for too long, she was an attractive woman. Although she was probably beyond child bearing age at twenty-eight summers, some man might still want her and who knew, she might still be able to produce a child, it wasn't unknown. From the look on both of their faces it was too late to try to suggest any alternatives. Maybe this was best for the time being. Melodene could be just what Willamar needed in a companion.

They all finished their tea. Jonayla doused the fire and Willamar made a place for Melodene to sleep beside him using extra furs taken from Jonayla's trade goods, and the family, plus one, settled down to sleep.

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Ayla and her family were up and ready to depart the next morning at first light. The Zelandoni of the Nineteenth Cave as well as her friend, Zelandoni of The First Wolf

Cave, were there to wish them a safe journey. Ayla hugged the man tightly and expressed her gratitude again for his memorial image of Wolf. She waved at the other people who had turned out to see them off. Her little group was now swelled by the addition of Durcan and Willamar - and now Melodene, who rode on Willamar's horse mounted in front of him. He held her loosely with one arm so she would not fall. Riding on an animal was new to Melodene. She felt excitement but couldn't decide if it was the horse or Willamar's arm causing it.

Chapter 29: Family

It would take just about a full day to travel by horseback from Hill Top Holding to Old Valley and the Summer Meeting, but Ayla wanted some time to be with just her family. She wanted to be able to relax a little bit before returning to the hustle and bustle of the Summer Meeting. She knew that they still had five days before the final Matrimonial. She also knew that the Zelandonii would expect the First Zelandoni to preside. That didn't mean they couldn't have just a few days to themselves.

When she mentioned to Jondalar that she would like to make camp for a few days so they could catch their breath a bit before returning to the Summer Meeting, he immediately agreed. In fact he was so delighted with her suggestion that she suspected that he had been thinking the same thing.

They followed The River south until early afternoon. They then took a smaller tributary to the east and followed it for a while. Ayla wanted to have yet more distance between her family and the main river, so they continued in single file along the tributary's edge. Ayla and Jondalar were leading, with Willamar and Melodene following behind.

Willamar was holding Melodene snugly now, telling her he was just being certain she wouldn't fall. Melodene was 'just being cautious,' as she leaned back into him, pointing out 'dangerous spots in the trail' that his horse should avoid. They were both smiling brightly, enjoying each other's company. Jonayla was behind the couple grinning at their antics. Cambarre was behind Jonayla and oblivious to what Jonayla was enjoying. Durcan ranged about on Lightning, looking for likely game trails.

As they followed the tributary river, they could see small brilliant green flashes of dragonflies flitting along the water's surface. Here and there were little backwater places where the river widened and the flow became sluggish. These places were so peaceful and serene that at every turn someone was suggesting this spot or that spot would be the perfect place to make camp.

Finally Ayla stopped and looked around her, noticing horsetails growing along the bank of a secluded beach formed from the wide looping tributary. Minnows flashed and darted in shoals as trout swam among smooth submerged rocks. Nodding water lilies poked their heads into the light as if seeking the sky urgently. There was no

sound but the wind rustling the reeds and the peeps of a duckling as it raced over the water to its mother.

"I think this will do, don't you Jondalar?" Ayla asked. "This is a quiet spot that we should have to ourselves for a few days without fear of disturbance."

"It's beautiful Ayla, the perfect place to relax," Jondalar smiled. He slipped from his horse's back and came over to stand by her, placing his hand casually on her thigh as she sat upon Summer Child.

Ayla looked down at Jondalar. He was as tall and handsome as ever. Even if he had lost quite a lot of weight, he was still a powerfully capable looking man. And when he looked up at her with his impossibly blue eyes and smiled at her, she felt her heart beat a little faster and the feel of his hand on her leg made her insides quiver.

Ayla flushed. She was surprised at the feelings he still caused her to experience - even after all these years. It had been over two moons since they had been with just family and almost that long since they'd shared pleasures.

It was her turn to make Jondalar's heart beat faster. All it took was Ayla's wide, bright loving smile in return as she placed her hand on his, pressing it into her thigh, reassuring him that her need was equal to his. "Yes, a beautiful place to relax," she murmured in reply.

As the rest of their small family unit arrived and dismounted, Ayla jumped down and hugged Jondalar, whispering in his ear, "I think we should be irresponsible and go for a swim while the young ones set up camp. What do you think?"

"Jonayla and Durcan, will you two begin to set up camp? Your mother and I are going exploring for a while. I am sure we can spot a pool or two to bathe in and my personal Zelandoni can check my wound. Cambarre, will you help set up camp too?"

"Of course. You don't need to ask, I assumed I would," the young man answered.

"I'll supervise," Willamar said, smiling, as he began to unpack his carry bags. Melodene immediately insisted that she would do that for him and suggested that he rest in the shade as befitted his dignity. Willamar snickered and was about to say something about dignity when she turned her eyes on him and put her fists to her hips as if waiting to challenge him.

Willamar, knowing when to retreat, smiled at her fondly and nodded, walking over to a fallen tree to sit and watch the preparations. "Like I said to Jondalar, I'll supervise... ONLY supervise... Yes indeed, Supervision is my purpose in life these days." He turned his head and winked at Jondalar.

Ayla quickly unloaded her carry bags. She hobbled Summer Child and laid some dried grass brought from Hilltop Holding within easy reach while Jondalar did the same for his horse. "I think I'll bring one of my woven tunics to wear while we're here, since the weather is so nice," Ayla said, eyes sparkling.

"I think I'll do the same," Jondalar said, a wide smile spreading across his face.

Ayla's heart increased its pace at her man's unmistakable signal, she had wondered in the back of her mind when they might pick up their lives as they had been before Jondalar had been wounded. She had purposefully not given it too much thought because she didn't know how long it would take for him to recover from such a serious injury and the subsequent illness.

They took their things and walked along the river's edge, hand in hand, until they came to another little tributary that had been dammed up by a community of beavers. It was a perfect little round pond with a small sandy spot big enough for two at the far side. Ayla was delighted, "Isn't this just lovely Jondalar? It's like our very own little world!"

"Yes it is," Jondalar replied, reaching out for his mate's shoulders and turning her toward him. Ayla moved up against him and kissed him. She was so happy, happier than she'd been in ages. To let the responsibility of her position go, for even a day, was like a heavy weight lifted from her mind and now to be here with Jondalar who only a few hands of time ago had been looking into the Spirit World, close to death, this was wonderful.

"Take off your clothing Jondalar," Ayla smiled.

"Are you in some sort of hurry lovely one?" he responded playfully.

"I want to look at your wound and see how it looks today. It's amazing what a small amount of that fungus did for your wound. It was like magic. Sometimes I'm amazed at the gifts that The Great Earth Mother provides Her children. I only hope I can find more." She earnestly hoped that she could.

Jondalar disengaged himself from her and pulled his leather tunic off over his head. Ayla wasted no time in inspecting the livid puckered remains of the shoulder wound. "It looks so much better. The healing process is well under way. It looks like it will be only a small scar in time. Move your arm over your head and tell me if it hurts."

Jondalar did as requested, wincing a little bit when his arm was fully extended above his head. "There is a little pain when I really stretch, but I know that will go away in time. I'm almost as good as new Ayla, thanks to your care. I just need exercise and some good meals to bring me back to my old self."

He smiled at Ayla and said, "As a matter-of-fact I'm ready for some exercise right now." His smile turned mischievous and wearing only his loincloth now, he stepped close and hugged Ayla tightly to his bare chest. She wanted him so badly, so very badly. It had been so long since they had shared pleasures that it almost seemed like the first time. Her heart was pounding in her chest and she was feeling a little wobbly in the knees.

"Let's go for a swim," she croaked. Clearing her voice in embarrassment, she continued, "I have some tallow soap and I'll wash you. Wash away all the pain and suffering you've had to endure over the past two moons." She pulled her own tunic off over her head, removed her leggings and loincloth then stepped into the pool.

Waist deep in the water, Ayla turned and said, "Well, are you coming?" She smiled her most dazzlingly inviting smile.

Jondalar had stood immobile, rooted to the ground as his passion rose to unmanageable levels as Ayla had stripped naked so close to him, so available and inviting. Standing there waist deep in the clear cool water, her trim torso and full womanly breasts bared, he could only stare. But when she asked if he would come into the water his dazed mind flashed back into action and he ripped his loincloth free. His passion obvious to her view, and waded into the cold water, feeling that he might be heating it a few degrees with his own body's passion.

They gave and received pleasure, standing up in the water waist deep, unable to wait any longer. Ayla was unable to stop herself from a noisy confirmation of Jondalar's vigorous efforts as her body convulsed around his massive manhood, a part of him that had always been a perfect fit for her, something that Jondalar had always been grateful for. So many women in the past had found him too big to accommodate, but with Ayla he could lose himself in her and enjoy the moment fully.

Finally, both of them sated and unable to stand much longer, Ayla slumped into Jondalar's arms, then they slowly disengaged to float back to the sandy spot to lie side by side, in a luxuriant afterglow of shared pleasure.

"That was something special Jondalar! If it wasn't so hard to go without for so long, I'd say it was almost worth the wait," she giggled happily.

"Yes, quite earthshaking," he said, lying back on the sand with just his legs still in the water. Ayla was watching him as she lay beside him. She loved this man, this strong capable man. This man who could make her feel like this. They had been together for almost twenty summers and they had had two children and had experienced ups and downs in their relationship, but she could still - at his touch - feel like a young girl experiencing the wonder of a first opening.

Ayla playfully rubbed sand on Jondalar's chest. Then, with mock surprise, said, "Oh my Jondalar, you have sand on your chest! Let's get back in the water and I'll wash it off for you." She soaped her hands and began to run them over his chest and up around his neck and then down to his belly and into the water, making his body tense with sensations. "I see that you are enjoying being washed," she smiled and moved closer to kiss him, resting her breasts against his chest as her hand moved down to encourage his readiness to begin again.

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As the afternoon light slanted in long striped shadows, showing that they had been away long enough, Jondalar and Ayla slowly dressed, murmuring their love and promising that they would return to this spot at least once more before they continued their journey south. Then, hand in hand, they strolled back toward the family campsite, sated and content beyond anything they had experienced in a very long time.

As the two entered the camp Jonayla said slyly, "Well, we finally made it back did we? When Cambarre heard a scream, he wanted to go and see if you two were alright. I told him that I thought you were better than alright and that he might be embarrassed if he did go to investigate."

Ayla felt a little embarrassed at the obviousness of their intimacy but the smile on Jondalar's face and that of her daughter's, made her match theirs with her own. "I'm grateful daughter; we didn't need any interruption this afternoon. It was so nice to

bathe in the stream and to remove the dirt and pain from the recent past. It's almost like being reborn," she sighed in contentment.

"Maybe Cambarre and I should borrow that soap later," Jonayla said, knowingly.

Ayla was looking around at the campsite and noticed that their tent had been set up and their travel gear had been arranged the way she liked it. "You set everything up? That was thoughtful of you. I would have done our things when we got back."

"I know mother, but Cambarre and I wanted to do it. You don't always have to do everything you know. Just keep relaxing like you did this afternoon. You deserve it," her daughter replied.

"Where are Willamar and Durc?" Ayla asked when she realized that they weren't present.

"Willamar went with Melodene, and they found a patch of blueberries. They're going to gather as many as they can so we'll have a tasty treat with dinner tonight. Durc is out stalking game on foot, looking for something for the pot as he always does," Jonayla smiled, enjoying how well organized they were as a family unit, something she knew would please her mother and father.

Ayla was feeling very content. She still held Jondalar's hand in hers, not wanting to let go. She felt so happy and wanted to keep that feeling for as long as she could. The late afternoon sun shown at a slant through the trees, indicating that evening was approaching. The days were shortening as summer marched relentlessly toward fall. The murmur of flowing water and the sounds of the forest gave a peaceful feeling to their day. Everything was as it should be. It reminded Ayla of a time many years before when she had been responsible for just herself and Jondalar, not the entire Zelandonii population.

She thought, fleetingly, and not for the first time, that if she were confronted with her past by the Zelandonii when they returned, she would ask Jondalar to come away with her and the children, back to the east. It might even be possible to travel all the way back to where her oldest son might still be. At the very least they could visit and perhaps even live with people who honored them for who they were and didn't criticize them for her past life.

As she was thinking these thoughts, the noise of breaking twigs intruded and she realized that she had let go of Jondalar's hand. He was sitting by their tent leaning

against the carry bags with his eyes closed, smiling. She looked toward the noise and saw Willamar and Melodene coming toward them carrying a cooking basket each, full to the top with blueberries. They were talking to each other animatedly and gave the impression of two children enjoying an adventure.

Ayla smiled at the scene, it had been a long time since Willamar had taken an interest in anything physical. She realized that since Marthona's death, he'd stopped doing many of the things he had done before. Almost like giving up. To her chagrin, she realized that she hadn't noticed that before. The contrast to the Willamar before Melodene and now was startling.

The sight of those two made her realize that she was spoiling the day by thinking about the future. A future that might not happen. Ayla waved a greeting and then went to sit beside Jondalar. He stirred and held out his hand, eyes still closed. For once she was going to just sit and relax, and not do anything. She took his hand in hers, snuggled against him, closed her eyes, and smiled. It felt strange to just be with Jondalar and have nothing else to consider. In a way it was an exciting feeling for someone who was always busy doing something, making, or planning something or talking to others about something that affected the community.

Their little campsite was idyllic, Ayla listened to Jonayla and Cambarre setting up the campfire stones and then, her eyes still closed, she heard the young couple leave to look for firewood. Ayla knew what she and Jondalar would have done when they were a new couple. They would have done more than just look for firewood. That thought made her think again about her daughter's impending children.

"Jondalar?" Ayla murmured. "I'm looking forward to having a baby in the family again."

Jondalar opened his eyes wide, "What? Ayla, you're not..."

"No Jondalar, I'm talking about our daughter's children. It will be good to have them around the place. It will mean that our family is growing and that I will always have family. I'll never forget when I had no one and it's just comforting to know that there will soon be three generations in our family."

Jondalar laid back and closed his eyes again. "You had me thinking I was going to be a father again."

"I'm probably too old, but it would be fun to try. I haven't taken anything to stop myself from making a child since we traveled north. You never know what the Mother's plans are for Her people, I've heard of women having children who are older than I am and who thought their child bearing years were over. I would be satisfied with our child's children though. Jonayla and Cambarre would make beautiful children together."

"Yes," Jondalar agreed sleepily.

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That evening they ate fresh roasted rabbit. Durcan had been lucky to find a pair of rabbits in a clearing. He'd killed them using his mother's sling technique. He was proud of his kills and returned to the camp just before dusk.

They skinned and dressed the rabbits and spitted them over the fire. Ayla had seen tubers growing a little way down the river near the little pool that she and Jondalar had found earlier in the day. She went to fetch some while Jonayla foraged for some late summer greens that were bursting with seeds and some watercress she'd seen growing in a little tributary stream on their way down the river earlier in the day.

What with Durcan's contribution, both women's vegetable finds, and Willamar and Melodene's blueberries, they feasted to their heart's content that night. After everyone had eaten their fill, they discussed their plans for the morrow. Of course Durcan wanted to hunt and everyone agreed that was a good idea and praised his find for their dinner that evening. Jonayla even asked if she could join him on his next day's hunt. "I haven't hunted in more than a full moon. Can I come with you little brother?"

Durcan smiled and agreed that it would be fine for her to come. He knew her talk of a lack of practice was just that, talk. He admitted that except for his mother, Jonayla was probably the best hunter he'd ever seen. Everyone said that. He thought that was because she could move so silently on the hunt. He was quiet but she even startled him sometimes when she came up next to him to whisper something about game movement. One moment he would be alone and the next she would be beside him, almost like magic.

Cambarre, knowing that three would be too many for a hunt suggested that he would stay in camp and work on repairing their travel tent, the one that had been his but that he now shared with Jonayla. It was showing signs of age and needed to

be patched. It had leaked during the last rain and he didn't want them getting wet again as fall moved forward and the rains became more frequent before the snow fell.

So it came to be that Jonayla and Durcan were the ones to discover the wolf pups.

Durcan had come across the tracks of a wolf and had pointed them out to his sister. That made them a bit nervous, but not so much so that they wanted to give up their hunt. They decided to go back up the tributary the way they had come to more open ground close to where the tributary met The River that ran from the north. It was here that Durcan almost stepped on the wolf. She was there protecting her den and if Jonayla hadn't been prepared with spearthrower in hand, Durcan might not have gotten away from the encounter unscathed.

It all happened so suddenly. Durcan and Jonayla had ridden down the river and hobbled their horses at the edge of an open meadow and Durcan was doing a perimeter check for Ptarmigan nests. They usually built their nests at the edge of meadows and some Ptarmigan would be most welcome.

Startled and instantly snarling, the predator hunkered down to attack Durcan. A slender bird spear miraculously sprouted from one of its eyes and the beast flipped over as if hitting a stone wall and lay inert before Durcan's feet. He gulped and looked over at his sister. "That was a good shot. And with a bird spear at that," he said, sounding relieved.

"It's what I had mounted in my spearthrower, so it was all I had to use. Glad it worked," she said, also very relieved. It had been a tight shot, if Durcan had moved suddenly she might have hit him instead of the wolf, but she felt she'd had no choice but to try.

Durcan looked down at the dead wolf. "She's got pups," he said.

Jonayla came over and squatted down beside the dead animal. Her teats were swollen. It was obvious that she was nursing. "Oh," she said in surprise. "Well, we need to find her family, don't you think? It's a bit late in the year to start a family, but not too late, I guess."

They went back to the horses and removed the empty carry baskets to use as holders if they found any pups. Then the two backtracked, using the wolf's spoor as their guide. It took some time to find the well camouflaged den and Durcan was

elected to crawl in to grab the pups. He received several scrapes and a couple of nips before pulling the three little varmints out of their den.

There were two gray males and an almost black female and they were all frightened. Jonayla decided that they should take the pups back to camp and then come back to skin the adult wolf so they wouldn't stress the pups any more than they had to by doing in front of them.

Everyone was surprised when the two showed up in camp with their whining little companions. Ayla was the first to realize what they had and she quickly went over to the two skittish horses. Jonayla was holding a carry basket with one pup and Durcan had two side by side in his basket. "Well," Ayla said, looking at her daughter. "You always said that you wanted to find some wolf pups, I guess you finally did!"

Ayla and Jondalar's expressions turned from interest to concern as their children told their tale. Life was always at risk, but this had been a close call that could have caused their idyllic time by the stream to change into something much darker. Every once in a while you heard something like this happening - a terrible thing that might have happened, but didn't - and it made one realize that luck was a random thing. Ayla sent a thought-prayer to the Spirits, thanking The Great Earth Mother for sparing her son. But all she said out loud was, "Now you're going to have to tame them."

"Can you hold them for us father?" Jonayla asked. "We were close to unearthing a Ptarmigan nest or two and we still have to skin the wolf for its pelt."

"You stay with the pups," Jondalar replied. "Maybe Cambarre will come with me to find those Ptarmigan nests and we can also get the pelt for you. You don't know how much work it is to train wolf pups. It took your mother many moons of continuous work to train Wolf. After all, they are wild animals and getting them to think of you as their pack leader doesn't happen overnight."

"Thank you!" Both Jonayla and Durcan said in unison. They were eager to begin training their new charges.

As the two men mounted their horses to go back up the river to retrieve the wolf pelt and hunt Ptarmigan for dinner, Jonayla enthusiastically said, "Mother, isn't it wonderful, we have three pups, one for Durcan, one for me and one for you. You get first choice."

Durcan looked concerned at that, he had already made his choice. He wanted the black female. She was different looking and she seemed to like him.

Ayla smiled at her children. "Thank you for your generosity daughter, but I'm not ready for a new companion right now, I still mourn Wolf."

"Then you decide who should get the third pup. Since we both decided you should have one, you should be the one who decides who gets it. I don't think I want the responsibility of deciding who should have a pup and from the look of him, Durc's going to be too occupied with that little black female to care about who gets the last one."

"If it were my choice I would suggest the Zelandoni who is first in the south. She has been a staunch friend of ours and I know she would appreciate the gift of a little wolf."

"Then that is what we'll do. As soon as we get back to the Summer Meeting that will be one of the first things I do. Do you think she will really want one?" Jonayla suddenly felt a maternal concern for the pups.

"I'm certain of it. She expressed an interest. And if she didn't want one you can be sure that she would say so. But you needn't worry, I'm sure she will be most grateful for the gift."

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The rest of the afternoon was filled with the antics of the little furry animals. They took to the constant attention and when Jonayla and Durcan fed them little treats of venison jerky and fat laden pemmican, they quickly became frisky and hungry little terrors.

By that evening Ayla concluded they would need to leave the next day for the Summer Meeting. She would have liked to stay in this idyllic spot for at least another day, but it was important to get the third pup to the southern Donier without delay or it would become confused and make the taming process that much more difficult.

So it was, that after they had eaten their dinner of Ptarmigan supplemented with venison stew and some more of those delicious blueberries, Ayla brought up the subject of their departure. "I hadn't planned on leaving tomorrow, but with the pups and the need to give the third one to the southern Donier as soon as possible, I feel

we should leave in the morning. It is only a few hours ride and Jonayla and Durcan will be able to put their little gift into her hands before mid-day tomorrow."

"I hate to leave this place so soon," Jondalar said a bit wistfully. "I was hoping to visit our little pool again before we left, but I guess you're right. If we feed the little fellow much longer he'll be bonded to us. If you want to give him to the southern Zelandoni, then I agree, the sooner, the better."

Jonayla took her pup into the tent with Cambarre that night; Durcan took his black wolf pup into his tent. Ayla and Jondalar took in the third pup for the night. They were careful to collar the animals with a bit of thong, although it proved unnecessary. All three pups settled down and slept through the night, exhausted from their traumatic experience and the energy expended throughout the day.

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Sunlight was breaking through the trees, hitting the river, and causing it to sparkle as they broke camp the next morning. Ayla took a few moments to breathe in the calming scents of their surroundings. She would miss this place, maybe someday she and Jondalar could return, just the two of them, for a few days.

With a sigh, she mounted Summer Child with one smooth leap and turned to see her family climbing on to their mounts. Melodene was still astride Willamar's horse, seated in front of him. She was new to riding, but felt safe with his arm around her waist, even safer when he held her tight.

Ayla suspected womanly wiles rather than fear of learning to ride, but that was alright with her. Melodene was bringing Willamar back to life. He already looked younger and certainly was acting more interested in life than only a hand of time ago.

Ayla turned her mount and headed back the way they had come. They would be back in the arms of the Zelandonii before midday. For better or worse. Home again.

Chapter 30: The Spear

They were less than an hour away from the Summer Meeting when they heard a man's loud scream from west of the riverbank. Then a woman's scream could be heard, and the unmistakable roar of a cave lion in the same direction as the screams.

Jondalar and Cambarre turned their mounts toward the sounds. Ayla looked at her children and said in a commanding voice, one that would brook no decent, "Stay here! Protect Willamar and Melodene!" She then turned Summer Child and put the horse into a full gallop. Jondalar and Cambarre only moments behind her.

Jonayla was agitated. She wanted to follow them, after all, her man had gone into danger too. But she looked at Durcan and the others and knew that if she went after her mother, her brother would follow, leaving Willamar and Melodene without any real weapons to protect themselves. Willamar only had a belt knife and Melodene had nothing more than a throwing stick to bring down birds.

Jonayla swallowed her frustration and sat upon Gray, gritting her teeth and waiting for events to unfold. She knew this was the responsible thing to do but it grated on her nerves just the same.

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Knowing that he wouldn't be able to stop Ayla from her headlong charge, Jondalar signaled Cambarre to go right, while he went to the left. This way they would hopefully be able to take on the animal from multiple directions or at the very least confuse it.

Ayla heard the grunts and groans, the sounds that lions made to warn other lions to stay away, or more worrisome, to let other lions in their pride know where they were. She rode directly at those sounds and urged her nervous horse around an outcropping of rock with bushes and scrubby little trees growing between cracks in the stone. She burst onto the scene first and was suddenly facing a fully grown three hundred pound cave lion not more than twenty paces away.

Ayla didn't stop to think about the danger. She knew that the animal was the largest and most deadly of predators and that even a spearthrower would be next to

useless against it unless she were lucky enough to hit one of its eyes. If she hadn't been so worried about the people cowering so terribly close to the beast she wouldn't have made the mistake that she would soon regret.

Instead of grabbing her spearthrower as she dismounted, she jumped to the ground first, then turned to reach for her weapon. Between the sight of blood and the scent of cave lion, Summer Child was nearly frantic with fear. When the horse felt Ayla's weight removed from her back she reared up and turned in one motion, snagging the Clan spear against a scrubby little tree. Momentarily caught by shrub, the spear pulled loose from its bindings and fell to the ground. This all happened so quickly that Ayla didn't have an opportunity to grab her spearthrower before Summer Child had galloped away leaving her weaponless.

Ayla saw the huge lion drop a lifeless man from its jaws and crouch over him, looking at her threateningly. Then came an angry growl. She knew that the vicious predator could clear the space between them in only seconds. The lion could be on her, tearing her apart before she could even reach down for the Clan spear at her feet.

Jondalar and Cambarre knew they wouldn't be able to reach Ayla in time. They glanced at each other then began to shout and scream, moving away from each other, waving their arms in an effort to distract the beast. The lion angrily turned for a moment to survey the noise for any imminent danger then turned back to Ayla.

Ayla saw her men and knew they didn't have a good angle for their spearthrowers. 'You're too late Jondalar,' she thought. Then she heard them yelling loudly and waving their arms. Thankfully, the lion twisted his body toward the sounds for a moment, giving her a chance to reach down and pick up the Clan spear.

Ayla knew that she was going to die and she felt a detached sadness about that. Only this very morning her biggest worry had been her son's unhappiness. Now, suddenly, she had stumbled upon the scene of her own death. The thought of not being there to see her children grow up... to know that yesterday was the last time she would ever lie in her lover's arms...

Even as these thoughts passed through her mind, her body reacted instinctively to the situation. In the few seconds that she had to react, Ayla knelt and shoved the stout Clan spear butt-first into the stony ground beneath her. She aimed the fire-hardened point toward the sky, anticipating the huge beast would leap forward to take her life.

In that moment, everything slowed down, or so it seemed. Ayla felt as if she were wading through water, at the same time she saw everything in minute detail. Her surroundings were in crystal clear focus. Every smell, every sound, every movement was noted and cataloged, her concentration was perfect, like nothing she'd ever experienced before.

Ayla watched, wide-eyed as the tawny predator leapt with its jaws wide, showing sharp carnassial fangs made for slicing into its prey. She saw the large, black, retractable claws - built to hook and hold its prey - fully extended ready to tear her apart. The vicious animal was right on target to kill her.

Feeling pitifully small and weak against such a massive beast, Ayla gripped the spear white-knuckled and held her breath. The angle of Cave Lion's jump was such that it took the point of the Clan spear directly into the center of its chest. If the spear had been of normal Zelandonii design it would most likely have shattered, allowing the Cave lion to maul her.

The stout Clan spear skewered the Cave Lion's massive pounding heart, stopping it in mid-beat. The huge cat died instantly, but its momentum took the spear up and over, pulling Ayla along with it. The beast slammed face first into the ground behind her, silent and unmoving.

As the animal tumbled over her, knocking her backward, Ayla felt a white-hot slice along her left shoulder as the claws of one massive paw raked across it, tearing her leather tunic and digging into her flesh.

It took Ayla a few moments to gather her wits. The shock of the attack and the pain in her shoulder made her feel numb, but when she realized that she was still alive, and the lion was lying dead beside her, she sobbed in relief and rolled over into a sitting position.

"Ayla, Ayla, are you alright?" Jondalar came to a skidding halt beside her then grabbed her torn leather tunic to look at her wounded shoulder. "You're clawed!" he cried.

"I'm alright Jondalar, it's just a scratch. Go check on that man over there." She pointed at the inert body of a man a few horse lengths away, but Cambarre was already there kneeling over the man.

Hearing the woman's sobs of distress Ayla ignored the pain in her shoulder and shook her head to clear her vision, slowly regaining her feet. She'd almost died, but she quickly pulled herself together. Again, hearing sobs of distress, Ayla went to the mother and child.

The child was a boy of maybe seven or eight and blood was smeared all over his right side. He appeared to be unconscious. Ayla looked at the disheveled woman and said quietly and as confidently as possible, "Let me see the child, I am a healer." She meant to say Zelandoni, but she was still in shock and it just came out that way.

The woman knew Ayla was the First Zelandoni. Who didn't? She was desperate and the other's manner was reassuring enough for her to place complete trust in her. She released her grip on her child and Ayla pulled the boy away from her to lay him out on the rough ground to inspect his wound.

The wounds weren't nearly as bad as she thought they would be. Although any lion scratch might very well be fatal from corruption, these wounds weren't deep, more like bad scratches. There was also a red spot and a small abrasion at the side of his head that looked like it would turn into a bruise. The boy must have hit his head. "Was the child attacked?" she asked. "This wound isn't very deep."

The woman looked at Ayla with red rimmed eyes and wailed, "Robinar saw the lion attacking his father and ran to stop the attack but the lion just swatted him away. My son was trying to save his father." Ayla tried to reassure the woman. "In a way it is good that Robinar is unconscious. He will feel no pain as I wash and bandage his wounds."

Ayla thought to herself, 'What a brave little boy. It would take a lot of courage to charge a Cave Lion.' She looked down at him and said the woman, "Do you have water? I need to clean this wound as quickly as possible. The longer it stays unwashed, the more time the lion's poison has to work on him."

The woman scrambled to her feet and ran to a collapsed tent structure and rummaged around under it. She then hurried back with a half-filled water skin and a woven tunic to wipe away the blood. "Thank you, this will do fine," Ayla said.

During this time, Jondalar had retrieved Ayla's horse and brought her medicine pouch and the few pieces of woven cloth that were left for bandages. Once she had cleaned the boy's wounds and bandaged them, Jondalar insisted she let him clean her wound. Ayla did as he asked.

Cambarre came over and said quietly, "The man is dead. He was bitten in the throat." The woman who had hovered over Ayla as her child's wounds were treated cried out and ran to her fallen mate and knelt beside him. She'd been so worried about her son that she hadn't wanted to leave his side. Now that help had arrived, she left her child and knelt beside her mate in tears.

"Jondalar, go to her. Cambarre, go get the others. We'll be here a while and I don't want them to worry any longer than they have to. Besides, there might be another lion in the vicinity and we will be safer all together rather than spread out in smaller groups." Both men did her bidding and moved immediately to their tasks.

Jondalar knelt beside the grieving woman and the dead man. He felt for the woman as, only moments ago, he feared that he'd lost his own mate. Now this woman was experiencing those same feelings, except that she was in no doubt that her mate was dead.

Cambarre led Jonayla and the others to the site of the attack and as soon as she saw the lion's dead body and the bloody ground Jonayla screamed, "Mother!" She jumped from Gray's back and raced to her mother's side. Ayla was naked to the waist, leaning over a young boy. There was blood oozing through a rough bandage wrapped about Ayla's shoulder and Jonayla was instantly concerned for her, but Ayla waved her concern away and asked her to start a fire and boil water.

"I'll get a fire going and make an infusion of hypericum, symphytum for your wound and the boy's too," Jonayla said, rising to fetch some wood for a fire.

Cambarre stopped her, "I'll get the fire going. You help Zelandoni with the mother and boy." He found there was firewood already stacked beside the campfire ring close to what was left of the tent.

"Jonayla, an infusion will be good to wash the wounds, but would you get the honey from the carry bag too? Honey is what we need most for this type of wound," Ayla said.

Jondalar was walking back with the woman. She was so distraught that she could barely walk unaided. "I can reset the tent so we have a place for the boy to rest. Do you think we should stay here for the day?"

"No Jondalar, I think we should get back to the Zelandoni lodge as soon as possible. Why don't you and Cambarre make a couple of travois so we can take... I'm sorry, I don't know your mate's name." Ayla looked at the woman who Jondalar was still holding upright.

"His name is... was Blandar," she said. "My name is Eyzinah, and I thank you for what you've done First Zelandoni. You saved my son's life; he would be dead now and so would I if you hadn't risked your life for us."

"Eyzinah, we need to get your son back to the Zelandoni lodge as soon as possible, can you travel? We're not far away and you can ride doubled up with one of the men. I don't see your horses and don't think we have time to try to find them."

"Yes, I can do whatever you say. You do think my son will live, don't you? I've heard that a lion's claws can be fatal, if the wound is deep," she said. Then noticing for the first time the open wound on Ayla's shoulder she gasped, putting the back of her hand to her mouth. "You've been clawed too!"

"Compared to what might have happened, your son and I got off lightly," Ayla said, trying to make herself sound unconcerned.

As Ayla talked to Eyzinah she learned that Blandar and his family had decided to leave for their home cave early, as many people did toward the end of the summer season. They lived at South Face Holding, which was one of three caves that made up the Twenty-Ninth group of holdings. Even though Blandar knew that traveling in groups would be safer and that lions shy away from larger groups, he hadn't wanted to wait until others were ready to leave and that decision had cost him his life.

When Jonayla had completed the preparation of the infusion, Ayla washed the boy's wounds with it and applied a liberal coating of honey, then wrapped the last of the woven cloth she had with her around the boy's torso. As she tied off the binding cloth she reflected on how chance and decisions that people made could affect them in ways that they hadn't thought of. Blandar's decision had certainly affected him. Eyzinah, her son Robinar and Ayla could have been killed too.

A silent Ayla allowed her daughter to wash and coat her wounds with honey and rewrap her wound using her spare tunic as bandage. Even though Jonayla offered her own spare tunic to her mother to replace the bloody and torn one she had worn before the lion attack, Ayla decided that she would go without a tunic for the time

being until they got back to their own summer lodge. Her shoulder hurt fiercely, as if on fire, and she didn't want anything rubbing against her throbbing injuries.

In the meantime, Willamar and Melodene had built a third travois to haul the cave lion's body. There was no time to skin it, but neither he nor Jondalar wanted to leave the pelt behind to be destroyed by carrion eaters, so they gutted it to reduce the weight. Willamar planned to skin it as soon as he could get it back to the Ninth Cave's summer camp.

It was less than two hours after the confrontation with the cave lion that the group set out again for the Summer Meeting; their ranks swollen by two more souls and two bodies, one man and one beast.

Ayla led the way, with Jondalar at her side. Jonayla followed with a travois that held the still unconscious boy, Robinar. The boy's mother, Eyzinah, rode mounted in front of Cambarre. A second travois containing the body of Blandar was being pulled by Durcan. Bringing up the rear was Willamar with Melodene seated in front of him. Their travois, holding the dead body of the gutted cave lion, was being pulled by a very nervous horse.

Ayla's bloody Clan spear was nestled in the crook of her arm as they reached the outskirts of the Summer Meeting.

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Jondalar was concerned about Ayla. She seemed a bit shaky, and who wouldn't be? He thought to himself, but as he surreptitiously glanced sideways at her from time to time, he noticed that she seemed to be trembling slightly. He could see that her grip on the spear was making her knuckles whiten and that she had an unfocused intenseness in her gaze as if looking inward.

"Ayla," he said quietly as they entered the perimeter of the Summer Meeting grounds. "Are you alright?"

Ayla only nodded and kept looking straight ahead as if in a trance, not really taking in her surroundings. They began to enter the hustle and bustle of the Summer Meeting and as they passed people there was a hush and activities stopped as people turned to stare.

Ayla rode on, still not looking around her, but Jondalar could see the reaction of the Zelandonii people. Then he realized what his small group must look like; their First Zelandoni was naked to the waist and had a bandaged shoulder, her left side was smeared with blood, her leggings soaked in the boy's blood, and she was holding a Clan spear covered with dried blood. Jonayla's horse pulled a travois carrying an injured boy, the boy's mother, Eyzinah, was sobbing as she rode double with Cambarre. The worst sight was Durcan pulling a travois carrying the boy's dead father. Willamar and Melodene were the last of the group and dragging a travois holding a gutted cave lion.

"Ayla," Jondalar said, reaching out to touch her.

Ayla flinched as if woken from a sound sleep.

"Ayla, we should turn toward the Zelandoni lodge. We are a spectacle with all this blood and that cave lion," Jondalar said with concern. Ayla looked down at her blood soaked leggings and seemed to notice for the first time what she must look like. She looked at Jondalar with her eyes now focused. Then she looked around at the people staring at them and then at those following. "Yes, you're right Jondalar. Willamar, please take the lion directly to the Ninth Cave's lodge. We will head straight to the Zelandoni lodge."

Willamar and Melodene rode away, dragging the travois holding the dead cave lion. Ayla, Jondalar, her daughter and Cambarre trotted their laden horses up the well-used path to the Zelandoni lodge.

"Zelandoni!"

It was the Acolyte from the Fifth Cave, what was her name? "Gandora," Ayla recalled, greeting the young woman who served her friend, the Donier of the Fifth.

Gandora had been standing just outside the opening of the Zelandoni lodge and now ducked in, holding the hide door to one side and called out that the First Zelandoni had returned. In moments there were other Doniers and their Acolytes filing out only to stand in surprise at the scene before them.

Ayla was beginning to feel light headed and a sheen of sweat had broken out on her forehead. She felt ill, but knew that she needed to settle the wounded child and his mother before she could rest. "Would someone help carry Robinar into the lodge and help his mother down from Cambarre's horse. I would appreciate it if someone

would also take the body of Blandar into the lodge so that he may be prepared for burial."

Ayla swayed atop Summer Child. She felt her head swimming. It must be the shock of the killings, she thought. But as she dismounted her knees went weak and she started to fall. Jondalar had been worried about her and was at her side to help her down from Summer Child. It ended up that he caught her in his arms as she fell from the horse. He carried her into the lodge and finding an empty pallet, he laid her on it.

"Jondalar, I'm alright. It's just that I'm a little shaky from all that's happened," Ayla mumbled distractedly.

Jondalar wasn't convinced, he'd been watching her ever since the confrontation with the cave lion and he thought that she might be suffering from the poison associated with cat claw wounds and said so. "Ayla," he said. "I think you're running a fever."

"No, I was only scratched," she replied. "Jonayla washed the wound well and we had honey. I think it's just that I'm tired and sore. It was a big lion and I was frightened and thought I was going to die."

But she soon became more feverish and began to sweat profusely as did the child Robinar. Finally Ayla spoke to her colleague, the first Zelandoni from the southern caves and asked her to use some of the precious magic fungus for the child.

"But what about you?" the Donier asked.

"I want to keep what little is left, so we can compare it to samples we find. Jonayla can keep my little scratches clean. I am strong and I will recover," Ayla said quietly. "This is important. Don't dose me even if I become sicker. I'll get well, they're just scratches."

The southern Donier made the magic fungus infusion as she'd seen the First Zelandoni do when she had treated Jondalar north of the river Neema. As she had been instructed, she held back on using the entire remaining fungus. This would have been required to treat both the child and the First Zelandoni.

It was amazing how fast the boy recovered. It seemed that almost from the moment he had received the first oral dose of the infusion, he began to heal. His burning

forehead cooled and his restless young body quieted. Soon he slept the healing sleep.

Not so for the Zelandoni leader. Her fever climbed. Jondalar asked that the fungus be prepared for her. "It was her wish to keep back some of the fungus. If I dose her, there will be none left and I will be disobeying her direct request," the southern Donier said.

"This fever has come so quickly. It isn't normal that a person should be so sick so soon and from just a few scratches. I'm concerned that Ayla didn't know what would happen and now she is lost in fever and can't give further instructions. I insist that you give her the magic fungus!" Jondalar said in a demanding voice.

In anxious indecision, the southern Donier held out, trying to follow her leader's instructions. As she sat through the night of fever, she realized that it would probably not abate. She knew that if the remaining magic fungus was not used, the woman she honored above all others would surely die. Maybe this fungus was a gift from the Mother and it was given to her children just for this purpose, to save this worthy daughter.

Early the next morning the southern Donier conferred with all of the Zelandonia who had remained in the lodge to tend the child and mother and to watch over their leader. Jondalar and Jonayla had remained there during the night and added their voice to the discussion. Jondalar threatened that if they didn't use the magic fungus now, he would resort to violence to get it and use it.

Jonayla, being more subtle and knowing what would work better with the spiritual leaders, made a convincing case that if her mother died, no one among the Zelandonia would be as capable to use the small amount of remaining fungus to find more.

They finally decided to prepare the remaining magic substance into the life giving infusion. Jonayla, kneeling beside her mother's fever ravaged body cradled her head in the crook of her arm. Brushing moist strands of hair from her forehead, she carefully dripped the life-giving liquid between her mother's dry lips until it was all gone. Then she prayed that this one dose would work as well as it had for the boy, who was still sleeping comfortably on the other side of the lodge.

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While Ayla lay in a fevered stupor, the news of what had happened; her illness, the confrontation with the cave lion, the death of Blandar, and the wounding of his son, Robinar, ran like wildfire through the Summer Meeting.

It had been an eventful summer as most summers were when the people gathered after a harsh winter to trade and find mates and to greet friends and family. But this was probably the most significant event of the summer after the journey to the north and the confrontations that took place there. This was more immediate because it was taking place in their midst. They had all seen their bloodied First Zelandoni riding through camp with an injured boy, his dead father and the cave lion that had killed him. They also heard stories of her being attacked by the cave lion.

By the morning of the new day, everyone had heard the story of how their First Zelandoni had killed a hunting cave lion all by herself with nothing but a Clan spear. The spear itself had been placed beside the Zelandoni lodge openly on display. Its strange carvings were commented upon and its massive shaft made the people wonder what sort of hunter could wield it.

Ayla was already on the mend, sitting up and drinking broth by the time the storytellers had devised their songs and stories about the Great Earth Mother's Daughter who had defended her people with the magic spear. The stories and songs soon told of her confrontation. One frail female overcoming the most awesome predator any of them could imagine. It was almost inconceivable that anyone could come out of a confrontation like that alive. Ayla had now done it twice.

Ayla knew that it was mere chance that she was still alive. If the spear hadn't been as strong as it was or if the butt of the spear had slipped, she would have been ripped apart by giant teeth and needle sharp claws. No one would have been able to stop the huge cat before Ayla had been sent on her way to the Spirit World. When the Clan Mog-ur gave Ayla the spear, he told her it carried protective spirits. 'Indeed it does,' thought Ayla.

When she found out that they had decided to use the last of the Clan fungus to save her life, she accepted that the Mother may have had that in mind when She had placed it into her hands. But she regretted that they had to use it.

Ayla was cheered when Robinar was moved to a pallet beside hers. He was recovering quickly. She left her own bed to kneel beside his and inspect his wound. It would leave a fearsome scar. She told him about Jondalar's scar and said that he himself would have a story that he could tell for the rest of his life.

They shared a sad moment when she talked about his father's death. She assured the boy that his father would be in a kinder place, walking in the Spirit World with his ancestors. "Yes, I know that the Spirit World may seem a frightening place to us, but when we go there we will all be welcomed and it will not be scary to us then," she assured him.

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"I thought that we would be lucky this summer," said the Donier of the Fifth Cave. "Until Blandar's death we hadn't lost anyone this season," he paused, "at least not here, at the Summer Meeting." The same couldn't be said about the events in the north.

"Are the preparations made for his burial? I think his son should attend. He could be carried and if we bandage his wound well, he will be safe from Evil Spirits. I think it is important for a son to see his father's burial ceremony and not to just hear about it from others," Ayla said with conviction.

"Yes Zelandoni, everything is ready, we were only waiting to see if you would be well enough to conduct the ceremony. It is always best with things like this, something that affects the whole Summer Meeting, to have the First Zelandoni preside over the ceremony. It helps to settle the people. We still have the last Matrimonial to get through, and unfortunately, so soon after the burial ceremony. It's most unusual," the Donier of the Fifth Cave concluded.

Jondalar sat at the foot of Ayla's pallet. "Blandar's cave has supplied the men, his grave has been dug and awaits him. Since all but a few of his people are here, the leader of South Face has accepted a place for Blandar in Old Valley's hallowed burial grounds. The only problem is that his burial clothes are back at his home cave. Some of the young men of South Face have decided to ride back and get his things. They should already have returned, since it is no more than a half a day's round trip by horse."

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The next morning dawned cloudless, but with a hint of summer's end in the air. The sky turned from a dusky blue to a bright cornflower by the time Ayla was up from her sick bed. Again Jondalar had stayed by her side through the night, even after she had assured him she was recuperating.

Blandar's burial ceremony was to be performed by a still weak Ayla and her fellow Zelandonia that day. She wanted to inspect the body that had been prepared for burial since she would be leading his spirit on its journey.

The dead man had been laid out on a raised platform covered by a woven mat. His body had been washed and his wounds had been wrapped in woven flax material to protect them from evil spirits.

Blandar's friends had returned the evening before with his burial clothes and his best hunting weapons had been retrieved from the site of his death and now lay beside him on the mat. There were also some of the tools and implements for making blades, including rawhide thongs and resins to be included in his woven burial shroud.

Before coming to live with the Zelandonii, burial clothing was unknown to her, but Ayla felt deep down inside that it was a good and honorable tradition to dress the departed this way. It was a show of respect and love.

Blandar had been an accomplished Knapper, one who was known for his fine axe blades and spearthrower points. Even Jondalar knew of his work and had praised it. Because of his skill in the field of knapping, his leather tunic was meticulously painted with stylized spears, cutting knives and axe blades.

The colors used on his tunic were bright; brighter than anyone would wear normally, but these were burial clothes for the afterlife and because of that, they could be as bright and garish as the owner desired. Everyone knew that the Spirit World was a dimmer version of the earth they walked in life, and to be noticed, one would need to stand out.

Eyzinah, Blandar's mate, had been taken to her Cave's summer camp by a Donier and instructed to rest. Eyzinah had stopped by several times since to check on her son and quietly sit by her dead mate. The Zelandonia had screened off the dead man's body from the rest of the lodge to give him a quiet space to rest so his spirit would not be disturbed until the burial could take place.

Ayla had talked to Eyzinah and several hunters from South Face Holding to get his story. It would be her responsibility, as First Zelandoni, to introduce him to the Spirits that would lead him to the other side.

Ayla sat behind the screen with Blandar thinking about the ceremony that would take place soon when voice intruded into her thoughts. She turned to see the Zelandoni of the Third Cave standing near the edge of the screen. She realized that the other had come to sew up the mat that would contain the dead man's body. "Zelandoni," Ayla murmured.

"Zelandoni," the Third returned in a properly subdued voice. Ayla nodded to her friend and colleague and left the quiet space so he would have peace and quiet to complete his task of preparation.

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Because of the size of the Summer Meeting, not everyone could attend Blandar's burial ceremony. Many would not want to as they didn't know him, but those that did would want to honor the man by seeing him helped on his way to the Spirit World. Therefore there would be room made for anyone who wanted to attend. Because this tragedy had happened during the Summer Meeting, it affected them all and therefore all Zelandonia and cave leaders would attend to represent their caves.

As usual, many of the people had already gathered around the temporary burial shelter that had been built the day before. The mesh panels had been removed and the wrapped body of Blandar was then suspended over the grave-pit by wooden poles and ropes made of sinew.

Many people had worked on Blandar's grave ceremony. From the men of his cave who dug the grave-pit in the hallowed ground, to the women from many caves who had prepared the food for the burial feast that would celebrate Blandar's life after the burial ceremony was over.

As all of the Zelandonia and the leaders of the Caves arranged themselves around the burial shelter, the people attending the ceremony began to sit down on the ground and grow quiet. A large plate had been filled with choice portions of food from the prepared feast, including choice slices of bison.

In her weakened state, Ayla leaned on the carved Clan spear for support. After all, the spear had killed the cave lion that had killed Blandar, it seemed a fitting support staff to steady her step. With one hand, Ayla picked up the platter of food and held it high for everyone to see. Then she placed it beside Blandar's shrouded body.

"The Zelandonii hold this feast in your honor Blandar," she said, addressing the dead man. "Please join us now so we may wish your spirit a good journey as you travel to the next world.

"Blandar was a good and honorable man who cared for his mate Eyzinah and his son Robinar. He was a useful member of the Zelandonii people and a valued member of South Face Holding. Blandar, you will be missed by all."

As First Zelandoni, Ayla had to use the man's name three times during the ceremony to insure that The Great Earth Mother heard his name. Having completed the ritual, she indicated the food on the many tables and finished by saying, "Come everyone, feast in honor of our departed brother."

From this moment on, his name would not be used. It would only confuse his spirit to hear it spoken. The Spirit must cross over and it was everyone's responsibility to help it do so.

Ayla, as First Zelandoni, picked up a woven basket containing red ochre and recited the burial charter. "There are Five Sacred Colors. All other colors are aspects of those primary colors. The first color is red," Ayla began the formulaic refrain. "It is the color of blood, the color of life. Some flowers and fruits show the true color of red, but they are ephemeral.

"Red seldom stays true for long. As blood dries it darkens, becomes brown. Brown is an aspect of red, sometimes called old red. The red ochre's of the land are the dried blood of The Great Earth Mother, and though some can be almost as bright as new red, they are all old red.

"Covered with the red of blood from your mother's womb, you came into this world. Covered with the red earth of The Great Earth Mother's womb, your body shall return to Her to be born again into the next world as you were born into this one." Ayla said these things as she sprinkled Blandar's shrouded body from head to toe with the red powder.

"The fifth primary color is dark, sometimes called black," Ayla chanted. "Dark is the color of night, the color in deep caves, the color of charcoal, after fire has burned the life out of wood. Some say charcoal black is really the darkest shade of old red. It is the color that overcomes life as it ages. Just as life becomes death, red becomes dark black. Dark is the absence of life; it is the color of death.

"To our departed friend, the body your Élan inhabited has died and will go into the black under the ground. It will return to the dark earth of the Mother, but your Élan, your spirit, will go to the world of the spirits. It will return to the Mother, the Original Source of all Life.

"Take with you your favorite spear to hunt the spirit animals for sustenance," she said, putting his spear beside him and sprinkled it with red ochre. "Take with you your tools to make new spears for the hunters of the next world." She put his tools atop the shrouded body and sprinkled it with the red powder. "May your spirit go freely, go confidently. Do not look back. Do not linger. Your next life awaits you."

The grave goods were arranged around him. The food, in rawhide containers, was placed on top of the grass-mat shroud covering his body. The same men who had dug the pit in the sacred burial ground stood at either edge of his final resting place ready to lower him into the ground.

Gripping the Clan spear for support, Ayla raised her voice to chant the Mother's Song:

"Out of the darkness, the chaos of time,
The whirlwind gave birth to the Mother sublime.
She woke to Herself knowing life had great worth,
The dark empty void grieved The Great Earth Mother."

The people responded in unison, some singing, some just saying the words.

Then all of the Zelandonia chimed in:

"From the dust of Her birth She created the other,
A pale shining friend, a companion, a brother.
They grew up together, learned to love and to care,
And when She was ready, they decided to pair."

All the people responded again -- and so it went until the final refrain:

"Her last Gift, the Knowledge that man has his part.
His need must be spent before new life can start.
It honors the Mother when the couple is pared,
Because woman conceives when Pleasures are shared.
Earth's Children were blessed. The Mother could rest."

Everyone knew this last part had come from a revelation their First Zelandoni had experienced during her calling to the Zelandonia, a revelation that had changed all of their lives.

As Ayla's ceremonial recitation came to an end, the people began to line up at the table to take their portions of food to join Blandar in his funeral feast. Since this was a formal public occasion, there was a specific order they would take in their assembly. They lined up according to their understood, but seldom displayed status. This allowed them to announce their place in this world to the spirits of the next and to assist Blandar's spirit in making the transition that he must. His close relatives and then his friends from his home cave would be first in line.

Later, as the people began to leave to return to their summer lodges, many reflected, not for the first time, on pleasures and the birth of children. How was it that they hadn't put the two together before? It had taken the First Zelandoni to make them realize the significance of the act. Now, with hind-sight, it seemed so obvious, but before her revelation everyone had thought differently.

The ceremony complete, Ayla was feeling tired and needed to lie down. She would rest and then see how Robinar and Eyzinah were doing in the morning.

Chapter 31: Unexpected Things

Ayla opened her eyes. For a moment she wasn't sure where she was. Then with a sigh she lay back on the furs and listened to the familiar sounds of the people of the Ninth Cave's summer camp as they began their day. She could hear the children's voices raised in cheerful play just beyond the lodge entrance and she heard someone in the shelter moving around, clearing their sleeping things away for the day.

Ayla still felt drained, but she also felt stronger than the day before. She had less pain this morning than she'd experienced over the past several days. It was time to get up, she needed to check on Robinar. As she sat up, the hide door-flap at the entrance to the lodge was moved aside and the first Zelandoni from the southern caves stepped in.

"Greetings Zelandoni," the other woman said, smiling. "How are you feeling this morning?"

Ayla replied, "Still a bit sore, but improving. I guess I was tired, I didn't mean to sleep so late."

"Nonsense, it is still early, the sun has only just shown itself over the eastern ridge," the other said. "I wanted to speak to you first thing this morning. I was hoping to talk to you as soon as you returned, but with everything that has happened, this is really the first opportunity that I've had."

Ayla didn't want to face any problems this morning. She was sure that she knew what the Donier wanted to talk about. Any unpleasantness about her Clan past and about her son Durc could wait until later. "Zelandoni, I would like to see Robinar and then spend some time with my family before confronting any problems there may be to resolve."

"Yes, of course," The Donier said. "It's only that when I heard you had returned and before I knew you were injured, I had sent out a call to all the Zelandoni as you requested, to arrange a meeting for all the chosen. Several of the Caves will be leaving right after the last matrimonial two days from now. I thought we should have our meeting today, if possible. But if you don't feel up to it..." The southerner trailed off.

"I see," Ayla said, feeling a little cross. Was there always something that had to be done, always some problem that had to be resolved? Why couldn't the Zelandonii people accept her as she was? It tried her patience that she was always being criticized for something, and her past with the Clan kept coming up as if it were a sharp stick in the eye. She'd been a child; it wasn't like she'd chosen to live with them! And then on top of that, she would have to deal with the Madroman problem. Sometimes Ayla wished it would all just go away.

She quickly regretted her harsh feelings. Ayla loved nearly all of the Clan people. She especially loved her adoptive family; Iza, Creb, and Uba, and the others that had helped her survive those first years. Why should she have to apologize for them or for herself? Steeling her nerves Ayla replied, "Yes, we should probably have that meeting today, as you suggest. Would you be able to call a gathering for later today? Maybe as the sun reaches a hand above the western hills, that would give me time to see Robinar and to spend a little time catching up with friends and family here. I haven't seen some of them for several moons now."

"Yes Zelandoni, I'm sure I can have all the Zelandoni at the lodge by then."

"No, it would be better to meet on Sacred Mountain as we discussed before. It is close by, yet will afford a more secluded place with less chance of interruption. I suggest that all of the Acolytes remain behind at the Zelandoni lodge to handle any small issues that may come up while we have our meeting so that every Zelandoni may attend," Ayla said. "Since this will be our last meeting of the season with all of the Zelandonia in attendance, I want to clear some things up before we leave for our home caves."

"Zelandoni," the southern Donier began. "I think you will be surprised by the response to your leadership by your fellow Zelandoni. I know that before you left to go north there was some unpleasantness about your past with the Clan, but for the most part it is no longer an issue." She wanted to reassure her leader, a woman she admired and wished to support. She wasn't sure what would happen if the First Zelandoni decided to make an issue of any lack of harmony in supporting her.

"We'll see. Thank you for arranging the meeting. I will see you there," Ayla said as she finished folding her furs and placing them at the edge of the tent to clear the center space. She walked out with her friend and greeted those at the morning meal.

"Proleva, greetings!" Ayla hadn't talked to her close friends since her return to the Summer Meeting. She'd fallen ill and this was the first opportunity to catch up with the doings of her home cave. Proleva insisted that Ayla sit beside the hearth while she served her a breakfast of boiled grains mixed with blueberries and raspberries and apple slices. It was delicious. The zesty mint morning tea reminded her of Jondalar and she asked Proleva if she knew where he was.

"Yes, Durc and Jondalar went out hunting this morning. A herd of Bison were spotted northwest of here and a group of hunters went off to investigate." She paused for a moment, "I remember what it was like before the Spearthrower and the horse," she said, reminiscing. "It was a major undertaking to arrange a hunt. Thanks to you and Jondalar, now it's just a matter of riding out and killing as many beasts as they can before the herd moves too far away," Proleva said.

Ayla finished her meal and thanked Proleva. She took some of the plates that had piled up and went to the washing stream, cleaned them with sand and water, then brought them back and placed them on the sandstone block that was used to prepare food and that also held an assortment of utensils.

"Do you need more water? I see that you only have one water bag hanging there," Ayla gestured to the one remaining bag hooked to a tripod.

"No, no," Proleva smiled. "That is a job for the children. They will take care of that, in fact they are supposed to wash the utensils as well. You should go see that boy you saved rather than to do the children's chores!" Proleva laughed.

Ayla smiled, "It's good to do some simple things like washing food platters. I miss the domestic things, it makes me feel I'm among family again to be here with you. It's so good to be back. In fact I'm looking forward to the peace of a snowy winter's day back at the Ninth Cave. If it weren't for the last matrimonial and the fact that Jonayla and Cambarre are to be mated, I'd be tempted to return home early after the summer I've had."

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Pulling the Mammoth hide flap aside, Ayla stepped into the dim interior of the Zelandoni lodge. "How is Robinar?" she asked the Zelandoni of the Fifth Cave, who was responsible for the lodge that morning.

"The boy heals well. It's amazing how fast he is recovering. As you know Zelandoni, he should be a very sick little boy still, but his wounds are scabbing and he gains strength every day. I am just as amazed at how well you are doing," the Fifth said. "I wish we knew where that Clan Medicine Woman found that fungus. I hope we can discover more of it. It would be the most powerful medicine we have available to us."

"Yes, a most remarkable medicine. I have tried to memorize its properties," Ayla said. "I will keep looking for more. I think that if it could be found once, then we should be able to find it again. In fact, that is something we should discuss this afternoon if we can get to it..." Ayla's voice trailed away. She hoped that the meeting wouldn't digress into an argument about her leadership and her past. That's what she expected to happen and she was prepared to deal with it. She almost looked forward to letting them find another First Zelandoni to lead them. The thought of leaving, to travel east, to a place where she had been accepted before, was a soothing one.

"Zelandoni," the Fifth said. Ayla looked up from her thoughts. "Would you like to see the boy?"

"Um, yes, of course," Ayla moved past the older Donier and deeper into the Zelandoni lodge. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the dim interior. "First Acolyte of the Fifth Cave," she said. "Would you please raise the north side panel to let more light in?" There were three woven panels, one on each side and the back of the large temporary structure so that light could be let in. This was very helpful when caring for the ill or wounded, especially if the weather was nice, as it was today. It was always necessary to see well when cleaning a wound and it didn't hurt to have some natural light if one was kept in a sick bed for any length of time.

Ayla went over to the pallet where Robinar lay propped up against piled furs so that his head and shoulders were raised. His mother Eyzinah was sitting beside him and rose to her feet when Ayla approached them. "Zelandoni, thank you for coming, I'm so glad to see that you're doing better. I was worried that your selfless act in saving us from the cave lion might end with the loss of your own life. You are so brave and skilled, it is the only reason that my son and I still breathe."

"Eyzinah, I appreciate your kind words, but it was the Mother that saved you and your son... and me, for that matter. She was watching over us all. I was afraid too, it was only her hand guiding me that allowed us to survive. If I hadn't had that Clan

spear in my hands when the cave lion attacked, it is unlikely that any of us would have survived."

"Yes, well, I can't tell you how grateful I am for the fact that it was you who found us. I think you are blessed by the Mother and your relationship with Her saved us."

Ayla was uncomfortable with praise she felt wasn't warranted, so she changed the topic. "How are we doing today Robinar?"

"I feel better Zelandoni," the boy said, looking at her wide-eyed.

Ayla sat beside the boy and unwrapped the woven cloth from around his mid-section. The wound was still raw and angry looking, but didn't look putrid, which would have been normal from a lion claw wound of this severity. "We are lucky that the cat didn't have time to chew you up," Ayla said smiling. "Robinar, you have a full set of cave lion claw scars, just like mine. For the rest of your life, when you tell others of your fight with a cave lion, you'll have the scars to prove it!"

"Yes Zelandoni. Thank you Zelandoni," the child replied with bright eyes and a smile to match.

Ayla looked at the boy with a kind expression. "We will always be connected - you and I - by this thing that happened to us. We both survived a terrible fate and we will always have that in common. Did you know that we were saved because of the Clan people? They gave me the spear that killed the lion and the magic medicine that cured our wounds."

Robinar nodded, "Yes, mother told me. I don't recall exactly what happened, the last thing I remember was the lion attacking father..." the boy's voice choked.

"You were very brave. Your mother told me that you charged in to help your father," Ayla said, smoothing the boy's hair away from his forehead.

"I don't remember that. The next thing I remember was being here. You were in that bed beside me and I thought we would both die."

"That's why we must always be friends, your Élan and mine are now entwined," Ayla said. She felt it. She knew that somehow the Mother had wanted them both to live, otherwise so many separate things wouldn't have come together to have allowed them to survive.

"Just think Robinar, for me to have found you just in time to distract the lion and that I had what turned out to be the perfect weapon, that thick strong Clan Spear, and for the giant cat to leap, as if guided by an unseen hand, onto the point of the spear and impaling its heart, and then to have the magic medicine... Who else but The Great Earth Mother could have accomplished all of those things to make the outcome turn out as it has?"

Ayla spent some time with the boy, she wanted him to understand that they were special friends. They talked about his father and Eyzinah joined in the conversation. It turned out that both Blandar and Eyzinah had a lot of family members at South Face and within the Twenty-Ninth group of three caves so that they would be secure and cared for by their family. Eyzinah said that they would move to her parent's hearth for the time being, though they might move back to their own hearth in time.

Reassured that they would be cared for, Ayla finally excused herself. She had to return to the Ninth Cave's lodge to prepare for the Zelandonia meeting.

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As she entered the Ninth Cave's vicinity, Ayla saw Willamar working on the cave lion pelt. It was stretched onto a wooden frame and he was scraping the underside with a smooth-edged stone to keep the hide supple.

As Ayla approached, Willamar noticed her and stopped work for a moment. "Ayla!" Willamar still called her by her personal name when they were alone. And she enjoyed that little intimacy from Marthona's old mate. Ayla had always felt close to him. He was a wise man, who only spoke when he had something important to say.

"Ayla, it is good to see you up and walking around after such a short time. I prayed to The Great Earth Mother that you would recover, and it's good to see that She is watching over you."

Ayla felt the same. "I see you're working on the lion pelt. It looks like a good one. I guess it is unusual to have only one hole in the hide," she said conversationally.

"Yes, normally it would take three or four Spearthrowers to take down a lion this size. I was thinking this would look good in the Ninth's Zelandoni dwelling. What do you think?" Willamar asked.

"I would suggest it go to South Face because that's where Robinar lives. It will be something he can be known for and be proud of," Ayla said, knowing the boy would be pleased. Changing the subject, Ayla asked, "How is Melodene doing? Is she feeling at home among the Zelandonii?" She was curious about Willamar's relationship with Melodene. They seemed to have become close very quickly.

Willamar smiled broadly, "She's doing fine. I know I'm an old man, many would think I am too old to take a mate and that may be, but we have decided to stay together; Melodene has consented to come back with me to the Ninth Cave. I have to tell you Ayla, that she has made me feel young again," he laughed.

"I'm glad Willamar. Melodene could use a steady man to care for her after what she's been through. I talked to her once and she'd given up on men, she thought then that she would be alone for the rest of her life. And here you are. It's amazing," Ayla said sincerely.

"I know, it is amazing. I know I only have a few years left in this life, but I will live them loving that woman and being loved by her. It's almost like we've known each other all our lives."

"I know what you mean," Ayla agreed. "It is something very special when two people feel as one, to have a closeness that gives security and gladness. I'm happy for you both."

"I know it may sound strange at my age Ayla, but we may have a child, we're trying for one. Melodene lost hers and laments the loss. She wants me to give her another. I told her that she might have to try with someone younger than me. Although all my parts work, I don't know how vital my essence is at my age. Do you know what she said?" He paused for a moment and Ayla could see his eyes mist with emotion. "She said that if she can't have a child of mine then she would not have one. She said that she wouldn't consider lying with another man, only me. How about that! And at my time of life!"

Ayla hugged the old man warmly and kissed him on the cheek. "I'm so happy for you both. If you don't have a child, at least you'll have the pleasure of trying," she smiled mischievously.

Willamar laughed happily. At that moment they noticed Melodene coming over. "Greetings Zelandoni," Melodene said as she came to stand by Willamar. The old

man put his arm around her waist and pulled her close. "Willamar!" she said embarrassed.

"Melodene, I've told Ayla what we plan and she approves. So don't act embarrassed, that's not how you acted last night in the furs," Willamar chuckled.

Melodene blushed. "Zelandoni, I hope you do approve. I never thought I would love another man after all I've suffered at the hands of men, but Willamar is such an honorable man, such a caring man, that I... I feel safe with him..." she trailed off, eyes brimming with tears of gratitude.

"I know what you mean Melodene. That is what I have with Jondalar and I couldn't wish you a better relationship than to be with Willamar. You should mate at the matrimonial," Ayla suggested.

"No, I have mated before and it didn't work out very well," Melodene said. "And besides Willamar wasn't keen about all the jokes he'd have to put up with from the younger men. I think we have it just right. We want our relationship to grow and to become common knowledge little by little. It is what we feel most comfortable with."

"Well, I'm glad for both of you. I will pray that your union will produce a child, as you hope," Ayla replied.

"Willamar, you told the Zelandoni about that!" She asked surprised.

"Yes," he replied. "Ayla's like a daughter to me and besides, by telling her, the Mother might hear and grant our wish. I can't think of anyone better connected than the First Zelandoni to speak to the Mother on our behalf."

Melodene shyly asked, "You don't mind that we're trying?"

"Of course not, so long as you name me as the child's close relative. I would be happy if you had a child by this man Melodene. It would increase our immediate family and that is always a happy event for me. There was a time when I wandered the earth without any family at all, which makes me appreciate family more than most. In our family you'll always have a close relative who will care about your child as much as you do yourselves." Ayla hugged them both.

Just then two insistent yelping and furry tumbling bodies whirled in and around their legs. Suddenly Jonayla was there, trying to recapture the little wolf pups that were her responsibility while Durcan was away at the hunt.

"I see you did give away the gray female. Did you give it to the first Zelandoni of the southern caves?" Ayla asked.

"Yes. You should have seen her face when I handed her the pup. She was almost like a child in her joy," Jonayla said. "It was fun to see her forget to act dignified for once."

"I'm glad that you decided to give her one of your baby wolves. She has been a very good friend to us. It is good to give her a token of our esteem."

Jonayla had captured both rambunctious pups by then, with one under each arm and breathing a little hard, she replied, "I still don't understand why you didn't want it. There will be a time when both Durc and I will move to our own hearths and then you'll miss them, I'll bet."

"Daughter," Ayla said with a smile, "Don't you think if I wanted a wolf pup, that I could find one all on my own?"

"Yes mother, I'm sure you could, but these little ones are so friendly, it's very unusual for wolves to be so friendly."

Ayla agreed with her daughter, they did seem very accepting of people for being wild animals, "That is true, but it is my belief that any wolf, or almost any baby animal for that matter, can be tamed to the presence of people if they are taught from a very young age. But I don't think a wolverine or hyena could be tamed, it's not in their nature so coexist with people. Anyway, I still miss my Wolf too much to replace him with another just yet."

Ayla walked back to the lodge with her daughter and the pups. It was about time to get ready for the meeting with her fellow Zelandonia that afternoon. She needed to meditate, to prepare for what was to come.

Ayla excused herself saying that she needed to change for the meeting and went down to the lake to meditate before leaving for the mountain. As was her habit, she tied her carry baskets to Summer Child's riding blanket with rawhide thongs. One basket held her medicine bag, woven absorbent wrappings, coverings and tools,

while the other carried a change of clothing and a ground cover, with space left over to hold anything found along the way. She always had an eye open for things and plants that could be useful.

Mounting Summer Child, Ayla rode down to New Lake to be alone for a time. She sat by the shore, cross-legged, elbows on knees and let her mind drift and her thoughts flow.

What was it that she wanted to accomplish with the coming meeting? Whenever she thought about it she became more confused than ever. Deep down, she wanted to be relieved from the responsibility of leading the Zelandonia. Deep down, she wanted her life to be as it had been when there were just the two of them and she and Jondalar had roamed the land as companions and lovers with no ties and with the ability to go where they wanted whenever they wanted.

Ayla knew that she was painting an unrealistic picture of that time. Hardships and troubles were present then and now. Even back then, long ago, they were traveling to someplace and had to push on, leaving places where they could have remained and become part of the daily fabric of life. Those places and people had wanted them to stay, to become part of their community and they were sad when she and Jondalar had left them.

What really concerned her, were her children. Before they truly knew each other, when Jondalar was first told that she had given birth to a Clan baby, the look of loathing and disgust in his eyes had almost destroyed her. The subsequent conversations and warnings she had received had embedded the fear of discovery into her being. This had always been a conflict for her. On one hand she loved her Clan son Durc and was proud of him. On the other, if she had told any of the Zelandonii about him she risked being shunned. She would receive that look of disgust and horror by all of the people.

Marthona and the First Zelandoni, who had been her mentor, hadn't rejected her. However Durcan had been troubled by her past and the ridicule he had suffered since the existence of her Clan son had become known. Ayla wished she could have stayed at the Summer Meeting as the story had been spread through the gathering. Then she could have stood up to the troublemakers and shown her son that she was not ashamed.

She had spoken to Jondalar about this in a quiet moment while traveling back from the north. He'd been surprised by her concern. She had asked him if he still felt as he

had when they first came to his Zelandonii homeland. If the people didn't want her, would he come away with her? He had asked about their children and what it would mean to take them away from their family and friends.

Ayla hadn't said anything. Her feelings were confused. She didn't want to leave, not forever. This was her home now. But she wasn't going to apologize for her life either. Everything that had happened to her, even Broud's cruelty to her, had made her the person she was. It had all been part of her life.

Still, even now, no clear answer came to her, no matter how much she meditated on it. She knew that she had been called by the Mother to lead the Zelandonia and that should be enough to satisfy her. She knew that she had many good friends, and that she should count herself a lucky person. Yet, she was still uncertain, still concerned about how her children would deal with their mother's past. Would they come to resent her?

Ayla had been sitting by the lake for some time and knew that soon she would have to go. On the spur of the moment she felt like a swim. She realized she felt tired and thought that a dip in the lake would refresh her mind as well as her body.

She disrobed and walked into the cold water of the lake. Summer was coming to an end and the afternoons were markedly cooler and the water of the lake colder than before. At this moment it was just what Ayla needed. She reflected how strange it was that once one submerged in cold water, the body soon adjusted and it quickly became comfortable to be in the water, even feeling warmed by it.

Ayla didn't actually swim, she just stood neck deep in the lake. The pressure of the water had a calming effect on body and mind, allowing her thoughts flow in a more orderly fashion. She suddenly realized that this was a good way to meditate. The water made all her other concerns drift away and let her grapple with the feelings she needed to deal with. In a flash of insight Ayla realized what she needed to do, how exactly to deal with her doubts and the concerns that she had for her children.

She was facing away from the shore, looking at eye level out onto the lake. Ducks floated on the surface seemingly without concern for her presence, she felt small fish brushing against her legs and a light breeze against her face and felt so in-tune with the world, so sure of herself.

In that moment she heard a voice from the shore calling to her. It took a few moments before she was willing to respond. She could have stayed like this,

standing naked, neck deep in the water and communing with Mother Earth for much longer. But she heard the voice call again, now with some concern. Finally with a sigh, Ayla turned to face the shore.

It was her friend, the first Zelandoni from the southern caves. Ayla raised her hand in greeting and called out as she walked to the shallows and stepped out of the water to stand in front of her friend. "Greetings Zelandoni," Ayla said. "I was meditating before the meeting to put my thoughts in order. You would be surprised how focused your mind can become when you stand neck deep in water. It's like being hugged by The Great Earth Mother herself, and it seems as though everything else recedes, leaving only your thoughts."

"I'm sorry to disturb you then. I didn't know what to think when I saw just your head above water. Your daughter told me you had come this way to be alone to meditate. I wanted to go with you to the meeting and thought I'd come by for you," the southern Donier replied.

"No, it's good that you came, I might have stayed here too long and missed the meeting. Sit with me for a moment and let's talk. I need to clear my mind with friendship talk for a little while." Ayla walked to her horse and pulled an absorbent woven cloth from her carry bag and dried herself from head to toe, then dressed in her ceremonial clothes, finally to come and sit beside her friend.

"I would have said this when we talked earlier, but this morning you seemed very preoccupied. I wanted to thank you for the wolf pup," the southerner said. "Your daughter told me that you suggested that she give me one. She said that you weren't ready to replace your old friend Wolf and that you thought I might like it. I'm more grateful than I can say. It is a wonderful experience to have a trusting little ball of fur following one around."

"Keep in mind that that little ball of fur will grow up to be a real wolf someday. He needs constant contact with people and lots of patience. There are many things he must be taught in order to live successfully with people. It takes quite a bit of time and effort to train a wolf, even from a pup," Ayla said.

"Yes, I can image it does. But I think I'll be up to the task. And I'm grateful," the Donier said again.

"I'm glad you like him. What have you decided to name your pup?"

The Donier smiled, "Hunter. I think he will be a good one. He is already very inquisitive and has caught a mouse in our lodge, so that is what we are calling him."

"A good name for a wolf," Ayla agreed. "I think we should go now. It is not far, but I would like to be there waiting for the others. I plan to have our meeting outside by the guest hearth and I believe the Donier Helpers are making it ready for us."

Chapter 32: A Sign from the Mother

Ayla led the way up the trail that wound its way torturously through trees and outcroppings, always reaching upward until she saw the familiar gap between the trees that indicated the open space before the sacred cave.

A strange calm settled over Ayla as they rode their horses forward at a leisurely pace. It was as if her senses were sharpened while at the same time her fears and uncertainties fell away from her. The Mother was with her, she was certain of it. The Mother had spoken to Ayla many times now, but this place was where She had first spoken *through* her. Ayla felt an exhilarating joy and shivered. Looking around the open area in front of the cave she asked her companion, "Zelandoni, did you communicate to everyone that we would stay through the night?"

"Yes Zelandoni, everyone is prepared for a long meeting. You can see that the children Doni helpers have set a fire in the hearth and have stacked more wood close by. I believe they have prepared food as well, in case that is needed. I wasn't sure if we would fast or not, so I instructed them to prepare food, but to keep it simple and out of the way."

"You did well. Thank you," Ayla replied.

"Greetings Zelandoni." It was the boy Rubio, the young leader of the cave attendants, hurrying toward them.

Ayla smiled down from her horse at the boy, "Greetings Rubio, I see you've been busy. Thank you for your service, it is appreciated."

"I am grateful to serve you Zelandoni. This will be my last summer because I'll be twelve next year and too old to continue in my place. I'm just grateful that I got to be a part of everything that has happened this summer. One day I'll be able to tell my children that I was here when you spoke for the Mother." The boy grinned excitedly up at the mysterious blonde woman who he knew was truly the Mother's surrogate.

Rubio had conflicting feelings of both admiration and a little fear as he watched the First Zelandoni dismount in one smooth motion to land silently on her feet. He watched her walk to the hearth area and look around at his handiwork. The complex

of sacred places had been cleared and mostly repaired over the past several moons, since the Earth Mother had spoken.

He so admired the strong and capable religious leader. She was an accomplished woman, someone who had brought great things with her to share with the people. He knew these things, and that she was at the pinnacle of their society, but he was half in love with her too. She'd been nice to him, treating him like a man, someone of importance. No woman had ever done that before, he'd always felt like a child.

Rubio knew that she was old enough to be his mother, but he was still attracted to her as a man would be to a woman, although he wasn't sure what that really meant. All he knew was that he liked being near her and he felt deep down inside that he would risk his life for her if she ever needed him to. Not that he thought she would ever need a boy to help her.

"Rubio, I understand there is food prepared?" The First Zelandoni had turned to look at him, making Rubio's thoughts return to the present.

"Um, yes Zelandoni," he replied. "Jamicon has roasted both Bison and Elk meat and Lanala has prepared a stew with lots of summer vegetables like carrots and beans and several types of grains. It is a simple meal, as the Zelandoni from the south instructed. I hope that's alright."

"That's perfect Rubio," Ayla smiled. "When the others arrive and I have greeted them and after we have recited the Mother's Prayer, would you and the others please serve the food. Just bring a serving of meat and stew for each Donier and a cup of tea. We will be talking late into the evening and I want to make sure everyone has food so they're able to concentrate on the issues at hand without hearing their stomachs rumbling."

"Yes Zelandoni, it will be done," Rubio said and hurried away as several of the other Zelandoni began to enter the sacred hearth area.

As Ayla saw the other's approaching she walked to the sandstone block that lay at the north edge of the fire ring and climbed up to stand on it with folded arms and waited in silence. As she had prearranged with her friend from the south, she would remain silent and the southern Donier would greet and seat the others.

Not knowing how the meeting would go, Ayla didn't want to be drawn into casual conversation with anyone; she didn't want her feeling of calm clarity to be diluted.

She wanted to discuss the things that were important to her first, before anything else.

As the others entered the sacred precincts and dismounted, the children took charge of their horses and led the animals away. The Doniers came one by one to the hearth and the southern Zelandoni directed them where to sit. No one felt inclined to talk, they just sat cross-legged on the ground and looked up at their leader expectantly.

The silence was drawn out as more and more of the Zelandonia arrived and were arrayed around the hearth. The Zelandoni of the Nineteenth Cave and of Wolf Cave had not returned to the Summer Meeting because they needed to be with their people due to the recent troubles. Soon eleven of the thirteen Zelandoni were present and Ayla began to speak.

"Out of the darkness, the chaos of time,
The whirlwind gave birth to the Mother sublime.
She woke to Herself knowing life had great worth,
The dark empty void grieved The Great Earth Mother.
The Mother was lonely. She was the only."

The other Zelandoni joined in. Ayla wasn't a singer, they all knew that, so they spoke the lines as if in prayer until they came to the last stanza. This was her addition, the final gift from the Mother to Her children, the stanza that had changed their way of life, even more than the firestones or the horses - the conception of birth...

Ayla finished the last stanza alone as the others fell silent, a new tradition. Her voice was full of joy, she might not be a singer, but her voice was honey smooth and resonant when she was aroused to a purpose. She spoke in meter as if she lived the words that spilled from her lips, as if they were spoken by another, a more powerful being than her mortal self.

"Her last Gift, the Knowledge that man has his part.
His need must be spent before new life can start.
It honors the Mother when the couple is paired,
Because woman conceives when Pleasures are shared.
Earth's Children were blessed. The Mother could rest."

As Ayla fell silent, the other Doniers bowed their heads and remained that way until the silence was finally broken by the children bringing food.

"Zelandoni, please eat while I explain the reason for this meeting and why it is being held here instead of at our lodge below... and then let us discuss what must be discussed." Ayla looked around at her fellow Zelandoni, making eye contact with each. "First, I will tell you why I chose this place to discuss our people's future. There was a time when I thought I should step aside and let you choose another to take my place."

There was a momentary silence, then without exception all the Doniers broke their silence and exclaimed in loud voices that they wanted no other in her place. The Fifth Cave's Zelandoni silenced them and turned to Ayla as spokesman for them all. "Zelandoni, we know what was being said when you left for the north, but after all was said, no one could think of anyone but you to lead us. The Mother has spoken through you and the people know that. No one else living has ever had that honor or that burden. Your calling brought us the "knowledge" and without it we would still be like the animals in the forests, breeding without lineage, without knowing who we were."

All the other Zelandoni nodded and murmured agreement. From the corner of her eye Ayla noticed the young Donier helpers who were ranged behind Rubio, their leader, as they peered wide-eyed from the cave opening, listening to their elders.

The Fifth continued, "The story tellers spoke to the people of 'Ayla and Jondalar,' their travels and adventures and the good they achieved before they came to us. We Zelandonia who stayed behind and didn't go north, talked to the Zelandonii and it was decided that no matter what happened to you as a child, you are our accepted and honored spiritual leader and that we all, and I mean all of us, want you to remain our leader."

Ayla had bowed her head and closed her eyes as the Fifth Cave's Zelandoni spoke. As he concluded his plea she raised her head and opened her eyes and looked directly at him. "Thank you Zelandoni, I appreciate your kind words and," she looked around at the others, "I appreciate your support. But as I was going to say, at one time I thought I should step aside, but no longer.

"I feel that I have more to contribute. Whether or not everyone accepts that, is not important so long as the things that need to be done are done. We have to decide among us how to deal with Madroman. We have to decide whether or not to bring the Chimu into our community of caves. Also, there are those in the south who are not sure they wish to remain as part of the Zelandonii."

There were murmurs of surprised denial from the two other Zelandoni from the south who did not know that their first Zelandoni of the southern caves had confided in the First Zelandoni.

"Calm yourselves, I'm not implying that there is a rift, but there is a feeling built up from the past - and rightly so. The people of the southern caves feel they have been neglected and passed over. We need to resolve this, here today. They must be made to feel as part of the whole. The same would apply to the Chimu if we agree to offer them entry in to the Zelandonii community.

"There is also the issue of living in peace with the people of the Clan. As you know, they raised me, I know their ways and I respect them. If I am the Zelandonii spiritual leader, the First Zelandoni among those who serve the Mother, I will make it known to all that I desire our people to be at peace with them.

"The Clan was here before us and they are not animals any more than we are. They have their own way of expressing themselves and it is different than our way, but not necessarily inferior to our way. They love their children, they take mates and form a complex society, with a religion that is not much different than ours. They use fire to cook their food and for warmth, there are no animals that do that, only humans use fire.

"So my question to you is this; will you support me in these things? What do you say?" She stood before them with her arms crossed, looking down at them and making eye contact again with each of her fellow spiritual leaders, waiting for their response.

The first Zelandoni of the southern caves stood immediately. "I support you Zelandoni, as I believe do my fellow Zelandoni from the south." She looked at the two other Zelandoni from the south and they nodded solemnly in agreement. "We await discussion on the topics and look for your guidance in these matters," the southerner concluded, then took her place beside the other two southerners.

The Zelandoni of the Fifth Cave stood up before anyone else could speak. "I agree with the southern Doniers, I will support you Zelandoni and I agree with your course of action." The old man looked around the fireplace at his fellow religious leaders and said, "Are we in agreement?" There was a general murmur of agreement. "Is there any among us who feels otherwise?"

Silence.

"Well, this is something new," Ayla said with a smile. "I can't think of the last time we Zelandoni all agreed on anything." There were some chuckles.

The Zelandoni of the Third Cave, Second View, stood as the Fifth reclaimed his seat. "I think that we have never before had a leader like you, Zelandoni. I get the feeling from you that you're not completely happy about being our leader. It truly appears to be a burden to you. Always in the past it was a status position that we vied for and the strongest among us would win the place of first." There were murmurs of agreement at the Third's statement.

"Then you came along. A person who was an outsider. You weren't one of the Zelandoni, but you seemed to be by your actions and your accomplishments. Because my cave is close to the Ninth Cave I saw you from the beginning and saw your abilities. Not to mention all the gifts that you and Jondalar brought to the Zelandonii people. That's why you find us in agreement. You have our support because we can't think of anyone among us who would be a better leader." The old man looked around the hearth at his equals and saw by their faces that they felt as he did and nodding, he sat down.

Ayla stepped down from the sandstone block and sat on the edge facing the Zelandoni. "I'm grateful for your words. You're right about one thing; deep down inside I admit that I wish I wasn't so different from everyone else. I know my accent makes me stand out and those very things you spoke of made me stand out when I first came here. Jondalar came here with me, he'd grown up here, so it was me that people noticed.

"If somehow I could have just fit in as Jondalar's mate I would have been happy. I didn't want to lead others, I just wanted to be a mother and have a family. I had been alone for years before Jondalar came to me. I lived in a valley all by myself and my only friends were my horse 'Whinney' and my cave lion 'Baby' and though I was grateful to have them for companionship, it is not the same as having other people near.

"Every night when I go to sleep, I listen to the little sounds around me of people settling in for the night; murmured conversations and children being put into their furs. It makes me happy to be part of the whole.

"But enough of my wistful feelings. I'm willing to do what I must to earn my home and my place in it. Let us talk of Madroman. It would seem that this will be the most unpleasant part of our deliberations and I would like to settle this matter among us first."

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The discussion about Madroman went on for several hours. It was an uncomfortable issue to resolve. He was a dangerous deceiver and had cost lives by his actions in the north. True, the actual violence had been perpetrated by Brukeval, Madroman just aided him, but without Madroman, there would have been little support from the Chimu men to carry out the violence against the Clan as well as their own people.

There was talk about banishing him from anywhere within their territories but it was felt that he might go somewhere else and cause similar trouble. Finally the southern Donier came up with an acceptable punishment that would not require taking his life. They would take him south with them and he would be made to serve the people of the Fifth Cave south. They were a small cave of twenty three individuals and could use Madroman's daily labor. He would be made to perform labor for the entire cave with constant oversight from the leader's mate, a stern woman with an injured arm that had not healed properly and limited what work she could do.

This wasn't a perfect solution and there was a possibility that he might escape, but Ayla had an aversion to taking his life, one more life after so many already taken... and the Fifth Cave of the south was a good distance away from anywhere else. If someone ran from it, they would have to live off the land and Ayla thought that Madroman had not developed many skills that would help him survive an attempted escape into that wild countryside.

The final decision would be made at the leader's council after the matrimonial ceremony with all the remaining leaders and their Zelandoni, but to resolve the issue among themselves would, in all practical ways, close the discussion to all but a vote of acceptance.

The discussion moved on to the Chimu.

"Camma, the leader of the three caves in the north, expressed an eagerness to bring her people into the Zelandonii community. If we would allow it, she would bring her people to next year's Summer Meeting so that we can get to know each other." Ayla

looked at the three Zelandoni who had come with her and said, "Maybe the Zelandoni who came north could say what they think of the idea."

The Zelandoni of the Third Cave stood, "Camma is a charismatic woman, she's quite a looker too," he chuckled as did several other male Zelandoni in accord with the old man's joke. "But what I noticed most about her was her leadership abilities. Her father was leader before her and it is obvious that she learned a lot from him. Under very difficult circumstances she held her people together and recognized that they were being tricked by a false Shaman. I'm not sure if any of our leaders, except our First Zelandoni, would have realized so fast that Madroman was a trickster. I saw his spirit monster disguise and it scared me greatly, so I have nothing but respect for Camma.

"Most of her people fought against the renegade followers of the false shaman so I believe them to be good people as well. If my opinion counts for anything here, I'd be glad to have them and the resources that they would bring to our community." The old Zelandoni nodded toward his leader and sat down.

Then the Zelandoni of the Fifth stood, "I agree that Camma is a good looker." That elicited more chuckles, this time from some of the female Zelandoni too. "And just as the Zelandoni of the Third Cave mentioned, I also respect her leadership abilities. Since I'm asked my opinion, I agree with my colleague. I think we should invite them to the Summer Meeting next year and see where things lead."

As the Fifth Zelandoni reclaimed his place by the fire, the first Zelandoni from the south stood. "I have no concerns about inviting the Chimu into the Zelandonii community of holdings. I agree that we should. When I was young, many summers ago, it would have been a problem, having a territory that is so stretched out, but now with horses we can move supplies where they are needed so that a larger territory is now practical. We all know the toll a gathering takes on the surrounding area, so the larger the territory, the less healing time required for the land to recover.

"As a matter-of-fact, I suggest that we hold next year's Summer Meeting in the south. We have never held one there before and the game will be plentiful and maybe we could go north the next year, allowing the traditional places longer to recover. As our people increase, I think this will be more and more necessary." Having said her piece, the southerner sat back down beside her fellow Zelandoni.

As the one who was the highest ranked among the Zelandonia, it fell to Ayla to conclude the issue, but she asked if anyone else wished to speak. When no one seemed inclined to add anything more, she said, "I feel that it is a good idea to invite the Chimu to next year's Summer Meeting. The only problem with holding the gathering in the south is that the Chimu don't have many horses and although they could trade for horses at the Summer Meeting they wouldn't be able to bring enough trade goods as they would need to trade for horses.

"I suggest holding next year's Summer Meeting at the Nineteenth Cave's gathering area. It has been five summers since we last used that place for a gathering. That way the Chimu would easily be able to bring enough trade goods to the gathering. We should be able to hold the Summer Meeting in the south by the next year. What do you all say to that?"

There was general agreement and it was decided to do just that. Ayla, knowing her daughter's mind, volunteered Jonayla to ride north to let the Chimu people know of their decision before the snow fell. This would give them time to prepare.

Ayla knew that her daughter would love to be assigned the task of traveling to the Chimu right after her Matrimonial with Cambarre as part of the half-moon phase trial period required for newly mated couples. Normally this period of time was set aside to insure that the newly mated couples were compatible. They weren't allowed to speak to anyone other than to each other and were expected to find a secluded place to be alone.

Her daughter would also be interested in developing trade for her growing herd of horses. She decided that she would give them dispensation to speak while on their half-moon phase trial period. She felt it warranted under the circumstances. Besides, they had been together for several moon cycles now and Ayla felt there was no real need for a trial period other than to honor form.

It was also decided during their meeting to take some time next summer to search for the magic fungus. Ayla suggested, and it was agreed upon, that all the Acolytes and a few of the Zelandoni, including herself would make some excursions into the northern region for a few hands of time and concentrate their efforts on finding the medicine.

Ayla concluded the subject by saying, "Having many eyes looking for this medicinal cure will give us a better chance of finding it. The Acolytes can search the surrounding area and if one of them finds something they can mark the place and

call myself or the first Zelandoni from the south. Since we have actually seen and used the fungus we will try to be available to determine whether or not what a find may be what we're looking for."

After this was decided, the group of spiritual leaders broke up into smaller groups and finally went to their furs to sleep. The moon was high above now and shining full. Ayla found it hard to fall asleep with so many thoughts running through her mind all at once. Wrapped in her furs, she gazed upward in to the night and surveyed the fixed stars pinned to the cold black canopy above. Some said those hot white fires that twinkled at night were new souls being forged, the abode of the yet unborn. They looked very far away. The night was so silent. Soon she slept.

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Dawn broke over the mountain late, the bulk of the peak blocking the early morning rays. The Zelandonia had risen and partaken in a brief morning meal and were ready to return to the Summer Meeting long before the sun became visible over the mountain's peak.

They rode in single file by rank. A Zelandoni's rank depended on a complex combination of things. Other than the one who was elected as First Zelandoni, the others received their status by their knowledge of lore and the amount of time they had been Zelandoni and also depended upon their acknowledged skills. Whether as a spiritual leader or as a healer, these all blended to determine what each Doniers status would be.

It was generally agreed upon where each stood, but if there ever was a dispute - which was normally frowned upon - then there would be a discussion among the Zelandonia themselves to determine the status of the contending Doniers.

As it was, if Ayla had not been First Zelandoni, she would still have been very close to the front of the line of spiritual leaders in precedence, because of all of her accomplishments. Before having been called to lead them, she had been third in order of precedence. Even though not born a Zelandonii, in her case the gifts of knowledge she shared with the Zelandoni were so significant that everyone, even those who would never voice it, agreed that she was a high status spiritual leader.

They had decided to hold the Matrimonial Ceremony two days hence. Then within a hand or two of time after the Matrimonial they would break up the gathering - probably within days of their newly mated couples return - then leave for their

respective home caves for the winter. The summer was coming to an end and within a full moon phase they would begin to see dustings of snow. Before the next moon died the land would be covered in snow.

As the Zelandonia negotiated the trail down the slope, Ayla in the lead, they looked out over the measureless golden grass-clad valley below where flowers would again bloom yellow next spring. Ayla's gaze took in the white gleaming mountains in the west that soared forever and ever in the distance. She thought to herself that beyond those mountains would be the great sea. A sea she'd never seen.

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Ayla wondered, as she led the others - breaking out of the trees at the base of the mountain and into the open of the flat valley below - what life would bring in the future. She tried to sound confident and even felt that way sometimes when the Mother guided her. But as she led her fellow Zelandonia toward the Summer Meeting and saw the people stopping their daily tasks to stare at them, she wondered whether she was really qualified to lead these people. What made her think she could?

Suddenly they heard screams coming from far up in the sky above them. Ayla pulled on Summer Child's mane, signaling the horse to halt and shaded her eyes from the morning sun. Looking up, she saw two eagles in an aerial conflict. They came together for a brief moment to tear at each other, falling toward the earth until they suddenly separated, flapping their huge wings so they could gain altitude. Then they closed in on each other again with screams of anger and outrage that reverberated around the valley.

The Doniers had stopped to watch this unprecedented sight and the Zelandonii people were looking skyward too. Then, as Ayla watched, the great birds tumbled earthward again, screaming in anger. The eagles were only thirty arrow lengths from the ground with Ayla almost directly beneath them when they broke apart again. This time something slipped from the grasp of one of the huge raptor's talons and fell earthward.

Seeing the release, Ayla urged her horse forward and reached out with both hands just in time to catch the small white bundle falling from the sky. No one else moved, they were watching her now. Both birds flew to tree height and circled Ayla. She anticipated what was to happen and pulled her spearthrower free. Just then one of the eagles swooped down to attack her. Holding the small thing in the crook of one

arm, Ayla quickly raised her spearthrower and struck out, waving it over her head to fend the angry predator off.

With a scream of frustration and anger, the huge eagle soared upward into the blue sky and flew away, continuing to scream angrily as it disappeared into the west with its antagonist following closely behind.

As the fading screams echoed back at them from the mountains, Ayla was now able to turn her attention to the small animal she held. Her eyes widened as she realized that it was a wolf cub, a small white beast, bloodied but still whole, and alive. It couldn't be older than three hands of time, if that. It was younger than the ones that her children had found.

Shivering, the tiny thing looked up at her and whimpered, fear in its eyes. "What a thing to happen to one so young," she murmured. 'But what a sign from The Mother,' Ayla thought.

The first Zelandoni of the southerners had ridden forward to see what her leader held. "That has to be a sign. To be the one to catch a white wolf falling from the sky is a strong omen. This is a very good sign for everyone," she concluded, her voice quivering in awe at what she'd just seen.

"Yes... maybe, but this little one needs attention, look, he's wounded. The shock alone could kill him." Ayla, the tiny wolf pup still in the crook of her arm, urged Summer Child forward into a trot and headed for the Ninth Cave's summer camp. She wanted to get the tiny animal to a quiet place and treat his wounds.

Ayla was unaware of the wide-eyed stares she was receiving from the many people who had seen their First Zelandoni catch the falling wolf cub. Her only concern was for the young animal as she hurried to her lodge and called out for Jonayla to bring hot water. She dismounted from her horse in one smooth motion and took her charge into the lodge.

Jonayla came in right after her mother, "What have you got mother?" she asked.

"It's a wounded wolf pup daughter. Would you please get me some hot water so I can clean his wounds?" she repeated.

Jonayla didn't ask anything more. She knew that when her mother had a wounded thing, be it human or animal, she was expected to help and ask questions later. She immediately headed back out to the outside hearth to get the hot water.

Ayla pulled a hide from a storage basket and laid it out over a log bench seat that doubled as a work bench when needed for the purpose. While she was still examining the baby wolf, Jonayla hurried back with a steaming bowl of hot water.

"Daughter, while I clean the wounds would you go to my medicine bag and get some stavesacre seeds and..."

Jonayla broke in, "And symphytum roots, ground together and made into a decoction to wash the wounds."

Ayla looked up at her daughter. The frown of concentration left her forehead for a moment and she smiled, "Yes daughter, that's right. Why don't you make that for me while I clean this little fellow's wounds? Then we can wash the wounds with the mixture and settle him in for a good healing sleep. I'll bet he could use it. In fact, once you've made the decoction, you might also make a relaxing tea. Use some valerian or some lemon balm. You decide. Then I'll feed a little bit of it to him through a willow straw."

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The wolf pup was asleep in a warm secure cocoon of rabbit fur placed near her and Jondalar's sleeping place. Ayla was satisfied that there was no serious damage to his little body. He just needed restorative sleep and to be fed regularly. She stood beside the little bed that Jonayla had made for him and wondered at the event that had brought him into her life. She was convinced that this bundle of fur would be with her as a companion, maybe for the rest of her life. It was a gift from the Mother, at least that was what everyone was saying and Ayla felt they were right.

She hadn't had the heart to replace her Wolf with any of the pups that her children had found, but this was different. It was so unexpected. She hadn't made a conscious decision to replace her friend, but it appeared that the Mother had decided for her.

Looking at the sleeping pup, Ayla sighed, "You're quite a cute little thing, but you'll grow up into a full size wolf and I wonder if you will be like my friend Wolf. I hope so. I loved him as family and I hope to love you that way too." Just then the tiny wolf

pup wiggled in his sleep and made a small burping noise. It was a sound of contentment and Ayla smiled. She reached down to touch an ear, the same ear that, on her Wolf, had been bent from a fight so very long ago. Finally, she turned and left the lodge.

"Zelandoni, have you had anything to eat this morning?" Proleva asked.

Ayla looked toward the hearth where Durcan was sitting with Lorala. Jondalar had just filled a bowl with grains and was sitting beside the children when he noticed her and asked, "Can I get you something?"

"No, but thank you Jondalar, I ate with the Zelandonia this morning before we left the mountain. With everything that has happened since then my mind is awirl and I couldn't eat anything if I wanted to."

"That little wolf is a real looker Ayla," Jondalar said. "I think we're going to have another four-legged companion, if I read that look you were giving him correctly. It'll be nice to have another wolf friend. I've missed not having Wolf around. Have you decided what you're going to call this little one? Maybe Wolf?"

"No, not Wolf. There was only one Wolf. I was thinking of calling him Sky, since he fell out of the sky, I thought that would be an appropriate name for him. What do you think Jondalar?"

"I like it. It's a good name," Jondalar replied, smiling. "That wolf is going to really stand out. With its white coloring I don't think it was destined to live long on its own. It would be alright in winter, but in summer its prey would see it coming for miles. I wonder why the Mother made an animal with such unusual coloring."

"Yes, I wondered that too," Ayla agreed. "Maybe that's why she gave him to me, so that we could help each other."

"I can't really see what help you would need," Jondalar said frowning.

"I needed a sign Jondalar and I think that Sky was the sign I needed. The Mother is telling me that I'm doing what she wants and has given me Sky as a sign. It's like all the important decisions in my life. I've always been given a sign. When I was young, I thought the signs came from Ursus the Great Cave Bear, but I now know that Ursus is just another manifestation of the Mother and that she's been guiding me all my life."

Jondalar didn't say anything. He was sure she was right. Maybe that was why she was so special and had so many talents for just one person. He was very proud of her and could easily have been jealous of her, but for one thing... Ayla was not a user, nor one to make herself grand. No matter how many times she'd brought the people gifts of knowledge she never once used that to her own advantage.

He knew he was lucky to be her mate. She was an unusual person who stood out from everyone else and who was also beautiful. Even now, he thought, after two children, her body had recovered completely from childbirth and she stood before him proud, without conscious effort. He had a momentary pang of guilt, remembering their misunderstandings of the past. He wished he were a better person and that they had never had those rifts.

Jondalar shrugged those thoughts off. Ayla wasn't bringing any of his faults up, so why should he? I'll just be happy for her and grateful for the life I have; a beautiful talented mate and two strong, smart children. What more could he ask for?

Ayla looked at Jondalar when he didn't respond to her words and realized that he was looking into her eyes yet not really looking. He had a faraway expression as if he were remembering.

She too remembered; the time when they had first met, the feeling of being one with another person of her own kind for the very first time. Jondalar was beautiful then, she hadn't known that another being could be so beautiful. She had never met anyone from her own kind until she'd met him.

What luck. No, it was another gift to her from The Great Earth Mother, for Jondalar to be the first man she would meet. To experience life standing beside him, to have his children and his support. She felt humbled by his quiet homage, his manly presence, she was so happy. She couldn't contain herself, she stepped up to him and hugged him and he hugged her back, then they pressed their lips together in a long passionate kiss.

The moment of perfect understanding fled as the world around them intruded. Proleva cleared her throat, a little embarrassed by the raw feelings expressed by her two friends. They looked at her and then around at the outdoor hearth and smiled shyly. Jondalar took Ayla's hand and they retired to the lodge to be alone with each other. Proleva would warn off anyone who might interrupt the couple until they reemerged relaxed and smiling sometime later, to start their day.

Chapter 33: The Matrimonial

Ayla was hand feeding Sky his mixture of Bison broth and mashed grains when the flap to the summer lodge was lifted and a friendly face topped with a shock of kinky red hair smiled at her as he stooped to enter.

"Ralev! Good morning," Ayla greeted the young story teller warmly.

The man stood awkwardly for a moment, hands clasped nervously. Then he smiled and sat beside her, "I'm happy to see you again Zelandoni. I'm also glad that you seem happy to see me."

"Of course I am. I only wish I hadn't had to go north so soon after you arrived. I wanted to listen to your stories. It would have been great fun and I'm sure informative too. Maybe I'll have some time to do just that, before we leave. In fact, have you thought about where you will winter this year? It is too late to re-cross the glacier this late in the year."

"We have had some offers but haven't decided where we'll stay yet," Ralev replied. "But the reason I stopped in this morning to see you is, well... to apologize to you."

"Apologize?" Ayla asked, puzzled.

"Yes, I didn't mean to speak out of turn about your time with the Clan. I realized right after I mentioned your Clan son that these people weren't like mine. Or at least like those of Lion Camp. I should have been more cautious with my comments."

"Actually Ralev, I think the Zelandonii are much like the Mammoth Hunters. There are those who can think beyond their prejudices and those who will not accept new ways. I think that whatever problems the information caused are insignificant compared to the understanding and acceptance that I have received from my fellow Zelandonii.

"In fact, I thank you for bringing up the subject of my son Durc. I have never been anything but proud of my Clan son. I should have talked about him years ago, but never knew quite how to introduce the subject. I guess I'd been silent for so long that it was easier to remain so."

"I'm glad that you feel that way Zelandoni. I admit that I have been worrying about my blunder ever since it happened. I wasn't sure of my welcome when you returned. I'm relieved that you're not angry with me."

"Good, then that's settled. I'll stop by your story telling lodge to listen to some of your tales before too long. In fact, let me also offer you a place to stay this winter. We will have an empty dwelling that was used by Jondalar's apprentices. They have either mated or completed their apprenticeships and are moving back to their home caves this fall, so the dwelling will be empty this winter. It's big enough to accommodate your whole group."

Ralev, who was a very astute individual, frowned. "What about Cambarre and Jonayla. Won't they need a place of their own? We could stay at the guest hearth. We're used to a lack of privacy."

"Cambarre and Jonayla plan to move into a dwelling near ours that once housed Lanoga and Lanidar and Lanoga's siblings. They have decided to move to Lanidar's home cave this year so their old dwelling will be empty. So you see, we do have a place for you. It's almost as if fate was urging you to stay with us," she smiled again, reminding Ralev of a story he'd decided to develop about a woman with a beautiful smile.

Ayla continued earnestly, "I would enjoy hearing all of your tales and I'm sure that Jondalar would too, as well as everyone else at the Ninth Cave. I would also like to wring every last piece of information from you about my son Durc. So when you make your decision where to stay, keep us in mind."

"I accept. In fact I was hoping we could stay at the Ninth Cave. After all, many of my best stories are about the star-crossed travelers, Ayla and Jondalar. Now I can find out what you've been up to since we last heard of you and what Jondalar's home cave is like. The experience will add to my collection of stories about the Ayla and Jondalar saga." He laughed when he saw her blanch. "I promise not to tell any stories about what I see during the winter until later when I'm far, far, away."

"Good," she smiled. "And besides there are some very interesting people there, like Willamar the Master Trader, who can tell you some very interesting tales of adventure and travel to the western sea. My daughter also has some exciting stories about catching horses and building a herd. That is something many people would find interesting I think."

"Yes, there should be a wealth of material for me this winter. Thank you."

All the while, as they talked, Ayla had been feeding the small wolf. It had been greedily sucking the broth from the absorbent material that she'd been dipping and then holding to his mouth. She set the small animal in the little pen that Cambarre had built to house him and began to clear away the utensils. "I must leave for the Zelandoni lodge soon to prepare for the Matrimonial. Why don't you come to our lodge tonight, after the ceremony is over and celebrate Jonayla and Cambarre's mating with us? Proleva and I will be preparing lots of food and we'll have Barma. I expect it will be a fun time for all."

"Yes, I would like that. Thank you," Ralev said. "I might be persuaded to tell a tale or two at the celebration, if asked."

"That would be wonderful, I'll make sure to ask you," Ayla gave the young man one of her brightest smiles - full of pleased excitement - that made him catch his breath in surprise. In that moment, the thought flickered through his head that he'd have to incorporate that smile into his stories about her, it was quite dazzling.

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Ayla pulled the door flap back as she entered the Zelandoni lodge. This would be the final meeting of the Zelandonia before the women gathered to hear the traditional talk explaining their responsibilities to their mate as well as a discussion about how to make a mating last a lifetime. She would be giving this speech again just as she had at the summer's first matrimonial. This time though, there would be only seven couples and most of the women who would be mated had, like her daughter, already been with their man for some time. This ceremony would just be a confirmation of their relationships.

Never the less, it was a talk that allowed questions and gave answers steeped in tradition and experience that went back into the misty past and was essential to the ceremony as a whole.

As Ayla entered the lodge, the Zelandoni gathered around in open curiosity. She had her wolf pup wrapped in a hide carrier slung from her neck and everyone wanted to chance to see The Great Earth Mother's gift; that's the way everyone thought of the small animal, that the little white ball of fur was the gift of the Mother, that he was given as a sign of her pleasure toward their spiritual leader. Ayla wanted to believe it too, and she felt it could be true.

"Zelandoni," the Donier from the First Cave of the southerners asked, "may I hold Sky for a few minutes? Or is it something that shouldn't be done yet?"

"No, that would be alright. He needs to become familiar with people. It won't confuse him to be handled by others since he will spend most of his time with me and only I feed him. He will think of me as his pack leader and you and the others as members of his pack," Ayla said as she handed the wolf pup to her friend.

The southerner sat down beside the hearth on a hide cushion and cuddled the little animal. Because she had a wolf pup of her own, she was able to handle this tiny, much smaller, animal with confidence. The others watched as the little animal curled up in the Donier's arm. He wriggled in delight as fingers gently scratched under his chin and around each pointed ear.

The Zelandonia planning meeting was attended by all of the Acolytes, with the exception of Jonayla who would be mated and had responsibilities elsewhere. The Acolytes would do much of the preparation for the early evening ceremony. There would be the mating ceremonies and then the Mother worship ceremony and finally the Matrimonial feasting.

The feasting would be held at the individual summer lodges but everyone was welcome to attend any or all of these feasts. Many would go from one feast to another, as was traditionally accepted. This was a time when it was expected that good wishes should be exchanged between different groups, even if some lodges had no one mating at that particular Matrimonial.

Everyone - except those assigned to remain - left the Zelandoni lodge prepared to do their part in the upcoming event. Ayla had retrieved her wolf pup. He had been handed around to those who wished to touch him and to get to know him better. She would return to the Ninth Cave's lodge to assist Jonayla with her purification ceremony. She wanted to be involved in all the preparations for her daughter's mating. It wasn't strictly expected, but many mothers would assist their daughters just because it would be the last time they would have to spend together before their relationship changed forever.

Ayla reflected, as she walked through the camp, that her young daughter would soon have a mate and a place of her own and children would soon follow. It made her think nostalgically about her own mating ceremony and how she had felt so

many years ago. She could only wish her daughter as much joy as she'd experienced on her mating day.

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It was after midday by the time mother and daughter returned to the Ninth Cave's summer camp. They had both bathed in New Lake, away from the people. They both had purified themselves, one because she was to be mated and the other because she would perform the ceremonies.

As Ayla moved the hide flap aside and entered the lodge with her daughter right behind her, she heard her daughter gasp and they stood just inside the threshold looking at a beautiful mating outfit, one that Jonayla had never seen before.

"Daughter, I wanted to give you a gift that you might enjoy as much as I did once. I've kept it packed away for longer than you've been alive. This was my matrimonial outfit that I brought with me from the Mamutoi. You will notice that it looks somewhat like many of the outfits that women wear today, but this one was the original, the one that the others were designed to imitate.

"Nezzie of the Mammoth Hunters, with the help of many other women in Lion Camp made this for me and I hoped you would wear it at your matrimonial too. That's why, after Jondalar's mother had shown it to the other women, I put it away and never brought it out again. I wanted it to be a new experience for my daughter. But I will understand if you want to wear the outfit you have with you..." Although Ayla would accept her daughter's refusal, she was pleased by Jonayla's reaction.

"Mother, it's beautiful! I can't believe that you kept this a secret from me all these years," Jonayla said in wonder as she rushed into the lodge and picked up the beautiful garment.

There was no doubt that a huge amount of effort had gone into making it. The leather was of the finest quality, a rich, earthy, golden yellow hue that almost matched the color of her hair. The hide was made from saiga antelope. Instead of the usual velvety soft buckskin of a well-scraped hide, it was even softer and had a burnished, shiny finish that appeared somewhat waterproof. It had obviously been hung out and steamed to remove any creases caused by its long storage. Jonayla wondered who had done that and where it had been hanging so no one had seen it.

She fingered the outfit admiringly. The ivory bead designs were highlighted and defined by many small amber beads in shades both lighter and darker than the leather, with embroideries of red, brown, and black. The tunic, which fell to a downward-pointing triangle at the back, opened down the front, with the section below the hips tapering so that when it was brought together, another downward-pointing triangle was created. It was made to be tied closed at the waist with a finger-woven sash in a similar geometric pattern made of red mammoth hair with accents of ivory.

The outfit was stunning, a magnificent work of art. The workmanship in every detail was excellent. It must have utilized the most skillful and accomplished artisans to create the finished outfit, and no effort had been spared. The beadwork was a good example. There were thousands of ivory beads made from mammoth tusk and sewn onto the garment and Jonayla knew that each small bead had been carved, pierced, and polished by hand.

After she'd had time to recover her composure Jonayla said, "Cambarre will be surprised; we hadn't planned on a mating and didn't have anything special other than our best tunics. In fact, mother, how is it that you had this with you?"

Ayla smiled, "If I'm nothing else daughter, I am perceptive. I saw the look in your eyes when you talked about Cambarre and a mother makes plans for her children, it's only natural. You'll understand when you have children of your own."

Jonayla replied, "I think I'm with child mother. It's been almost two moon cycles since my last women's flow and over the past few days I've felt sick to my stomach in the mornings."

Ayla hugged her daughter delighted at the news. "It may be a bit early to announce it, but I'm sure you're right Jonayla, you look rudely healthy like a mother expecting, even though it doesn't show around your middle yet. I'm going to be happy to have children around our dwelling again! I wish Marthona were still here with us, she would be so happy."

Ayla asked her daughter if she had given Cambarre the news yet. "Yes, I told him I thought I was. I think I am, I'll be positive in another half-moon's time if my moon-time still hasn't come," Jonayla replied.

"Well, whether or not you are now, I'm sure you will be a mother soon, so don't worry. And besides, if it turns out that you're not, the Great Earth Mother's gift is to

be enjoyed and I'm sure that She will give you children in time." They laughed companionably and turned to the outfit laid out before them.

"Who steamed this to remove the creases and how did they keep it hidden?" Jonayla asked as she fingered the material lovingly and brushed her hand over the many ivory beads that decorated the tunic.

"Proleva. Who else? I was going to try to do it at the Zelandoni lodge but that wasn't really practical. That's when she came up with the idea of steaming the creases out and then hanging it in a shroud over there," Ayla pointed to Joharran and Proleva's sleeping area. Jonayla remembered that there had been a woven fiber bag hanging against the wall of the lodge. She'd been given the impression that it only held more folds of woven fiber to account for its thickness. It was supposedly for trade and no one gave it a second thought.

"I'll have to remember how devious you and Proleva can be," Jonayla joked. "May I try it on?"

"I think that would be a good idea. You're a little thinner than I was and maybe a tiny bit shorter, but then I was two years older than you when I was mated. I think we can put a few stitches here and there to make this fit you perfectly and I can hardly wait until people see you in it."

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Cambarre and Jondalar were at the fa'lodge and Jondalar felt the time was right for a question. "Cambarre, what are you going to wear at the ceremony tonight?" Jondalar asked, as he'd been instructed to do by Ayla.

"I have a dress tunic. If I could only have read the future I would have had a matrimonial tunic made, but this should do," Cambarre replied, holding the tunic up. He and most of the men to be mated that afternoon were gathered in one of the emptied fa'lodges to dress after their individual purifications.

"Well, Ayla wanted me to see if you would like a special tunic. Don't ask me how she knew you two would mate this summer but she did." Jondalar lifted a woven cloth covering to show a pure white tunic with snow white ermine tails with black tips sewn in a vee-shape from both shoulders. It was a striking tunic, like nothing he'd ever seen before.

"That is special!" Cambarre said. I've seen variations of this but nothing that looked so white and those ermine tails really make it look unique."

"Yes, it is almost exactly like the one she made for me when we were mated. Apparently she brought the skins and tails with her to make this for you when we left to come to the Summer Meeting. Ayla and my brother's mate Proleva made this for you," Jondalar said. "I hope you will wear it. It would make both women very happy if you did."

"Of course, I would be honored to. I will thank Zelandoni and your brother's mate when I see them next. This is a magnificent gift. It makes me feel accepted as one of the family. That they would go to this trouble to honor me is really something," Cambarre said with a slight catch of emotion in his voice. "And with all the other things Zelandoni has had to contend with, this is a double honor."

Since the time was approaching for the men to join the women for the Matrimonial, Cambarre put on his new tunic to general admiration. Most of the other men came over to see the tunic at close range and commented at its craftsmanship.

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By the time the people had gathered to witness the final Matrimonial of the season the shadows were stretching into long dark stripes, reflecting the onset of evening. Four of the couples participating in this final ceremony were mature and mating for a second time because they had lost a mate to an illness or accident, or because they had broken away from a less than satisfactory coupling.

Jonayla and Cambarre were the youngest couple and one of three couples who were mating for the first time. As the women filed from the Zelandoni lodge there were murmurs of surprise as Jonayla walked in single file with the other women. Her outfit was exceptional and all the younger women oohed and ahed as she walked past them.

Ayla's heart swelled with joy as her daughter took her place in line with the others. The Mamutoi matrimonial outfit was magnificent, especially worn as intended, with the tunic front tied back into fantastical wings, showing Jonayla's proud young breasts and flat firm stomach.

Some woman standing behind Ayla commented, "That one is beautiful. I remember seeing her mother wearing a similar outfit at her matrimonial. Her mate is a lucky man to have such an attractive woman."

Smiling to herself, Ayla agreed with the anonymous woman. Cambarre was a lucky man to have her daughter's love. She thought he knew his luck and that made her smile. Her daughter also was a lucky woman to have a handsome young man so much in love with her. Seeing her daughter dressed for a Matrimonial Ceremony like this made Ayla feel nostalgic. She could remember her own Matrimonial, and how it felt to be standing there experiencing this ceremony. Her daughter's radiant expression made Ayla happier than she would ever have thought possible.

She watched Jonayla's face as the men came into view from the fa'lodge where they had gathered to dress in their finest. She smiled as Jonayla's eyes widened in surprise at the outstanding vision of her man dressed in a white as snow tunic. Ayla had to admit to herself that it fit him well and he looked so handsome and strong. Jondalar was with her now and he smiled as they exchanged looks. Jonayla shivered slightly in secret delight as his brilliant sky blue eyes looked into hers.

Cambarre almost tripped over his feet when he saw Jonayla in her mating outfit. He was so surprised that for a moment he stood still with his mouth open such that the man behind him almost ran into him. He received a slight shove from behind and lurched forward, again unable to take his eyes off his mate-to-be. She stood there with the other women, like a force of nature. No one existed for him but Jonayla, a golden vision, almost intimidating in her beauty.

Then the First Zelandoni began to chant and then another Zelandoni joined in and then another and another until there were many spiritual leaders chanting in unison. Soon there was a soft but sustained chant continuously repeated in low soothing voices. That was when the First Zelandoni raised her voice to begin the ceremony, "All Caves of the Zelandonii, you are called upon to witness the joining of man and woman..."

Ayla was to preside over three mating vows, bringing each of the couples together under the Mother's spiritual presence and finishing each by tying the woman's right wrist to the man's left wrist. As the couple clasped hands she tied them together with a simple leather thong as a token of their union. All knew that the rawhide binding must not be cut and would be expected to be given back whole when the couple returned after their half-moon phase trial period. It would be a very bad sign indeed, if the thong were returned cut. It was thought that a couple who worked

together as one would be able to live together as one and therefore should be able to untie the thong and return it as it was given, in one uncut piece.

When it was Jonayla and Cambarre's turn, they clasped hands, her right hand in his left as they stepped forward. Ayla, with eyes shining, repeated the ceremonial chant that would unite these two who were dearer to her than life itself.

"All Caves of the Zelandonii, you are called upon to witness the joining of man and woman. Doni, The Great Earth Mother, She who's mate and lover is Lumi, who shines down upon us this night in witness with Her. She is honored by the sacred joining of Her children..." Ayla continued the traditional ceremony as before, only now she couldn't help the tears of happiness that made her eyes sparkle in the approaching dusk of evening. Jondalar stood for Jonayla. Since Cambarre's parents walked the Spirit World, Willamar stood in for them.

"...The two standing before me have pleased The Great Earth Mother by choosing to join together. Cambarre originally of Elder Cave, do you choose Jonayla of the Ninth Cave of the Zelandonii, Blessed of Doni, daughter of Jondalar and his mate, related to Joharran leader of the Ninth Cave, son of Marthona who was leader of the Ninth Cave before him, to be your mate?"

Cambarre looked sidewise at Jonayla and smiled as he said in a loud voice, "I choose her!"

Ayla continued, "Will you respect her and care for her and the children she brings to your hearth?"

"I will respect her and care for her and provide for her and our children," Cambarre said firmly, still looking into Jonayla's amazingly blue eyes.

"Jonayla of the Ninth Cave of the Zelandonii and Acolyte of The Great Earth Mother serving the Zelandonia, do you choose Cambarre originally of the Elder Hearth, son of Mandolar and Dlania, who now walk the world of the spirits, who were related to Marambar, master hunter of legend and once leader of Elder Hearth?"

"I choose him," Jonayla said, squeezing his hand in hers.

"Will you respect him, care for him and teach your children to respect him as befits your mate as their father and provider?"

Jonayla joyfully recited her response, "I will respect him, care for him and teach his children to respect and honor him."

All the ceremonial litany was performed until finally it ended with a happy and tearful mother, who was also the spiritual leader of all the Zelandonii, saying, "All the Caves of the Zelandonii," her tone commanding attention. "Cambarre and Jonayla have chosen each other. It has been agreed upon, and they have been accepted by the Ninth Cave. What say you to this joining?" She held both arms up enjoining the people to respond.

There was a roar of approval. It seemed unanimous, people stood and clapped and cheered. During this moment of the people's approval, Ayla let go the last vestiges of insecurity about her past and the Zelandonii reactions to it. Really, her only fear had been for her children, but if this response to the mating of her eldest child was any guide, then anyone left harboring a grudge could be dealt with. Ayla was sure that her children were strong enough to confront that sort of person.

She smiled, ecstatic with joy and turned to the radiant young couple. As the noise decreased she continued, indicating that the couple should raise their clasped hands. As the Zelandoni chant rose in the background once again, she wrapped the mating thong around their wrists twice, then tied the knot.

"The knot has been tied," she intoned. "You are mated. May Doni always smile on you." The young couple circled around to face the people and Ayla announced, "They are now Cambarre and Jonayla of the Ninth Cave of the Zelandonii."

Now mated, Cambarre and Jonayla walked together out of the open area to make room for the next couple. They stood with the other newly mated couples. They talked in low tones among themselves, congratulating each other. Many remarked on Cambarre and Jonayla's outfits, wanting to know who made them.

By the time it was truly dark the first Zelandoni from the south was finishing the last of the mating ceremonies for her people from the south. Afterward the newly mated couples returned to their summer lodges for the matrimonial feasts. They would stay at their own people's lodge to greet guests, while members of other caves circulated between feasting caves to congratulate and share in the new couple's joy.

Many couples that are mated at the same matrimonial tend to remain close friends throughout life. They have shared an important experience. Before leaving the

Matrimonial grounds they hugged and promised each other that they would get together at the next Summer Meeting for one night, to see how everyone had fared over the winter.

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Many of the people had moved away from the ceremonial site, toward the feast of their choice. The seven newly mated couples still stood together in the waiting place as their spiritual leader spoke to them one last time. This last part was an innovation of Ayla's that she would perform in the future and for as long as she represented the Mother as the First Zelandoni. "When I was mated to Jondalar," Ayla began. "Things were different than they are today. Newly mated couples left immediately after the ceremony was over.

"As you know when we were given the knowledge of life's beginning by the Mother, many traditional ways changed. So did the trial period when six summers ago we lived with the clouds of falling dust that came to us from afar, where day never really came and the nights were long from one summer to the next.

"At that time we decided to make a change and have the newly mated couples leave the next day in the light of day. Now that our southern Zelandonii have begun to attend the Summer Meetings we've decided to hold the Matrimonial Feasts at the summer lodges where the newly mated couples will live because there are just too many people now to hold one large feast as was done the past.

"It is true that many things have changed, but the reason for the trial period has not. You leave the Summer Meeting in the morning. From tomorrow morning, for the next fifteen days each couple will live alone, away from the people. You will not speak to anyone other than to your partner, unless given dispensation to do so by a Zelandoni." Ayla paused, looking at her daughter and her mate, knowing that they had a task assigned to them during their time alone that would require them to communicate with others.

Ayla made eye contact with each couple, smiling and nodding to each. "You may now go, but remember that your Matrimonial Thong must not be discarded and also remember, to cut the thong is unlucky." Ayla smiled broadly, "You are to leave the Summer Meeting at dawn tomorrow, so don't celebrate too much tonight."

The couples excitedly thanked their First Zelandoni and darted away toward their individual lodges to host their feast. Ayla walked with Jonayla and Cambarre through

the camp to their own feasting place. "I am grateful to you both for taking on the task of calling on the Chimu during your trial period. It will be a great help to me," Ayla said.

"We're happy to do it mother," Jonayla replied. "I like to do things that will help you, I know how much you have to think about and this will be one less worry. I've asked Durc to care for the three horses that I have left that weren't traded, so we're ready to leave first thing in the morning."

"That's fine," Ayla said. "Enjoy your feast tonight. After all it is in your honor. When you return from your trial period I would like to leave for home. We have work to perform on the dwelling Ralev and his storytellers will be staying in this winter. They need to be made comfortable and secure before the first big snowfall. And I'm sure that you two would like to get started on yours."

"Makes sense to me. I know that I'll want to change some things in the dwelling that Cambarre and I will be calling home. I just wish Lanidar and Lanoga weren't leaving. I'll really miss Lorala, she always treated me as if I were her little sister. But I guess, as you like to say mother, things continually change, so I'll just have to get used to it."

"Hopefully some of the changes are to your liking..." Cambarre gave Jonayla an impish grin then pulled her tightly to his side as they walked toward their lodge.

"Yes, change is good," Jonayla smiled back at him. The smile was very reminiscent of her mother's - one of the things about her that had attracted Cambarre to her in the first place.

Ayla remained silent, letting the young couple find their own way. She liked Cambarre and thought he would make a good mate for her daughter, but in reality, as is the case in most things, only time would tell.

Chapter 34: The Storyteller

The bonfire was burning as tall as a man and people milled around serving themselves roasted bison, elk and caribou meat. Stews with grains and vegetables were plentiful. 'The vegetables won't store for long and will need to be consumed before leaving the Summer Meeting,' Ayla thought. When the Zelandonii returned to their home caves they would still have time to gather the last of the summer's fare, wild carrots, onions, tubers and roots and store them away in the permafrost storage pits so they would have some vegetables during the early winter months.

'It would be a hectic time,' she thought to herself, as she watched her people enjoying the feast. It would only be another hand of time or so before the first people of the Ninth Cave left for home. Those would be the young hunters who would take most of the dry-preserved meat with them on travois. This was the Ninth Cave's share from the summer hunts. The young men would start hunting the more distant western areas around the home cave while their women began gathering in vegetables and grains from the traditional places.

When the rest of the Cave members returned, bringing all the hides, equipment and utensils with them, they too would join in the final hunting and gathering tasks.

But tonight it was a merry time, and no one was thinking of tomorrow, other than maybe the guests of honor, Jonayla and Cambarre. Ayla looked over at them, still dressed in their splendor, sitting on thick padded cushions made from soft deer hide and stuffed with mammoth wool. They looked so happy.

Just then Durcan came to sit by her, excitedly watching the festivities, the chattering and dancing and singing. "Isn't this fun mother? I can't remember a happier time, can you?" He wasn't really expecting a response. His young body leaned against her. She could smell his scent, the mixed aroma of youth, wind and grass and healthy boy. She smiled, putting an arm around his shoulders and hugging him close. "So you're enjoying yourself? Are you going to visit any of the other cave feasts tonight?" If he intended to, she wanted to have some idea where he was going.

"No, I'm waiting for Ralev to tell the Mother Spirit Story. I think we have the best celebration at the Summer Meeting anyway. Look at all the people here. I think just about everybody from our cave is still here, plus a bunch of people from other caves."

"Yes, Proleva and the women from the Ninth Cave are known for the quality of their food preparation. She still out does anyone else when planning a feast," Ayla said with true admiration. Proleva had always impressed her with her organizational skills and her talent for inventing new and tasty dishes.

"Yes, we do have great food, but I think the real reason so many people are here is that Ralev has spread the word that he was going to tell a new version of the Mother Spirit Story."

"A new version you say! I look forward to hearing him tell his story. I haven't had time to stop by the storyteller's lodge this summer, but I've heard that he tells great stories."

Durcan looked at his mother, "You mean you don't know mother?"

"Know what Durcan?"

"Mother, call me Durc, will you?"

"I thought you didn't want me to call you that anymore," Ayla said, a little mystified. Her son had been so adamant the last time she'd called him by her endearment name for him that she had made a conscious effort to stop using it.

"Well, Ralev has told stories about Durc and they sound like me... and well, everyone calls me that now and I like it. No one teases me about my name anymore so you can call me Durc too, if you like."

"Very well," Ayla replied. "But what is it that I don't know Durc?"

"Um, I thought you'd know about it mother. Ralev's troupe has been telling stories about you and father and your journey along The Great Mother River. There are some wonderful stories about you and father and Wolf. You really haven't heard anything of them?"

"No, I've been away and then ill and very busy in between. He can't have that many stories about your father and me, surely?"

"Oh yes, those are the most popular stories of all. People know you and father, so the stories mean more to them than just legends and stories about people they

don't know. I'm glad that Ralev will be staying with us this winter. You'll get to hear all of his stories mother."

Ayla wasn't sure that she wanted to hear stories about herself and Jondalar. She knew how storytellers always exaggerated things and she didn't want people to think she had done things that she hadn't. The good thing about Ralev's stories, she realized, was her son's happiness. Apparently Ralev's storytelling had resonated with the Zelandonii so that her Clan past wasn't such an abomination to them as it might have been when she had first come to the Ninth Cave.

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"Stories! Stories!" the chant started up by the children at first, then many of the adults joined in. Ralev smiled and stood, placing his now empty food platter on a rock beside the fire and walked to the far end of the hearth. The fire had burned down from its original bonfire status, to one with flames that were barely visible causing shifting shadows that lent a mysterious air.

Standing tall and commanding, Ralev dramatically spread his arms before the people, then called out in a loud voice, "I have a story to tell!" His voice creating a sudden silence as the people settled down expectantly.

"I have traveled for more than a year to reach this place and in that time I have met many tribes of people," Ralev began. "There are many differences in these people. Some live in long earth covered lodges and some in caves, I met one tribe of people who would dig into the earth and live below ground during the winter and then in hide tents that could be taken down and moved with the herds during the mild weather of spring, summer and fall.

"The one common thread between these diverse peoples was in their belief and worship of The Great Earth Mother. They may have used different names for her, but it wasn't hard to see who they proclaimed and worshiped.

"The story I'm about to speak of, tells of the time that the Spirit of The Great Earth Mother walked the earth among Her children. During this time the Mother was protected by Her Spirit Lover Lumi and the Wolf Star who protected them both."

The people sitting around the large open hearth murmured knowingly. They had heard this story before, or one like it and it was a favorite theme. Ralev and his

troupe had been telling variations of this story and others all summer long since their arrival.

"Once there was an evil witch who cast her spell over a whole people. She made the women in the community hate their men. This witch's name was Armuna and she hated all men because she had once been beaten and defiled by a brutal man. She had come among the people from the east and had teased the leader of the S'Attaro tribe, thinking that she could control him through her womanly ways and her beauty. But the leader who was called Atta didn't care what people thought of him because he controlled his people through fear. So when Armuna tried to seduce him, he just took his pleasure with her against her will, hurting her when she tried to resist.

"Armuna was humiliated and wanted to take revenge, but he was a big and powerfully built man and he had other men who followed him and helped him subdue the people. Armuna secretly talked to some of the women in the tribe, telling them what Atta had done to her, and they were afraid. So she came up with a plan to avenge herself on Atta and the other men. Her plan was to give herself willingly to Atta and to treat him as if he were a god and do anything he commanded of her, no matter how base or humiliating it might be. In this way she would be able to be close to him and once he let his guard down, she would take her revenge upon him."

From somewhere in the dark night a flute started up, then also from afar the beat of a drum. The listeners didn't stir at this addition to the story telling, they sat absorbed in the unfolding drama. This version was new to them and a good story told by an experienced storyteller was always a treat.

"To test her submissiveness, Atta commanded Armuna to go with his personal guards and pleasure them, which she did. Nothing would stand in the way of her plan for revenge. Even if he had told her to cut a finger off to prove his control over her, she would have done it. Atta treating her like chattel only made her hatred smolder more. As the men used her body she pretended to enjoy them but deep down inside she thought of the horrible things that she would do to them when she had her revenge.

"Armuna was a very accomplished hunter in her own right. Her people far to the east trained both boys and girls to hunt and many of the women continued to hunt even after they bore children. So Armuna was no stranger to a spear and sling.

"She also made every effort to befriend the women of the tribe. Rough handling of women was encouraged by the leader, so there were many women who wished that things were different than they were. Some women hated the men nearly as much as Armuna did. She took advantage of those feelings and would meet the stronger younger women in the forest to practice with spear and sling and to talk about a day when the men would be punished.

"Having proved her meekness and subservience to Atta, Armuna was soon trusted enough to prepare Atta's food and even the food of the other men when they feasted with him in his lodge. That was a big mistake on their part because Armuna knew of a plant, gray in color, with sharp leaves that would kill a person if ingested. One evening she pounded these leaves into powder and mixed them into the grains of a dish to be served that evening when Atta and his friends were to feast together."

Ralev paused for a moment and looked around at the fire-lit faces intently watching him. He was pleased with the faint flute and drum, his troupe was good and it did add to the tension. He was also pleased at the obvious tension that his listeners were exhibiting. Even the First Zelandoni, who - whether or not she knew it - this story was based upon, seemed engaged. He hoped she wouldn't mind that the story was about her, when it became obvious.

"What I haven't told you yet is that Atta sometimes tested Armuna in different ways. That night for some reason he was suspicious of her. It might have been that she looked nervous or it could have been a brief look of hatred in her eyes. For whatever reason, he demanded that she taste all the food before they ate it.

"Armuna smiled at the man who beat her and shared her with any man he wanted to reward, telling them to take her roughly and to beat her because that's what she liked. She hated it and she hated him. She took a good helping of stew and of the grain dish and sat down to eat everything on the plate. When she was done she licked her fingers appreciatively and said, "That was good, I think I outdid myself, especially on the cooked grains. I used a new herb that gives it a unique flavor."

"Assured the food was not poisoned, Atta told her to leave and get more Barma. This was the moment that she had planned for the past several full moons. Armuna would go to any length to make her revenge complete. She had gathered the women who had been training with their weapons and had them arm themselves. When the groans and yells came from Atta's lodge she rushed in and saw the men rolling around on the dirt floor. Not waiting for Atta to die from the poison, Armuna

walked over and looked down at him. His eyes were wide with fear and his face was twisted in pain.

"Armuna put the spear she was holding at his manhood and said between gritted teeth, "Now YOU get to feel what it's like," then she thrust the spear's sharpened point in to the place between the leader's legs that had attacked her time and again. Atta shrieked in pain as Armuna put all her strength into the spear and rammed it deeper and deeper into him. He was dying more painfully than anyone had ever died before.

"Armuna called to the other women who hated these men as much as she, but who were more timid than her. She yelled at them to stab the men still rolling around on the ground. The Women just stood and stared in horror at the spear that had been shoved into Atta and they could see his dead, agony distorted face. Armuna didn't wait a minute longer, she grabbed the spear out of the hand of the woman standing nearest to her and repeatedly stabbed each man in the groin and guts until every one of them were dead.

"There was a sick horror at what had just happened but the elation of being out from under Atta's control spurred the others to follow Armuna's commands. And her first demand was that they should round up all of the men left alive and make them - at spear point - climb down into a storage pit where they could be guarded.

"Although the effects of the poison were delayed in Armuna. She soon became violently ill from the poison she had consumed but after some time she recovered. It turned out that she had been eating small portions of the poison plant for several moons, enough to make her feel ill, but not enough to die from. Apparently an old woman who lived nearby in the forest had told her that to take small amounts of poison over time would allow her body to adjust to it and be less and less affected by future poisonings.

"This turned out to be true. It was quite a risk, but Armuna was willing to risk her life to revenge herself on Atta and his men."

Ralev walked closer to the fire and looked around at the large group of people. His gaze fell on the First Zelandoni and he smiled at her. He could tell that she had caught on to the root of his story, but she didn't say anything as he looked back at the people and continued in a voice that carried into the night.

"From that day forward Armuna was the leader of the S'Attaro people. She changed their name to the S'Armunai. She made the men build a stockade, made from pointed logs anchored solidly in the ground and she kept all the men in this prison, treating them very poorly indeed. Many of the women who hadn't been treated badly by their men weren't happy about this. They hadn't been upset by the removal of Atta and his men, but they didn't want to be without their men.

"As the years turned from summer to winter and back again Armuna became as bad at Atta had been. Her mind had turned to revenge for any small slight and as the men began to die from maltreatment, some of the women began to regret their earlier support for Armuna.

"Over time foreigners stopped passing through their land. Word had gotten out that the S'Armunai mistreated travelers and would even detain and rob them of their belongings or trade goods. Many of the women began to pray to The Great Earth Mother for relief from the new tyrant and those who did her bidding.

"One day two apparitions materialized in the valley below their camp. They moved toward them as if floating, there were murmurs of fear from among Armuna's followers and murmurs of hope from the rest of the women who secretly opposed them.

"At first the apparitions seemed to be half human and half horse. One was a woman and one was a man. As these specters neared, the women could tell that they were Spirits riding on the backs of horses. When they saw a third apparition following faithfully beside the two, they knew immediately what they were seeing. The first two were apparitions of The Earth Mother and Lumi, Her lover. The third had to be that of Wolf Star, the hunter of souls, who did the bidding of the Mother in the form of a wolf.

"As the Earth Mother rode into their midst all the people cringed. Some did so because they felt guilty at what they had done, and others because they never thought to see the Mother Spirit in life.

The Mother walked seeming on air as she entered the open space before the outdoor hearth. Then as the people watched, the Mother pointed to the cold and empty circle of stones and suddenly fire burst forth and burned brightly. All eyes looked at the flames that burned with no wood, as if they were ghost flames. They knew then, without a doubt, that The Great Earth Mother Spirit was among them.

"She was a golden woman, at least the part of Her that favored humans. Golden skin and golden hair with a confidence that shone from Her face and there was no doubt who was at Her side. He was bare-chested, tanned and well-muscled and his light blond hair moved as if alive or from a breeze that wasn't apparent. His tanned skin had the sheen of moon-light shining through and everyone knew he was the Mother's lover, Lumi.

"All of the S'Armunai stood still in awe at having such powerful spirits in their midst, fearful of what would happen next.

"The Mother's lover, Lumi, dismounted from his Spirit Horse and walked up to Armuna and gave Her the traditional greeting of a traveler to a leader of people. But in her pride she told her women to hold him hostage. She threatened the Earth Mother Spirit, saying that if she didn't leave - she, Armuna - would shove her spear into Lumi as she had done to Atta, whom, she boasted, had been a bigger, stronger man than this one standing before her. This of course was a lie, not the first one that Armuna had ever told.

"All the women were frightened by their leader's actions. She was a fool to have dared to defy the Earth Mother Spirit come to earth. It was a black thing to do that would curse the whole S'Armunai. But they needn't have worried. The Mother Spirit raised a hand and pointed to Armuna, demanding that she take her restraining hands from Her lover.

"When Armuna refused, Wolf Star, who had taken the form of a huge gray wolf, stepped forward and growled a warning that she must obey the Mother Spirit. Still Armuna refused. Then suddenly the horses screamed and there was thunder in the sky and Wolf Star was at Armuna's throat, pulling her into the Spirit World screaming in pain, rage and fear, never to be seen again.

"As the people fell to the ground in fear, thunder and lightning crashed around them and cold rain fell from what had been a cloudless sky just moments before, washing everything clean. When the thunder and lightning finally stopped and the sun came out to shine down on the people, the Mother Spirit told the S'Armunai that they had erred in their ways. They had treated travelers to their land badly and that was against the Mother's way. They had taken revenge on men who had caused them no harm and that was also against the Mother's way.

"The beautiful and vibrant woman, who was the Earth Mother Spirit, laid down the law of hospitality to the S'Armunai, saying, "All people from one end of The Great

Mother River to the other shall offer true hospitality to visitors without demand, obligation or recompense. This is the Mothers Law of Hospitality. It is now and for always and evermore shall be so."

"The Mother Spirit and Her lover Lumi, commanded that the men in the prison be released and many of the women ran to the stockade and released them. Then the Mother told the S'Armunai people that so long as they kept the law, they would prosper, but if they did wrong again she would not forgive them a second time. Then the Mother and Her lover Lumi turned away and rode into a sudden mist that took them from this world to that of the Spirit World, right before the staring eyes of the S'Armunai.

"From that day to this, if you were to visit the S'Armunai, they would tell you this story and you would see a community that treats each other with love and understanding, and any travelers that may happen by, are treated as friends.

"I know all this, because I was a traveler who reaped the benefit of the Mother's Law of Hospitality and became a guest of the S'Armunai, and I had a pleasant time indeed."

As Ralev's voice stilled, the flute and drum faded away. Ayla knew the story because she had lived it, at least a version of it. She had met Attaroa who was Armuna in real life and Wolf had killed her to save Jondalar's life, but she also knew that the stylized tale was more fantasy than reality. She briefly wondered if all legends were so far from the actual truth. The people were clapping and patting Ralev on the back telling him that this was the best version of the story he'd ever told and the people were moving around now so Ayla let her thoughts come back to the present and rose to her feet to compliment Ralev for the telling of an interesting tale.

Jondalar also added his appreciation, saying, "That story sounds strangely familiar. If you changed some names and don't mention the attack we experienced in the open plain, and removed all that Mother Spirit and Lover Lumi part, well, it could have really happened." Jondalar laughed and Ralev laughed with him.

"Yes Jondalar, I know that stories become more and more inflated as time goes on, but that is the way of things. People want explanations for things that sometimes have no explanation. I think there are two parts to any worthwhile story. It should be based on some truth and there should be a moral to the story. If people learn something from my stories, then I feel that I have succeeded at my craft."

"It was a very entertaining story," Ayla said, smiling. "My son Durc was just telling me that you and your storytellers have been telling a lot of stories about our journey from the east."

"Yes, we have. I felt that after my blunder when I first came here that I should remind the Zelandonii just who you and Jondalar are... how unusual you both are and also remind the people, through stories, of the gifts of knowledge both spiritual and practical that you have both given to them," Ralev replied unabashed. "I hope you don't mind if we exaggerate some, it is the storyteller's prerogative to make a story as interesting as possible." He paused for a moment grinning impishly, "Although when telling stories of you two, it really isn't necessary to embellish your accomplishments." He laughed, making both Jondalar and Ayla smile.

Ayla could see so much of Tricie and Ranec in their son Ralev. Ranec's nose and beautiful smile and Tricie's lighter skin came to mind. Ayla had a small regret that had always remained with her since their departure from the Mammoth Hunters. She wondered if the truth about conception had reached Lion Camp by now. Well, if it hadn't, it would find its way back with Ralev, she thought to herself.

"Ralev, you looked very much like your father just then, when you smiled. He had such an infectious smile." There was deafening silence for a moment, Ralev looked at Jondalar.

"Ralev, don't worry, I harbor no ill will toward your father. He saw a woman he could love and wanted to mate with her. How can I blame him for that? I was a fool to treat Ayla as I did, as if she had betrayed me. For reasons I couldn't even explain to myself, I pushed her into your father's embrace. And besides, Ayla came away with me, so I fear your father suffered from the experience much more than I did," Jondalar concluded.

"Yes, I'm told that he did. Although in time he recovered. I was too young back then. All I knew about you and Zelandoni were the stories that the storytellers told and that certainly piqued my curiosity," he smiled. "It was one of the reasons I became a storyteller. I heard stories about this mysterious Ayla and her lover Jondalar from my father. Then I heard stories about these same two people from the Storytellers and I compared the stories with each other. That's how I first understood what storytelling was all about, to get to the essence of a story, while keeping the listeners entertained. Once I understood that, I was hooked like a fish."

"Well, I will readily admit that you have learned your craft. You can tell a truly fantastic story," Jondalar said with conviction.

Ayla felt the need to thank him. "Ralev, I appreciate your effort to smooth over the issue about my Clan son Durc. I just want to say again that I didn't really mind it coming out. I'm as proud of my Clan son as I am of my Zelandonii son. I only knew Durc for his first five years, but I could tell that he was my son. He had my physical traits and that's when the Mother first showed me how life really began, that when a male and female share pleasures the Mother gives forth life.

"The Clan only thought of my son as deformed, but I could tell that he was a mixture of Clan and me. It was so obvious to me that I risked my life to save his. I ran away with him when they told me that I had to leave him in the snow to die because of his deformities. No one would listen to me so I ran.

"It had been a terribly hard birthing. The heads of Clan babies are so much larger than ours. I thought I was going to die during Durc's birth. After all that pain, there was no way I would meekly destroy what I had brought into the world.

"I guess my point is that Durc, my Clan baby, was the instrument that began the thought that the Mother finally clarified to me when she called me to the Zelandonia. If I hadn't had the experience of giving birth to a mixed essence child, I would not have understood her when she gave me the final verses to the Mother's Song."

Ralev's expression was serious now. "I'm glad that I will be staying with you this winter. In fact, I consider it the greatest luck I could have had. I look forward to hearing your stories about the Clan and your childhood with them. I would very much like to learn their sign language too.

"This new way of thinking about conception makes a lot of sense to me. I can see my father in myself also. If he wasn't so unusual, it might be hard to tell, but with my mother's light skin and red hair and my father's nose and smile, I can tell that I'm a mixture of the two of them. That fits so perfectly with what the Zelandonii believe, that I believe it too," Ralev said seriously.

"Well, I'm grateful for what you have done. You have helped my son to accept himself again, and all because of your stories. His friends now think of him as special rather than the son of a woman who had birthed an abomination. Your stories have actually changed many Zelandonii minds about that," Ayla replied.

"I think you have done more to change people's minds about that than anything we have said in our stories," Ralev said, and he really meant it.

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The feasting and merriment continued late into the night, but the guests of honor slipped into the lodge itself and changed into their travel clothes soon after the storytelling was over. Ayla and Jondalar wished them well and sent them on their trial period with a hug and a kiss. "Enjoy this time alone," Jondalar said as he stood beside Ayla, hugging her to him with a strong arm. "We still remember the time we were first mated. It was truly special. It was the beginning of something important. As you know, we had been together for a long time before our Matrimonial, but to be actually mated made it different somehow.

"When you wake up in the morning, breathe deeply of the morning and the freedom of your youth, before you have the responsibilities that come with age, and enjoy the next days as a rare gift. That is all I have to say." He finished and was a little embarrassed at speaking so passionately.

"Yes, your father's advice is well to heed." Ayla looked from Jonayla to Cambarre. "You are both our children now, especially since Cambarre has no parents left in this world. We want him to think of us that way now and in the future. Go, enjoy this time," Ayla said with tears of joy. She kissed and hugged them both in their turn and watched them walk away into the dark of night, together and happy.

Chapter 35: The Woolly Rhino

The young couple had erected their travel tent and laid out the circle of stones to contain their campfire and had even gathered wood for the fire the day before. There was no rule against preparing a place away from their summer lodge and they wanted to begin their time alone as soon as possible, they were so looking forward to it.

Jonayla had grown up listening to both her mother and father reminiscing about their trial period and how much they had enjoyed it, that is until they'd run into the ten year old boy Matagan who had been mauled by a Woolly Rhino. But even that turned out to be a lucky event. Her mother had saved the boy's life and her father had taken the boy on as an apprentice Knapper, and Matagan had turned out to be an excellent one.

Both Jonayla and Cambarre were eager to be away, but it was Jonayla who encouraged Cambarre to pack up their travel gear early and she was the one who devised the plan to leave unseen by the others before the feasting was over.

Cambarre didn't mind, in fact he was flattered that this beautiful woman was so eager to be alone with him. It was true that he'd had much more experience with women than she had with men, but he found her eagerness to be more seductive than the most experienced woman he'd ever been with.

The other women faded in his memory more and more each time he was honored to pleasure and be pleased by this exquisite creature. She didn't understand how exciting she was. Her beautiful body enflamed him, but her innocent lust for him was heart-stopping. He was hopelessly in love with her and happy the two of them would build a life together.

They didn't make a fire when they reached their tent in the dark that night. Their campsite was close to the shore of New Lake and they could hear the lapping of the water as they undressed and dove into the furs to snuggle together for warmth.

Although they had retired comparatively early, they didn't find sleep until just a couple of hours before dawn. They found that new love - especially officially condoned love - was more of an aphrodisiac than anything. It gave them the freedom to enjoy each other's bodies and to know that if a child came, it would be

theirs and recognized as their progeny. Just knowing that fact, made their lovemaking much more satisfying. But even with their youthful stamina, by the fifth round of pleasurable touching, kissing and tasting, they finally fell asleep in each other's arms. A dreamless sleep, a sated sleep, a satisfied and hopeful sleep, as only a newly mated couple might.

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As dawn's light reflected through the hide of their tent opening, the young couple woke, refreshed. They didn't leave the tent right away, but renewed their lovemaking once more, just to make sure that they hadn't dreamed it all the night before. Then Cambarre watched through the open flap of their tent as Jonayla, taking an absorbent chamois to dry herself and nothing else, walked down to the water's edge and stepped in, stopping for a moment to hug herself at the coldness of the lake water. Then she walked into the water until she was waist deep and washed herself with tallow soap to freshen her body for the day.

Cambarre watched his beautiful mate as her sweetly curved hips swayed as she walked to the water's edge. He could feel his manhood expanding and hardening, but knew that if he kept letting it direct him they would spend their whole time here by the lake and get nothing else done. Reluctantly, but feeling very much like a responsible adult, he stood and grabbed his Chamois and followed Jonayla to the lake.

She had turned to face the shore by the time Cambarre emerged from the tent so she could see his state of readiness. "I see you," Jonayla giggled. She was enchanted by her mate's condition, his obvious arousal at being with her. It gave her a vague sense of power over him that she could make him so aroused just by being naked near him.

In reality Cambarre could be aroused by her smile, a wink, or just breathing the same air as Jonayla. Cambarre had a long list of aphrodisiacs when it came to Jonayla.

He walked into the water to stand next to her and asked for the lump of soap. Jonayla didn't hand him the soap, but began to smooth her soapy hands over his shoulders and chest. "Turn around so I can get your back," she instructed. Cambarre did as he was told and Jonayla scrubbed his back, building up the suds and standing close to him so that her breasts were soon pressed against his back. It was an exquisite feeling, two soapy bodies pressed together.

Then Jonayla reached down to wash her man below the water line and Cambarre couldn't help the groan of pleasure as soapy fingers found his stiff manhood. His need felt as if it heated the water as Jonayla massaged him with her warm soapy hands. It was no surprise that they made love standing in the lake as the morning air cooled their backs and their blood surged, fueled by a heat deep within.

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It was late morning before they'd had their breakfast and broken camp. By then there were other people coming to the lake to bathe or bringing their horses to the water. The couple elicited surreptitious looks from the people who came near. Everyone knew who they were, the older ones remembered their own trial period and felt a pang of nostalgia, while the younger people were just curious, some wishing they could trade places with Jonayla, or Cambarre.

The curiosity all around them made the young couple move that much faster and soon they were on the trail heading north riding their two horses and leading a pack horse. They stopped just north of the Summer Meeting camp area and met Durcan there. He was waiting for them on Lightning, holding Jonayla's gray wolf pup snuggled in the crook of one arm.

"It's about time. I was beginning to wonder if you were going to leave today or not," Durcan complained.

Due to the prohibition that required newly mated couples not to speak to anyone during their trial time, Jonayla just smiled at her brother and hand-signed her gratitude as she took the wolf pup from him.

Cambarre watched as the small animal strained to lick her face and wondered at the acceptance of a wild animal for a human being. Only a few years ago, no one would have imagined that a person could hold a wolf of any kind in their arms, much less make it a friend. But then along came Zelandoni. Cambarre had been a small child when Wolf first came to live among them and having lived at Elder Hearth then, he'd only seen the big animal occasionally. But, just like the other children, he'd fallen in love with the huge predator that treated children like pack members and played and frolicked with them.

He hoped that this little animal would grow up to be like Zelandoni's Wolf had been. It would be something if he did. But he would reserve his judgment until the beast was a little older and would show its true colors.

Jonayla had no such reservation though. She wholeheartedly loved the baby animal. She loved it as much as she loved Cambarre, 'only in a different way,' she thought, and smiled. She looked up from her pup and into Cambarre's eyes and stated firmly, "Little Star will grow up to be a strong hunter and he'll be our friend, just like mother and Wolf were friends. You'll see," she said when she saw a slight flicker of doubt in her lover's eyes. "You'll see," she repeated in a self-satisfied tone.

They bid Durcan farewell with a wave and rode the northern trail toward the Nineteenth Cave. They would make their camp down the trail from the holding that night and visit the Wolf Cave the next day. After the visit they would cross over the river Neema to the north and on to First Place to see Camma.

At least that was their plan.

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Melodene was bending over the fire, stirring the porridge that would be communally served for lunch that day. At least for those who were still in camp. She wondered for the tenth time that morning where Willamar was. It had been some time since she'd seen him. Then, as she looked around for him once again, she saw him, riding one of Jonayla's horses. The old man dismounted and tied the horse to a staked ring made of rope. This allowed the animal some freedom of movement but did not allow it to wander away.

"Melodene!" he called out.

"Willamar!" she called back, straightening up and smiling. This man was such a change from what she had known before. He was gentle and caring and so wise. He knew what she needed and he gave it freely. She felt so lucky to have finally found such a man.

"I just saw the young ones leaving. They snuck away last night before the feasting was over so I'm told. A wise thing to do, in my opinion. When you're young and in love, food is the last thing you need," he chuckled.

"Willamar!" she scolded him in a good natured tone. "What is it about men? They always think about pleasures."

"That is what our job is apparently, if you think about it. It's strange, but for most of my life I didn't think men had a purpose other than to make a secure place for their mate and their mate's children and to provide food for them.

"It never seemed enough of a role to me. I always felt jealous that the woman was the favored of Doni. I don't mean that I resented a woman's place, but I didn't feel an equal for some reason. And then Ayla came along with her new ways."

"You should say Zelandoni, not Ayla, she gave up her name for the well-being of the people and should always be called by her title."

"Yes, yes. I suppose you're right. But if you think about it, she admits that the name Ayla wasn't her original name, or at least she doesn't think it was. I heard her once tell Zelandoni who was First before her, that she felt her name had been given to her by the Mother. Given to her through that Clan of hers. It makes you wonder..." his voice trailed off.

"She is an exceptional woman, that's for sure. I can't say how grateful I am to her. Without her, I would never have met you Willamar," she said, tears of happiness in her eyes.

"Woman, every time you say something like that it makes my heart flutter with pride and gratefulness of my own. I can't believe that you care for me so much, a used up old man. It's... it's quite wonderful," he assured her. "I never dreamed of something like this happening," he stepped close and kissed Melodene on the lips. She in turn pulled him closer and hugged him to her fiercely. "You're my life Willamar," she murmured into his ear.

Willamar was concerned that she seemed to need him so. He knew that he didn't have too many years left and worried how his death would affect her, but he put that thought to the back of his mind for the moment as he'd done before. They were still new to each other and she would become more familiar with everyone else and over the coming winter she would make friends.

"I love you Melodene," he murmured in reply as they hugged. He wondered if Jondalar and Ayla, and Cambarre and Jonayla, for that matter, felt as he and Melodene did. He hoped so, he thought that they must. He was a happy man.

Melodene even thought that she might be with child and he was amazed by this, the Mother's gift to an old man.

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Cambarre and Jonayla had easily reached the place below the Nineteenth Cave that they had decided would be their campsite that afternoon. Riding along the trail without a care, enjoying their shared solitude, time just seemed to melt away. The sun was shining in the sky, and when they were able to look away from each other's smiling faces, they noticed the fluffy white clouds that serenely floated by on the slight breeze and remarked on how beautiful they were. They were supremely happy.

They made camp in a little secluded meadow with a brook running through it. It was perfect for a travel tent and - not that they expected anyone - was hidden from the main trail by a slight rise in the ground and some trees.

While Cambarre gathered firewood, Jonayla filled their water skins with the sweet tasting water from the brook and then she began to lay out what they would need for a meal. She had learned the medicine woman's art of using herbs for special flavoring from her mother. Not that the Zelandonii didn't use herbs, but her mother knew of many more. Some were quite exotic ones that gave her meals a special flavor that many wished they could imitate.

Tonight she wanted to make a special meal, their first as a mated couple. She wanted Cambarre to remember this meal as one of the best he'd ever had. With that in mind she pulled two aged Elk steaks from her carry bag. She had wedged the bag into a nearby tree to protect the food from curious small animals.

Cambarre had returned with a first load of wood and had just lit the kindling that had been carefully placed under the larger sticks, when hearing a noise close by, they both stopped and looked around. Jonayla's horse gave out a loud dismayed whinny, followed by their pack horse, both stomping around in agitation.

"I think there is a predator somewhere near," Cambarre said, picking up his spearthrower and two spears. "I think I'll take a look around."

Still holding the Elk Steaks, Jonayla called after him, "Be careful!" She would have gone with him but felt that she should stay with the horses and there was Star to consider. The pup was at a very rambunctious stage now. So much so, that although

she could hold him in a sling carrier while riding, it was impossible to do anything on foot with his wiggly little body squirming for freedom. She had made an enclosure from woven reed to hold him while she worked, but if he made a determined effort, or was frightened, he would be able to force his way out it.

Whatever had caused the horses distress must have moved on because Cambarre soon returned. "I found nothing, not even tracks. I guess the horses spooked over something they smelled from farther off. I thought I heard something, but I guess it was nothing."

"Why don't you sit here while I make our dinner," Jonayla said. "Let's just talk for a bit and then eat and then well... then we can make an early night of it so we'll be fresh in the morning. We didn't get much sleep last night."

"No and I don't expect we'll get much tonight either, no matter how early we bed down," Cambarre chuckled.

Jonayla gave him a quick look, smiling a secret smile that made the young man's heart skip a beat. The moment passed as Jonayla worked beside the campfire.

As the sun sank behind the trees and dusk settled around them Cambarre talked about what they would do when they returned to the Ninth Cave. "This winter we'll redo the dwelling that your parents have given us. I've seen it, but it probably hasn't been cared for all that well, not as well as you would have done.

"I have a dwelling of my own, but it's small and unsuitable for children," he said meaningfully. "How many children do you want to have Jonayla?"

"You asked me that once before, remember? I couldn't answer then... we were trying to escape Brukeval and his men. As to my answer on how many children I want, I think that will be up to the Mother, don't you? But if she honors us, I'd like to have as many children as you would like to make in me," Jonayla smiled. "They would be beautiful children and I love children and would love to have many of our own."

"Yes," Cambarre agreed. "I'm glad you feel that way, because I would like lots of children too."

"I'm becoming more and more sure that I am with child. I haven't bled since before we first shared pleasures after you rescued me from Madroman's men. I..."

Cambarre jumped up and pulled Jonayla to her feet as she was speaking and hugged her fiercely. "So it is for real, you said you might be, but now you will be having our baby! I can barely wait until we get back to the Ninth Cave so I can fix up our dwelling. I'm looking forward to being a father."

"I told you I'm not positive, it could just be that with everything that's happened, the traveling and excitement, I might just not be experiencing my normal flow."

"When do you think you'll know for sure?" he asked. Jonayla had to smile at his boyish excitement, except he wasn't a boy, she thought. He was an extremely handsome man and she felt the familiar urge deep down inside as she looked into his clear gaze.

"I think by the time we return to the Ninth Cave, if I haven't had my flow by then I'll be absolutely sure. I have even had a little upset stomach in the mornings for the past few hands of time and that is also a good sign," she said, returning to the preparation of their meal.

Soon the Elk steaks were spitted over the flame and Jonayla was stirring an accompanying vegetable mix in a steamy broth made from the meat juices. Wild rice was cooking in a travel bowl at the edge of the fire. Jonayla had used her knowledge of herbs to season everything just right and had tasted each dish to make sure they were cooked to perfection.

She didn't want to be one of those women who ruin their mate's first dinner. She was confident in her abilities, in fact, both of Ayla's children could cook a decent meal. Durcan might not have cooked as many meals as Jonayla, but he knew what went into a tasty spread of food.

Cambarre had just accepted a bone platter from her, heaped with aromatic smells that made his mouth water, when suddenly a loud grunt and the drumming of hooves came from across the brook. A huge gray shape splashed through the shallow brook. Even in the dark of early evening they could tell it was time to run, to abandon their campsite.

Jonayla dove for their tent and knocked apart the contrived cage that held her wolf pup. Star had been in the middle of devouring the bits of raw Elk meat that she had placed in the enclosure. Her dive turned into a running jump as she exited the tent through the side, tearing it away from its rock anchors as she ran into the forest.

Cambarre dropped his platter and ran toward the horses, pulling their ropes loose as he passed by them. He relied on Jonayla's common sense to do what was needed without thinking about it. They met some distance away from the campsite, panting for breath, looking back at the noise coming from their campsite.

"That's a Woolly Rhino, I haven't seen one of those in a long time, especially this far south and in a forested area too," Cambarre said breathlessly.

They stood listening to the ferocious noises coming from the dark night. "I hope the horses got away to safety," Jonayla said.

"I freed them as I was ducking out to follow you. I'm sure they were as frightened by that huge beast as we were. The problem will be finding them after this."

After some time the noises died down and they could hear the heavily armored animal breaking through the trees and moving away further south. It had been no more than a short time, but when they returned to their campsite everything was trampled and torn. Their tent was smashed flat and the campfire was nothing but smoldering ash.

"So much for preparing my first meal for you, I wanted this to be a delicious meal and look at it," Jonayla lamented, pushing one of the now filthy trodden Elk steaks with her foot. She began to pick through their belongings trying to salvage what she could and after a few moments of shocked silence so did Cambarre. They were able to salvage the tent hide, which was pretty beaten up, but would serve them still. Their meal was a total loss, but the rest of their foodstuffs were safe in the carry bag up in the branches of the tree where it had been wedged to keep them away from small animals.

The couple decided to stay awake and alert until dawn in case the Rhino decided to return to their area. It was a long night, but they were unhurt and they were together. Cambarre draped their sleeping furs over their shoulders and they sat up until dawn.

The light of dawn didn't help the scene of destruction, but as the light strengthened they were able to find utensils that had been scattered and reparable pieces of gear that could be salvaged.

Cambarre was worried about the horses. "They could be miles away by now. They might have even headed back to the Summer Meeting," he said, concerned.

Jonayla smiled, "I think it is light enough now." She walked to the rise in the ground that hid them from the trail then put her fingers to her mouth and whistled. It was a loud wavering whistle. Cambarre had seen her call her horse this way in the past but doubted that after what had taken place the night before that any horse would have stayed around.

However, in a few minutes he heard a nicker and then saw Gray as the mare walked into camp, followed by the other two animals that naturally followed the leader.

"That's amazing, I was sure they would all be long gone after what happened."

"You forget that mother trained Gray. I was just a child then and she sort of trained us both," she smiled at the memory. "I wanted to play but she told me that if I wanted a horse I needed to understand horses and Gray needed to know that she was part of my family."

Jonayla thought for a moment, "Although I can't treat all the horses like I do Gray, I think everyone should make the horse that they rely on most a part of their family. We saw the benefits of that this morning. What would we have done if they had all galloped away south? I don't even want to think about it." Jonayla patted Gray's muzzle affectionately.

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They were packed and riding up the trail soon after a meal of dried Bison meat and mint tea. The sun was peaking over the ridge when they first saw smoke rising from Hill Top Holding. "Cambarre, I think most of the people from the Nineteenth Cave have returned to the Summer Meeting, so now would be a good time to stop at the First Wolf Cave for a short visit before crossing the river," Jonayla said, struggling to hold the excited little body of Star in his sling holder.

"You're going to have to let that little wolf down to run beside us pretty soon Jonayla. It looks like he's getting a little too big to be in that sling anymore," Cambarre observed.

"Yes I know, but he's still too young. While we're traveling I think I'll just have to hold him, if I let him down he might follow an interesting scent and not think to come back to me. I wouldn't want to lose Star."

Cambarre snorted, "You speak of that little pup like he's your child or something. He knows where to get an easy meal. He wouldn't go far. And besides, if the stories are true, your mother's wolf was just a puppy when she found him and I can't visualize her carrying it around all the time."

"No, but she lived in one place for almost a year. By the time mother and father left the Mamutoi, he was grown up enough to recognize her as his pack leader. Little Star needs to know that we are family before I let him down to run beside us." Jonayla hugged the wolf pup affectionately.

They rounded a bend in the trail and saw the outdoor hearth that told them they had arrived at First Wolf Cave. As they rode into the open, they saw several men at the cave entrance, but not the Zelandoni.

"Greetings!" Cambarre called out and raised a hand in friendship as he dismounted. The prohibition against newly mated couples talking to others would not apply to them from this point on until their mission for the First Zelandoni was finished.

One of the men turned toward them. Jonayla recognized the young man from her previous trips to Hill Top. "Greetings Kimadar, First Acolyte of the Nineteenth Cave," she called.

"Ah, First Acolyte of the Ninth Cave, greetings," he replied, walking toward them.

Jonayla jumped down from her horse, followed by Cambarre. "Is the Zelandoni of First Wolf Cave here this morning? I was hoping to see the interior and to bring my wolf pup, Star, into it, so the Mother can bless him." Jonayla wasn't quite sure why it seemed important to bring Star to this place, much less take him into the cave, but in the back of her mind she felt it was important. She hadn't even mentioned this to Cambarre, but hoped that it would be permitted.

"Wolf Star, you say," Kimadar said, surprised. He looked at the young gray wolf wriggling in the sling carrier that hung from the young woman's neck, being supported in both arms as if proffering an offering of bounty. The Acolyte shivered in superstitious fear. Wolf Star?

"No, not Wolf Star, just Star, who is a wolf," Jonayla tried to explain, but the other Acolyte wasn't really listening now, he was so surprised by the appearance of these people carrying a live wolf.

"I will get Zelandoni. He's in the cave, planning the day's work." He turned and almost ran toward the cave entrance.

"That was quite a response," Cambarre said. "I guess showing up out of the blue with a small wolf pup is unusual. I didn't know you wanted to visit this place so that Star could be blessed. Why do you think the Mother would bless him?"

"It's just a feeling I have. It might just be my imagination, but ever since we found these wolves, Durc's and mine, anyway, well, I feel that the Mother had something to do with it. And since this is First Wolf Cave, dedicated to the Mother... it just seemed like the right thing to do..." her voice trailed off into a hesitant silence.

"Children! Welcome!" The Zelandoni of Wolf Cave hurried toward them. Let me see our little visitor," he said, stopping in front of the young couple.

Jonayla disengaged the pup from the sling and held him out to the Zelandoni. "No, don't give him to me. Set him on the ground."

"He won't bite you Zelandoni," Cambarre said.

"I'm sure you're right, but the reason I asked you to set him on the ground is so I can see if he will enter the sacred cave on his own," the Zelandoni said with subdued excitement in his voice. "I've worked very hard to make this a holy place and if your wolf takes to it, then I will know my efforts have been accepted by the Mother and the Wolf Star."

Jonayla was alarmed. "But Zelandoni, he's very young yet. I haven't let him run free before, he might not be old enough to show you what you want to see." She felt desperate. This man had worked for years in this sacred place and was testing himself by what her little wolf might do. She could see the excitement in his eyes; almost a religious fervor.

Jonayla sighed. She had felt drawn to this place ever since she'd found the wolf pups, so maybe she should just accept what was happening and see what Star would do. "Very well Zelandoni," she said, setting Star on the ground at her feet. They were

not far from the cave entrance, maybe the wolf pup would do as the Zelandoni hoped, whatever that was.

Little Star looked up at Jonayla and then around at the other people. There were three other men working there that day as well as the Zelandoni and the First Acolyte of the Nineteenth Cave. But to Jonayla's surprise the little wolf ignored all the people and confidently trotted toward the cave entrance.

She stood there and watched as Star disappeared into the dark cave opening. Jonayla wanted to follow Star but the Zelandoni reached out and gripped her forearm, holding her. "Please, let him be for the moment. I need to see what he does and I need to see this alone. Will you trust me?"

"Of course I trust you Zelandoni. If that's what you want, we'll stay outside," Jonayla replied, surprised at the intensity of the older man's voice. "Go, we'll wait here."

"Thank you Acolyte," he said. Without a backward glance the Zelandoni walked to the entrance and after waiting for a few moments entered, disappearing into the dark.

The couple fed some grain to all three of their horses as they waited. Jonayla removed the halters and carry baskets from the horses and led them to the nearby stream to drink. It was some time before Cambarre noticed movement at the darkened entrance.

"Jonayla!" he called.

Jonayla hurried from the stream, leaving the horses to drink their fill and came to stand beside her mate. "I saw something move in the dim light of the cave opening."

They both saw the Zelandoni then. He stepped out into the light and beckoned to them both, "Come, I want you to see."

The young couple followed the Zelandoni into the cave. There was a descending floor that angled gently downward. They saw several niches carved into the living rock that held large multiple-wicked oil lamps. There were stone pedestals that also held more oil lamps, but no torches.

As if reading Jonayla's mind the Zelandoni said in a low voice, "We only use purified oil in the lamps and no torches so that we won't discolor the walls with sooty

smoke. You need to keep aware of where you step going through the main chamber. It will be easier to see in the small chamber," he said cryptically.

Both Jonayla and Cambarre had been in the cave before, as recently as the journey south from the Chimu, but still, it was an amazing sight. Much of the walls were still only sketched in with charcoal outlines, but where they were completed, the paintings were breathtaking.

As they progressed through the main gallery and into the passageway that led to the sacred pillar in the small chamber deep within the cave, they could see more light. As they stepped through the curving passage into the pillar room, pure golden light dazzled their eyes. Here were placed countless little oil lamps making the small chamber seemingly bathed in daylight.

They were all small, single wicked lamps, but the bases were tall, in order to hold a good supply of oil. It looked like the heavens had been brought into the little chamber, stars sitting on pillars and niches and on the floor, almost everywhere.

Jonayla gasped. "Look Cambarre," she whispered. "Star has wriggled in under the pillar that doesn't touch the earth." The sight of her small wolf lying curled up under the massive pillar was awe inspiring. The little furry animal seemed to know where he was. To Jonayla's eyes, the pup seemed to be at home there.

Suddenly she was worried. Would the Zelandoni insist that Star stay? She wanted to grab her wolf pup and run from this place. But then she realized that if the Mother wanted her wolf, she couldn't resist Her. In a small voice she asked the Zelandoni. "What does this mean?"

"It means that the Wolf Star resides here as I thought it must and that the Mother gave this place to Her children to worship her as the Wolf Star," the Zelandoni said in a reverent voice. "Your pup has shown me the way. When you come here again, maybe next summer, you will see this pillar transformed, it will be something no one expects but I see it in my mind's eye as if it were already completed."

"Then I can take Star away with me?" Jonayla finally found the courage to ask.

"Of course you can, though I would appreciate whenever you and your wolf pass by, that you might stop in to visit me. I thank you for your help. It was most providential that you came here when you did, and with a wolf. I never really expected to see another wolf taking to people as your mother's did."

"Well then Zelandoni, you'll be surprised to know that mine isn't the only wolf that walks with people." Jonayla told the Zelandoni of First Wolf Cave about Durcan's wolf and the one that the Southern Zelandoni now had, saving the tale of her mother's wolf, Sky, for last. The wolf that had dropped from the sky, by the Mother's intervention, right into the First's Zelandoni's arms was a story that Jonayla never tired of telling.

"That is an amazing story!" the First Wolf Cave Zelandoni exclaimed. "Please ask the First Zelandoni to visit here as soon as she can."

"It probably won't be until next spring or summer now," Jonayla replied. "The Summer Meeting will end soon and then there will be the Fall hunts and the last of the gathering time. You know how much effort is dedicated to that."

"Yes, but it will certainly be something to look forward to," the Zelandoni said.

Jonayla called Star, who willingly came to her. She leaned down and tousled his ears and then turned to go, looking back to see if he would follow. The young wolf playfully yipped and frolicked past the people, as if urging them to follow.

To Jonayla's chagrin, the small wolf stopped in the main gallery and sniffed at the wall, lifting his leg and peeing against the white gypsum. "Star!" she called. "Stop that! This is a sacred place!"

"No, no, it is alright. He is just being a wolf. In fact I believe that was the place where the First Zelandoni's Wolf marked the cave, all those years ago, when he found this place. I think I will leave that space reserved for future visits of this cave's namesakes." He smiled at the pretty young woman's confusion.

"After all," the Zelandoni said. "This is 'First Wolf Cave' and we certainly are honored when a wolf visits it. Even when he marks it as his own," he smiled again placing his hand on Jonayla's shoulder, walking beside her into the open.

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They had a good meal with the Zelandoni and his workers before mounting their horses to travel north again. They would cross over the River Neema that afternoon and camp on the northern bank. Jonayla decided to let Star down to run beside them for part of the way to see how he would do.

They waved farewell to the people still standing in front of the First Wolf Cave and turned their horses toward the trail. The small wolf pup followed them closely and ran in circles of delighted energy.

Chapter 36: Long Valley

It was late morning before Mageb spotted the herd of Auroch. They had been following Auroch spoor since dawn. He was now beginning to worry that they were moving into the Other's territory and would soon be forced to either fight or turn back before a kill was possible.

The Clan would go hungry as it was, because of all the disruption caused by the crazy men of the Others over the past many moons. Mageb still felt anger at these strange people and their strange ways. Why did Ursus create the Others and then let them plague the Clan in the first place, what had they done to displease Him so?

This hunt would be risky. The herd was very close to the Others hunting grounds. Clan men would normally avoid the area beyond the dead cedar trees that defined - at least to the Clan - the beginning of the Others' territory. Even so, they had to try. Mageb signaled the hunters to follow him and they ran silently forward, their heavy thrusting spears gripped in determined hands.

Finally, as they neared the herd, one by one, the men dropped to the ground to hide among the tall dried grass that covered the valley floor in this area. Mageb continued to run, skimming along the edge of the trees in a crouch.

As second to the leader of their Clan, Mageb knew that they only had a short time in this place before they were discovered. He hoped that Mongar, who was leader and who had taken more hunters toward the rising sun, would have better luck than he. Mageb expected to kill only two or three Auroch in the short time they had here. The pity was that their cave members would need much more meat to survive the coming winter than they would be able to hunt before the snows came.

Still running, Mageb passed the grazing herd, barely disturbing their tranquility. His plan was to get in front of them and then to yell and wave his spear. He had tied shreds of hide to it and would run toward the animals. Auroch were amazingly stupid animals, and would run from any sudden noise. Even over a cliff unless something impeded their path.

Mageb decided that he had gone far enough ahead of the herd and turned, now running into the open valley floor and away from the trees. He rose up to stand in the herd's path then began to jump up and down while waving his decorated spear

above his head. Adding to the warning, he roared loudly, imitating the sound of a Cave Lion.

The herd's bull looked up in alarm and immediately turned to flee, bellowing a warning to the herd. The huge, normally docile beasts, were now bleating and pounding the earth with their massive hooves as they ran for their lives.

As the herd neared the hunters hiding in the grass, Durg who was hunt leader after Mageb signaled the men into action. They jumped up from their chosen places and as tradition demanded, each hunter would choose an animal, run to a place in its path and then as the beast came upon him he would thrust his heavy hunting spear with the deadly fire-hardened point into the beast's side, preferably his neck, but between the ribs would also be a killing blow.

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Cambarre and Jonayla had crossed the river north of Hilltop Holding about midmorning. Negotiating the river was fairly easy at the end of summer. In a few moon's time it would be covered with ice and could be ridden across, but by spring it would be a torrent and ropes would be needed to guide people across. That would be a challenge for the Chimu attending the next Summer Meeting.

Jonayla was in thought when Cambarre spoke, "Look over there Jonayla." Her eyes followed where he was pointing. They had just crested the southern hills at the edge of Long Valley and were sitting astride their horses, elevated enough to see tiny figures running in the distance among a herd of Auroch.

"Cambarre. Those are Clan hunters!" Jonayla exclaimed in surprise. The Clan hunters were closer to the Chimu territory than they would normally venture. "Maybe with all the disruption over the past year, they have to follow the herds, even into Chimu territory," Jonayla spoke her thought out loud.

"How many people did you say were in their Clan?" Cambarre asked.

"I saw about fifteen when we were there, but I don't know if everyone was at the cave when we were. Some could have been out hunting. We weren't there all that long," Jonayla replied, still watching the hunt. "Maybe we should help them. Some of those Auroch cows have escaped their hunters and are coming our way. We could kill some of those for them. It looks like they'll be lucky to get more than two or three out of the entire herd the way they hunt with those thrusting spears."

"I don't know," Cambarre said. "Do you think they would want us to interfere?"

"No I don't, but I bet they'll take the meat if we offer it." Without further discussion, Jonayla jumped down and pulled a braided fiber rope from the carry basket and tied it around Star's neck. She then wrapped it around his waist, looping it up under the rope collar she had just made to better hold the furry little animal. She hurriedly tied the rope to a shady tree. "I'm sorry Star, but you would probably be trampled by those Auroch. Until you know how to hunt you'll need to be restrained. We'll be back for you as soon as the hunt is over. It shouldn't be very long." She scratched his ears affectionately and then mounted Gray and pulled her spearthrower from its sheath, she then slung the quiver of small but deadly spears over her shoulder. "Come on Cambarre, let's go." She urged Gray out on to the valley floor, racing toward the herd with Cambarre close behind.

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Mageb heard the whooping and the galloping hooves and whirled around to see two of the Others coming toward them. Now there was going to be a confrontation, he thought stoically. They had already killed three animals and there was no way he would leave them behind. Three kills wasn't enough, but every bit of meat was essential if they had any chance of surviving the coming winter.

Mageb had been too far away to participate in the kill and the animals that ran back toward him gave him a wide berth, running to either side of him. He crouched defensively as the two riders came at him, but when they used big sticks to throw small spears into the air and brought down two Auroch cows that had just passed him, his eyes widened and he stood up, grounding his hunting spear to watch.

The riders whirled around and galloped after two more Auroch cows about to pass Megeb and easily took them down with two more small spears. Mageb was amazed. He had never seen anything like it before. Those two had killed more than all his hunters combined and had done it in just moments. He shook his head in wonder as they took two more beasts on the run, killing them neatly and without seeming effort.

Then, as there were no longer any living Auroch left in the field, the Others turned their horses toward him. Mageb tensed, gripping his hunting spear tightly. Would they claim all the kills for their people? At best they could only transport two. Why kill the whole herd? He saw the two stop and retrieve their small flying spears,

apparently to use them again. Mageb admitted that they had the right to claim most of the kills, but he would insist they allow his people the three they had killed. He would insist, that is, unless they decided to use those deadly little spears on him.

Standing alone in the middle of the tall dry grass Mageb shivered as if cold. He must control his fear. To show it would be too humiliating, but seeing these Others on a horse's back was against nature, as if they were spirits of the earth. He knew this wasn't so. He had seen them die when in battle just like Clan people, but still, it was a fearsome sight and he felt helpless as they approached.

The two Others stopped and dismounted some distance away from Mageb. It was a man and woman who had killed the Auroch. It still amazed him that their women could hunt like men. It was against the Clan way and so strange that it made him fear them even more as they came closer on foot.

Then the female began to speak. In Clan speech! For a moment Mageb felt the blood drain from his brain in shock. If he hadn't grounded his spear and used it to hold himself upright he might have fallen, as humiliating as that would have been.

Then, as the female of the Others continued, he thought he recognized her. All the Others looked alike to him, even the men, many of them wore no beards. It was hard to tell them apart. He had seen these two before, he was sure of it. The woman was the daughter of the Others' female Mog-ur. The one who had come into their hunting grounds and finally stopped the violence against his Clan.

She was telling him that they only wanted to help. That she, this woman, knew that all the fighting over the past summer must have made hunting and drying meat for winter very difficult. That they didn't want to insult anyone by helping, but thought extra meat would be helpful to the Clan, and in some small way, help repay the Clan for the trouble caused by some of her people.

Jonayla stopped signing and looked past Mageb, as a cry of distress came from behind him. She signed that she was a Medicine Woman then turned, ran to her horse and leapt onto its back. Before Mageb could even try to block her way, she was galloping past him toward his hunters to the east.

Mageb stared at the man of the Others. He was, like many of them, slightly built and had no beard. He looked almost like a woman, he thought to himself, despising him as a weak male. He could confront this man of the Others or go to see what the woman might be doing to his hunters with her weapon. Then the man spoke. Not

like the woman, but like a child. He signed, "Woman is healer." It was hard to understand him, but he was certain about the word healer.

Unknown to Mageb, the only reason Cambarre could communicate with him at all was the fact the all the Zelandonii used some of their sign language when hunting. Cambarre knew a bit more, being the mate of the First Zelandoni's daughter. The First Zelandoni had brought the sign language to the people in the first place and that made it somewhat obligatory for him to become more proficient than other men.

Mageb decided that this man with no beard was no immediate threat so he turned and ran toward the place where the woman had gone. He could see that her horse was standing near a group of his hunters, but she was no longer on it, she was down beside one of his men, it was old Bagba. This would have probably been his last year on the hunt and his age had made him too slow to side step a charging beast. A horn must have raked his shoulder or gored him, it was hard to tell, what with all the blood. Bagba would die and someone would have to care for his aging mate.

Mageb reached down and thrust the woman away from the old hunter. What was she doing? He signed to her, "Leave this hunter be. What do you think you are doing?"

Jonayla climbed to her feet. Although she was slightly built compared to the hugely muscled Clan male, she was still slightly taller than him and when she reached her full adult height she would probably be even taller yet. Incensed at being disturbed from her task Jonayla furiously signed, "I am daughter of the female Mog-ur who is also medicine woman! Do not disturb me when I am working!"

She held up the otter medicine pouch that she'd first made with the help of her mother when she was learning the healing arts. Her mother had trained her, giving her all the knowledge that she could from a very young age. She'd been taught about medicinal herbs and horses until she knew them both like the back of her hand. She could speak knowledgably with anyone on either subject.

The experience Jonayla had with medicines made her confident to the point that she had no doubt about her abilities and this showed in her expression and signing. Mageb saw the familiar medicine bag and knew it was real, but he wasn't sure that the Others' medicine would work on his people.

"You may be a medicine woman for your people," he conceded. "But your medicine might not work on my people. Bagba is dying and if you curse him with some strange medicine he may not be able to hunt for food and greet his ancestors in the Spirit World."

Jonayla stood as tall as she could and said, "My mother, the Mog-ur of the Others, was trained by Creb's sibling, Iza. She taught me Clan medicine, so let me help this hunter. He need not die from this wound. It needs only to be cleaned and stitched, so evil spirits cannot enter the wound and cause fever. I have everything I need to care for him, if you will just get out of my way." Mageb was frustrated. Talking to this female was like talking to the river. Nothing he said made a difference.

Cambarre had returned to collect Star from his captivity under the shady tree. Man and wolf cub walked the horses over to stand near Jonayla's Gray. Knowing that it would be several hours now, he unloaded the horses and used a hammer stone and stake to anchor Star's rope to the ground to keep him out of the way. Then he walked over to where Jonayla had been kneeling. He couldn't understand what was being communicated but decided that she was holding her own, so he remained silent and watched.

After a while it appeared that the discussion was over and Jonayla had won the argument because she knelt beside the downed hunter and was once again cleaning the wound. She called over her shoulder to Cambarre to make a fire and heat some water. He began to follow her instructions but the leader of the Clan hunters stood in his way.

"Get water, make fire to heat water, fix hunter," Cambarre signed. "Medicine woman need now." He tried to pass by the Clan man but felt a strong grip on his bicep. He looked into the Clan man's eyes without fear. He knew that to show fear to this man would be a mistake.

That's when Star began to howl his frustration at being tied up. Mageb's head shot around and his eyes grew wide as he saw the wolf pup. What magic was this? How could it be that these Others had a wolf cub! He could see that it was held captive by ropes. The howl of a wolf... any wolf... made Mageb shiver.

Taking advantage of this moment of surprise, Cambarre pulled his arm violently out of Mageb's grip and walked back to the horses, he reached down and playfully pulled a wolf ear, then he slipped the spearthrower out of its holder and loaded a bird spear into it. "I help medicine woman. You take all kills for Clan cave. Send to

cave for more help." He managed to make himself understood and walked quickly past the Clan leader - who was still staring at Star in total astonishment.

Mageb was worried. What if these two made some magic? What if they tried to destroy his hunters with a curse? He wasn't sure what to do. But either way they needed the meat, so he sent one hunter running back for the women and their own medicine woman. There were nine Auroch to be skinned and butchered and it would need to be done before night when scavengers would be hard to stop.

The leader stood, watching the two people of the Others work on Bagba. The other hunters cautiously avoided the small wolf and began the preparation of the meat, butchering the animals where they lay and carrying the meat to a place near Mageb so he could both watch the strangers and protect the meat from scavenger animals.

Jonayla knew what was needed. The Auroch's left horn had caught the man just under his left armpit. It had torn the flesh away and he might not regain full use of the arm again, but she thought if she could clean it and stitch the edges together, he would have a chance of survival.

Cambarre watched Jonayla working on the man. At first the man grimaced at the pain when Jonayla cleaned the wound and cut away some of the ragged edges of flesh, but the shock and the pain were finally too much for him and he slipped into unconsciousness.

Cambarre was amazed at the amount of pain the man had taken before he passed out. 'Any Zelandonii man would have been screaming from the pain by now,' he thought. It was sobering to realize that these men were so brave and could take such pain with only a grimace.

Jonayla was done working on the still unconscious hunter by the time more hunters and their women arrived. With the women and hunters came their Medicine Woman. Cambarre remembered her, they had spent some time in each other's company before.

Jonayla recognized her immediately, "Greetings 'Dula' I have dressed this man's wounds. I don't think that Mageb was happy about it, but I couldn't let it wait. Maybe if you would inspect it he will be satisfied."

"Yes," Dula signed and knelt beside the prostrate hunter. She looked at the stitched wound and then looked up at the young woman of the Others. "What have you done? The wound is closed."

"Yes, my mother taught me that cut wounds should be cleaned with Lion's Tooth at the wound edges. Then a warm infusion of Butterfly Weed should be poured into the wound, and allowed to drain. Then, if it looks clean, it should be sewn closed before evil can enter the wound to cause fever. I am brewing an infusion of Skullcap to help with the swelling that will come and to keep this man calm when he wakes up," Jonayla said confidently. She only hoped that there were no taboos with these people that would stop any of her treatments.

"That is interesting," Dula signed. She hadn't understood the names of the medicines the young woman of the Others had used, but she did understand the confidence she displayed in her own abilities. "How do I remove the sewing you have done when the wound no longer wants to separate?"

"There is no need to remove the sewing. It was done using very thin strips of boiled sinew. In time, the body will absorb the sinew. I chanted the Mother's sacred healing prayer while I worked on this man. The Mother, who you call Ursus, will have frightened the bad spirits away. I washed the wound with the warm infusion and by closing the wound before other spirits that are harmful could enter, I think he should live," Jonayla assured her.

Finally Dula said, "Maybe you could teach me this prayer so that I can use it in the future."

"It is a long prayer, but if we have the time, I would be glad to," Jonayla replied. She watched as the small but stocky Medicine Woman bent over the prostrate man and touched the stitches Jonayla had made to pull the flesh together.

Dula looked up and said, "It is unusual to see a closed wound like this. Maybe some time we could talk about this also?" Without waiting for an answer to her question she stood and walked over to the Clan man who led the hunters and addressed him, kneeling at his feet. Receiving permission to speak Dula said, "This young Medicine Woman of the Others has performed the healing very well. If Ursus allows it, Bagba will live, although he will not hunt again I think, at least not with the use of his damaged arm."

Just then Cambarre came over. His arms and hands were bloody from butchering the animals. Once he'd done what he could for Jonayla, he'd gone to work with the others to butcher the dead animals. At first the hunters were leery of him, but soon accepted his help since he was just as eager as they were to get the job done before dark.

"We should leave now Jonayla. It looks like the Clan has everything they need." Cambarre washed his hands and arms in the water left over from the making of Jonayla's medicinal cures.

"Yes, we should leave," Jonayla paused for a moment then asked, "Cambarre, would you consider leaving your spearthrower with Mageb? They should try to use one, it would help their people if they knew how. Even if they never ride a horse, using a spearthrower would mean that they wouldn't have to stand in the path of a charging beast ten times their size." Jonayla looked at him pleadingly. "I would give them mine, but it was made for me and I'm sure it would be too small for any of these men to use."

Cambarre looked concerned but then agreed. "I just hope we don't have a need for it before we get back to the Summer Meeting," he said, still worried even as he held out both the spearthrower and his quiver full of small but deadly spears for Jonayla to take.

"No Cambarre, you need to give it to Mageb." Jonayla didn't touch it. "According to mother, the Clan men think that a weapon that has been touched by a woman is cursed and can no longer be used to hunt with."

"But you've touched this a hundred times," Cambarre insisted.

"Yes, you know that and I know that, but Mageb doesn't. So long as he doesn't see me touch it, it won't occur to him that you have ever let a woman do such a thing."

"Very well," Cambarre conceded. "I'll see if he'll take it from my hands." Cambarre walked solemnly over to the hunt leader and held out his spearthrower and quiver of spears. "For you. Kill more Auroch than your spear," he said, pointing at Mageb's spear, trying to make him understand.

Mageb wasn't sure what to do. These Others were letting them have all the meat, even though they had killed the greater portion. The woman, even though unasked, had helped old Bagba, according to their Medicine Woman. He didn't want this

strange weapon of the Others, but he didn't want to refuse the man of the Others, because that would have been extremely rude.

Reluctantly he held his hands out to accept the gift, wondering what he had of equal value. He guessed that he would have to give this man of the Others his best hunting spear, there was really no alternative. Having taken the Others' contraption in his right hand, he held out his left hand that gripped his own spear, offering it to the man.

The last thing Cambarre wanted was a fire hardened stake, but he took it graciously, nodding his head in acceptance of the gift. With that the two men - who thought and lived lives that were barely understood by each other - turned and walked away to their separate lands.

Cambarre came over to Jonayla who had been loading the horses and asked, "So what do I do with this sharpened log?" he smiled at his own joke.

"Tie it to your carry basket like my mother did when she was given one. Let's leave while everything still seems friendly," she said, swinging up on to Gray's back in one smooth practiced motion, her action catching the Clan people by surprise. To them it looked like she had magically mounted the horse. It didn't look possible that so small a person could have jumped so effortlessly onto a horse's back.

The Clan people watched as the two 'Others' rode away with the wolf cub trailing obediently behind them. After they were out of sight, Mageb laid the spearthrower and quiver on the ground, and along with the others gathered there, he hefted his portion of meat to carry back to the cave.

The sun was sinking into the west and the shadows were elongated, making the dried grass in the valley glow golden in the late afternoon light. Vultures soared high above, keeping their greedy eyes on the piles of bones and offal left behind. The Clan people moved eastward under the burdens that, once the meat was dried and stored, would allow them to survive the winter.

Cambarre's abandoned spearthrower would weather over the winter and become part of the surrounding earth, and would be no more than a few rotting sticks by the next summer...

-O-

Cambarre and Jonayla had turned their mounts toward the Chimu once again. It was obvious that they wouldn't make First Place before dark. "We should find a place to camp soon," Jonayla said, always concerned with their domestic needs. "Keep an eye open for any game. I would like something other than dried meat tonight. Losing our meal last night makes me want something fresh."

"Don't worry about meat for tonight. I kept a couple of good sized Auroch steaks from the kill. I figured it would be fair to at least take enough for tonight's meal. None of the hunters seemed to mind," he said, smiling at her, feeling a bit smug that he'd thought to do it.

"That's good," Jonayla said approvingly. "My mouth is watering just thinking about it. Now all we need to do is find a place to set up camp."

They rode westward until dusk, when they found a good spot up against a bluff that would protect them from the cooler night breeze. While Cambarre collected firewood, Jonayla refilled their water skins from a nearby brook and then built a stone campfire ring.

"Here are the steaks," Cambarre said, holding the thick juicy slabs of meat out to his mate. He'd just unwrapped them from the fresh, uncured Auroch hide that he had tied around them with a rawhide thong for carrying.

"Wonderful!" Jonayla took the meat and smiled approvingly at Cambarre. "What a clever man you are," she said. She had been so caught up with the wounded Clan hunter that she hadn't thought about their meal that night and she was grateful that he had, especially now that her tummy was growling.

"I'll grill these and boil some more of those tubers we found yesterday," Jonayla said. "I was lucky and found spinach and even some dandelion and basswood down by the brook when I was refilling the water skins, so we'll have a really good meal this evening."

Cambarre replied, "That sounds fine. While you do the cooking, I'll unload the horses and hobble them by the brook so they can graze and easily reach the water. I also want to take Star out and check for Woolly Rhino before we eat."

Jonayla knew his last remark was a tease and replied, "Please check well Cambarre but when the food is ready, I am eating it while it's still hot."

As dark enveloped the landscape, Cambarre and Jonayla enjoyed their meal. Being together and knowing that they had the rest of their lives ahead of them and being alone on their own, made this moment in time almost perfect.

When they finished eating the evening meal, Jonayla was about to get up and take the food platters to the brook to wash when Cambarre reached out and gripped her arm. "Let that wait for a bit," he said. "Just sit there and let me look at you for a while."

"What's this? You see me every day," she said, smiling at him, feeling excitement in the pit of her stomach.

"Yes I do see you every day and glad I am of that, but I don't get to really 'look' at you, not like this," he said.

Jonayla looked back at her mate and met his eyes. They were dark gray, almost black. With his blonde hair and weathered complexion he looked very strong and capable. She admitted to herself that she'd first noticed Cambarre because of his well-developed body and his obvious confidence. She hadn't been sure that she'd liked him at first, but she was sure that she had been attracted to him.

As she held his gaze she felt her body react to the moment. A heat was building up inside her that was exciting, yet at the same time comfortable. Jonayla realized at that moment, maybe for the first time, that she wouldn't want to live without this man. He meant everything to her.

Cambarre, for his part was drinking in the shifting expressions that played across his beautiful mate's face. He had admired her looks from the very first when he'd come to the Ninth Cave to learn the finer points of Knapping from her father. He had never tried to seduce her, as he had other women at the Ninth Cave. He had always felt that she wasn't interested in that type of relationship.

Though, once she made the first move he worked hard to interest her, and now, they were mated and he was a happy man. Looking across the merry little campfire that reflected light into her amazingly blue eyes, he felt happy and satisfied with life. This woman was beautiful, and he was proud of that. Proud when other men looked at her with interest because of her exceptional appearance. Now that he knew her

better, more intimately, his pride in her accomplishments and abilities even outweighed his pride in her beauty.

Tonight though, he just wanted to let her unusual beauty soak in, like the sweet scent from a spring meadow. Her skin glowed golden and smooth in the firelight. Full, pouty lips stretched into a wide, dazzling grin, much like her mother's, showing even white teeth. That smile had always made his heart skip a beat when it was directed toward him. It always made him want to do all he could not to disappoint her.

As Cambarre was thinking these thoughts, Jonayla stood and came to him. She sat down beside him, hugging him close. Cambarre tuned his face to hers and she turned her face up toward his and they kissed. Yes, Cambarre thought, this was one of those moments that he never wanted to end. "Why don't we let the platters wait until later," he said. He then stood up and took Jonayla's hand in his, urging her to stand.

Cambarre was determined to show Jonayla just how much he loved and admired her. He quickly banked the fire so that it would burn through most of the night, giving off the smell of smoke that would let wild animals know that humans camped here. Then he gently pulled Jonayla into the tent after him, pulling the open flaps closed behind them.

The only sound to be heard in their campsite for a time was the scuffling of Star, their wolf pup, who had his fill of Auroch steak and who wanted to break out of his little enclosure to join his pack leaders in their tent. After a time, soft moaning and a rhythmic rustling would have been heard - if there were anyone nearby to hear it - but by then even Star had settled down and was sleeping a contented, full-bellied puppy sleep.

Chapter 37: Horses

Jonayla was the first to creep out of the travel tent the next morning. As she stood in the morning light, she felt the need to put on her deer-hide tunic. Summer was ending and fall was beginning to change the weather. Even now she could see frost on the pebbles near the brook as she washed herself in the cold water. She wasn't as meticulous as her mother about washing after sharing pleasures, but she had her mother's sense of cleanliness. When there was water available it never hurt to take advantage of it to freshen one's body.

Many people didn't feel that washing was important and during the cold winter it was almost impossible to really wash, but Jonayla had taken to heart that washing helped to fight evil spirits. It had been proven to her over and over again that by cleaning wounds well, her mother had cured people that others could not. It was the same thing as her mother's realization about how babies were made - between a man and a woman - by simple observation and by understanding what you were observing.

Jonayla now stood in the cold morning air, naked, with her tunic lying on the browning fall grass beside the brook. She stood in the stream of flowing water and cupped water in her hands to wet her skin, then using a pot of soap she always carried, she washed her body, from armpits to ankles. Using a hide travel cooking bowl, she gently poured the icy water over her shoulders to rinse away the soap suds, shivering slightly from the cold.

Cambarre had roused himself and had stuck his head out of the tent to see what the morning held weather-wise and noticed Jonayla naked, standing in the stream, washing. He thought for a moment about joining her but then thought better of it. He knew by now, how she and her mother liked to wash themselves and he wanted to please Jonayla by being as clean, but he thought, I'll wait until midday and bathe in the lake at First Place. That decided, he tore his gaze away from Jonayla's nakedness and pulled a leather tunic out of his pack to wear that morning on their ride to the Chimu.

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The young couple were on the trail before the sun reached the top of their sheltering bluff. Star was running around the horses' legs playfully all the while being

ignored by them, while Cambarre and Jonayla smiled contentedly as they rode toward their next destination, the Chimu's First Place.

It was late morning before Jonayla spotted the cooking fires from First Place and they increased their horses' pace to a trot. They both wanted to complete their mission and then make a slow and leisurely journey back to the Summer Meeting, arriving on the appointed day for newly mated couples. They were both eager to get back to their home cave and set up their dwelling before the first snowfall if possible.

The first thing Jonayla noticed as they neared First Place was a new corral with a shelter, which had been built to one side of the main cave opening. One of the two horses that she had traded to the Chimu leader Camma, was standing contentedly, munching on some harvested dried grass.

She was glad to see that the Chimu had followed her instructions for the care of their horses. She could see bundles of dried grass stored up in a loft area within the structure at the back of the corral area. There were also some rough clay jars that had been sealed off. She guessed that they were storage containers filled with gathered grains for the horses.

People were stopping in midstride as they saw the pair ride into their camp. At first Jonayla didn't understand why there were shocked expressions on every face. She knew it couldn't be the horses because they had grown accustomed to that over the past summer, but as she was about to ask Cambarre about it, she heard Star yapping as the small wolf frolicked around them.

Of course! These people had never seen a tame wolf before. Even a very young wolf would be intimidating to anyone who wasn't expecting to see one in their midst. Usually where there was a wolf pup there was a dangerous wolf adult or pack close by.

Luckily Cambarre saw a hunter that he knew from their time in the forests while looking for the false Shaman and his band. "Doroban, greetings," he called out to one of the men standing near the cave entrance, wide-eyed. "Tell everyone that this wolf belongs to Jonayla, who is daughter to the First Zelandoni who serves the Mother. The wolf will not hurt anyone and is not to be harmed." He hoped that knowing who was involved with this furry little beast would put them at some ease.

Doroban called back, so that everyone in hearing distance heard him, "That figures. I will never understand these things, but I'm not surprised that the wolf cub belongs to the First Zelandoni's daughter. My guess is there is a tale to tell about this wolf pup and how you came by it."

"Yes," Cambarre agreed, smiling. "You'll find the story of how Jonayla's mother found her own wolf cub is quite a tale too." It would be very interesting to see their reaction when he told them about Sky and where he'd come from.

"Greetings Doroban," Jonayla said as she jumped down from Gray. "Is Camma not here?"

"Why would you think she was gone?" Doroban asked.

Jonayla nodded toward the corral, "Because a horse is missing."

"Ah," the man smiled, "very astute. Camma is out hunting, or at least trying to hunt. She takes on too much, too quickly. She has been practicing with the spearthrower from horseback like your people do. We have very little skill with horses."

"I see," Jonayla said. "A leader needs to master hunting weapons and new ways in order to lead well. I'm not surprised that Camma is trying so hard."

"Yes, she is a good leader," Doroban agreed, and then out of curiosity he asked, "We didn't expect to see any Zelandonii again until after the snows. What brings you here?"

Cambarre said, "We have a message for Camma from the First Zelandoni. Do you know when she will return? We're on our mating trial period and need to be on our way as soon as possible."

Doroban grinned, "I'm surprised you can find the time to perform missions during your time away. I know that during my trial mating, I wouldn't have wanted to."

"That's the price one pays when mating the First Zelandoni's daughter, who is also an Acolyte," Cambarre joked. Both men chuckled companionably. Jonayla flushed slightly at their casual male attitude and the implied sexual meaning of their conversation.

"So, do you know if Camma will be back today?" Jonayla asked, trying to change the subject.

"Yes, she has been staying out all day, but definitely comes back each evening," Doroban replied, allowing himself to be diverted from the former topic.

"Would it be alright if we waited for her?" Jonayla asked.

"Of course," Doroban said cheerily. "The Zelandonii are always welcome here. Come in. Zolana, my mate will fix you some food and a nice tasty tea. Come." He suggested they corral and unburden their horses and waited until they had, then led them into the main cave.

A busy looking dark-haired woman was preparing food for that evening's meal, when they were introduced. "This is my mate. Zolana, you remember the Zelandoni's daughter? She is now mated to Cambarre, who all the women remember," Doroban chuckled.

The young Zelandonii couple were made comfortable and fed. Jonayla commented on the tea, it was a delightful mix of dried and crushed basil licorice leaves and linden flower. "Very tasty," she said as she sipped. "I haven't had a tea like this before. The basil licorice herb was a plant that could grow most anywhere."

Zolana smiled, "It is a traditional winter tea for the Chimu. It is served piping hot with honey and mint and on a cold winter day it warms the insides nicely."

"Yes, I can see that it would," Jonayla smacked her lips appreciatively. Actually the tea was a bit overpowering, but she could see that Zolana was proud of it and she knew that it would be a restorative drink in the cold of winter, so she drank it all and asked for a second cup.

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Camma returned just as dusk was settling into night. She looked tired and worn. 'As worn as a robust, attractive woman in the prime of life could look,' Cambarre thought. She was as tall and as imposing a personage as he remembered, with her mass of flame red hair. As she jumped down from her horse he could see her muscled body flex and knew that there was still quite a reserve of strength there she could tap if necessary.

Camma had seen the horses in the corral and wondered who from the Zelandonii had come to visit. Her eyes widened in surprise as she recognized Jonayla and then her handsome companion. She rushed over and hugged Jonayla, exclaiming her delight in seeing her once again. Then she turned to Cambarre and hugged him to her also, holding the tight hug a little longer than was necessary. Jonayla smiled at that, she wasn't upset - she could even understand it - knowing that if their place were reversed, she'd have done the same.

"What brings you to us so close to cold weather?" Camma finally asked.

Savoring her next statement a little more than she knew she should, Jonayla said, "Cambarre and I are on our mating trial period and my mother asked us to perform a service for her since we had several hands of time that we must be away from the Summer Meeting on our own."

Cambarre reached out and took Jonayla's hand in his. "Yes, Zelandoni wanted us to tell you that next year the Summer Meeting will be held near the Nineteenth Cave, so that should you wish to attend, it will be an easier journey."

"That is very thoughtful," Camma said, looking at the clasped hands for a moment, then up into Jonayla's eyes. "First, let me wish you joy. You make a nice looking couple and I can see you're very happy," she said sincerely, "and it is wonderful news that the next Summer Meeting will be held so close to us. Once we've had a chance to trade for more horses and to catch some of our own, it will make it so much easier to travel farther afield. It was indeed very thoughtful of your Zelandoni to arrange this."

"When we crossed the river south of here it occurred to me that in the spring the snowmelt will make the water much higher than it is now. You'll need to have many ropes to help guide the people through the fast moving water," Jonayla said, a little concerned. "Maybe we can get some of the Zelandonii to bring their horses and we could make some floating travois to help carry your supplies over. I know there will be many Zelandonii willing to help."

"Yes, I'm sure there will be. It appears to be a trait of the Zelandonii men to help their neighbors, we are truly blessed. It just amazes me that we might never have known each other without the trouble that those two bad Zelandonii created in our territory. I would almost thank Brukeval and Madroman, if they hadn't caused so much trouble for my people."

"How are your people recovering now?" Jonayla asked, hoping the news was good.

"We're doing fine. We have all been out on the hunt to make up for lost time. I think we have put away enough preserved meat to get us through the winter and all of the older people are visiting the traditional places to gather the late grains and digging roots. The kills made by the Zelandonii hunters before you left us really made the difference. That, and the game driven towards our hunters as they tried to evade your hunters meant that our hunt was ended at the normal time.

"Jonayla, since you and Cambarre are here, maybe you two could give us a day and help us with our spearthrower from horseback proficiency? We could use some expert advice, to help correct mistakes we might be making. We didn't have horses until you were leaving and no one to show us the best ways to hunt from horseback," Camma looked beseechingly at Cambarre and then at Jonayla.

The young couple wanted to get away on their own, but understood that the Chimu needed their help and the request wasn't something they could refuse in good conscience. "We are in a hurry to head back south, but a day of practice and pointing out what works best couldn't hurt," Jonayla offered.

Cambarre nodded agreement, and then said, "Do you have someone else to ride a second horse so we can show two of you?" Then he looked at Jonayla, "Maybe we could use our pack horse to train a third hunter. That would allow three hunters an entire day of training in hunting from horseback."

"Wonderful, we're all grateful to you. We'll start first thing in the morning. I promise I won't keep you beyond the one day. I remember when I was on my trial mating period and I know how much you would like to be alone," Camma smiled knowingly.

There were many more Chimu at that evening's meal than those who usually stayed at First Place. The Second Cave had been reoccupied, but many from there had heard about the visiting Zelandonii and had come to see and hear them. Visitors to the Chimu caves were rare and winter was not far off, so hearing news from other people and places was always a special treat.

Jonayla and Cambarre didn't disappoint their hosts. With the story about Jonayla and Durc finding wolf pups and then their mother's miraculous Wolf from the Sky and their run-in with the Clan only the day before, they had much to tell.

By the time they were finished telling their stories, it was getting late. Camma suggested that they turn in - to many groans of disappointment - in order to get an early start in the morning. Camma walked with the Zelandonii couple to the guest hearth that had been made ready for them. "I almost forgot to ask you if you had seen Melodene the mate of Monkam who walks the Spirit World. He lost his life during the troubles. Do you remember Melodene? She was the one who led the Zelandonii here."

"Yes," Cambarre said, "she followed our path south and found us at the Nineteenth Cave. Then she traveled with us to the Summer Meeting."

Jonayla added, "I think Melodene will be returning with us to the Ninth Cave when we leave the Summer Meeting. She now lives with Willamar, who is a member of my family. We were all surprised because of the age difference, but they took to each other from the first. I think that Melodene experienced a hard life before and after her mate's death, and Willamar shows her respect and loving care." Jonayla thought for a moment, and then said, "I think that Willamar gets just as much out of the relationship. Melodene's youth, makes him act younger himself, he moves faster and seems happier, so it is a good relationship."

Camma had listened silently. "I'm glad to hear it. I was worried when she disappeared shortly after the Zelandonii left us. I hoped that she had followed you, but didn't expect her to be taken in. I am grateful. It is good to know that she fares well. She did have a horrible time and maybe this will heal her."

Camma wished them a good night's sleep, and with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes, she left them alone and returned to her own place within the cave.

Jonayla watched the tall redheaded leader walk to her own hearth. If she hadn't already known that Camma was a good leader, her obvious concern over one of her people who had left for places unknown would have proven her worth as one. Jonayla hoped that the Chimu would join her people and become one with the Zelandonii; it would be a good thing for both the Chimu and the Zelandonii.

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Camma woke Jonayla and Cambarre before dawn. "We want to get an early start. I have some grains with berries heated and ready to eat and some winter tea made."

They rose and dressed, then hurried to the main hearth and ate quickly with Camma, Doroban and Chandalar, a man from the Second Cave of the Chimu. He was one of their best hunters and Camma had chosen him to ride the extra horse for the day. Zolana, Doroban's mate, served the food that Camma had prepared.

As dawn's light filtered through the trees that crested the nearby hills, the five riders - two very confident ones and three looking less so - rode to the west, toward where Camma had seen a herd of Auroch the afternoon before.

Jonayla and Cambarre called out suggestions and instructions to the three Chimu that accompanied them. Camma had learned the basics by trial and error and therefore was better at controlling her horse than the other two. Doroban had little experience, having preferred to hunt on foot, the way he had always done. To the Zelandonii couple's surprise, Chandalar was catching on very quickly, as though he naturally understood how to control a horse's movements.

Jonayla was very impressed by the man's natural ease with the horse. "I think you may be a natural horseman, I've never seen anyone take to riding so quickly."

"It does feel right to me somehow," the man said as he patted the neck of his horse. "I can see so much more from up here too. I can readily see the advantage that a person has by riding on the back of a horse. It should make hunting easier and I think safer too once I fully learn how."

"Yes," Jonayla replied. "Being able to get out of the way of an enraged bison is a good thing. A horse can also help hide you from the animals you hunt. Many migrating animals have never seen a person on a horse so they don't recognize us as anything dangerous. That allows you to get close, especially if you disguise yourself wrapped in a hide, with a little horse urine on it, so they won't smell your human odor."

"Interesting," Chandalar replied, not sure if he really wanted to wrap himself in horse urine.

"Look!" Camma said excitedly.

Jonayla and Cambarre looked in the direction the red haired woman was pointing.

They could see a small herd of horses in a meadow some distance away. The wild horses hadn't noticed them yet. The herd was upwind of the five riders so no human

scent had reached them. Not surprisingly, their own horses nickered when they caught the scent of the wild herd.

"I see some foals," Camma said, even more excited now. "Do you think there is any way we might catch them?"

"It is not likely," Jonayla replied. "We have the right amount of people, but I don't know if you can ride well enough yet to be able to herd wild horses into a surround. We would also have to make a surround and the horses would be gone before we could do that."

"No they wouldn't!" Camma said with an urgent tone in her voice. "There is a surround not much further down that valley. We hunt here fairly often and there are several killing surrounds. They're in good repair and even better, the one closest to us hasn't been used this year, so there would be no smell of death to frighten the horses."

"Well, in that case!" Jonayla said excitedly, "I think we should try to catch some horses."

They moved up to the trees and dismounted. "See the patches on the inside of our horse's legs? Peel off the top layer of hair, it's matted and will peel away. These are patches that every horse has," Jonayla said. "You can smell them, they smell strongly of horse. Rub the matt on your hands and face and any skin exposed to the air, to transfer the horse's smell to your skin."

Jonayla showed them how to do it, demonstrating as she instructed. "We need to be careful not to frighten them so much as to make them frantic. It is alright to make them burst into a gallop, but only when they have no place to go other than into the surround."

Cambarre knew that Jonayla had built up a small herd of horses and that she'd spent many moons in the field doing just what they were doing now. It was still amazing to see her in action, so confident as if every move was from long tradition, rather than having been learned on her own over the past few years.

"Now," Jonayla said as she watched the others rubbing the mats of smelly hair all over their exposed skin. "Where is the surround you spoke of?" she asked Camma.

Chandalar spoke up first, "I was there just a couple of days ago and although it is in good shape the gate barrier is closed. Someone will have to go there first to open it. It is a barrier that opens in the middle and will need two people to close it quickly once the horses are corralled."

"Chandalar, you and Doroban should go into the trees to our right, far enough so the horses grazing in the meadow won't see or hear you. Leave your horses screened by the trees and then open the barriers on this side of the surround. You should crouch down behind the barriers so you won't be seen by the horses. When we drive them to the surround you must quickly close the barriers behind the horses." Jonayla looked around at the scene before them, one last time, then concluded, "I think we should be able to make this work if you can do that."

Camma instinctively knew that Jonayla was the expert when it came to the task before them and had no second thoughts about instantly obeying her instructions. She and Doroban were mounting their horses when Jonayla called after them.

"Camma will be riding down the middle of the meadow, Cambarre and I will take each side trying to steer the horses to the surround. Keep in mind that this may not work, it doesn't every time. If the lead stallion, that brown male in the middle of the herd is smart enough, he could lead them around the trap no matter how hard we try to guide them into it."

As Chandalar and Doroban rode into the trees, Jonayla continued her instructions. Camma and Cambarre both listened intently since this was the first time they had tried to herd horses. "We don't want to make the wild horses any more fearful of us than we have to. We'll let our horses slowly walk into the meadow and then spread out as if they are grazing. Lean forward against the neck of your horse to make yourself harder to see and remain that way. If the stallion becomes aggressive, just shout, but don't wave your arms unless he tries to attack you.

"Camma, once we get them moving you should fall back about fifty paces so Cambarre and I can herd them together. You should just zigzag back and forth in the open field but stay behind us keeping the horses on the move and discourage them from bolting back the way they came. It will be alright to sit up, but don't flap your arms or make any sounds unless the horses start to head back your way. Just seeing you sit up should make them nervous enough to keep edging away from you and toward the surround."

Following Jonayla's instructions, Cambarre and Camma slowly moved their horses into the open meadow and waited as Jonayla moved into position on the far side of the field. First one, then another and then another of the herd looked up and stared at the intruders. Then the stallion raced to put himself between his herd and the danger he sensed. He came to a stop some distance away and stood hesitantly, watching them. He could see and smell two strange male horses and one female. This was unusual and made the stallion unsure what to do.

Then Jonayla urged Gray forward and yelled, "Whoop! Whoop!" Hugging Gray's neck she trotted toward the hesitating stallion. This was a critical moment; Cambarre knew it and did as Jonayla had done. That unnerved the stallion just enough to make him turn back toward the herd and gallop to the far side of the meadow.

Jonayla urged Gray forward again, this time at a slow walk. Cambarre did the same and after a few moments Camma followed, slowly zigzagging her horse. The herd was uneasy and moved away from them, but they were not so frightened that they would gallop away.

This went on for some time with the herd stopping and then moving away again as the three strange horses kept walking toward them. Then Jonayla signed to Cambarre to look at the horizon. There in the distance was the corral. It blended into its surroundings, made from tree trunks and thorn bushes. The barrier was standing wide open and there was no sign of the two gate keepers.

Jonayla was grateful that Chandalar and Doroban were experienced hunters. 'They might be new to horses, but they knew how to hide themselves and that might be enough to make this work,' Jonayla thought. Now she urged Gray a little to the right, making sure as they approached the corral that the space between Cambarre and herself was closing up. Cambarre saw this and moved left, mirroring Jonayla's move.

Suddenly the stallion's instincts kicked in and he tried to move toward the right, but that in itself was a mistake, Jonayla controlled that side of the field and both she and Grey knew what they were doing. Jonayla shouted, "Camma! When the stallion starts moving to the center, gallop in toward the opening and yell, but now you both must lean down so they can't see you!"

Both Cambarre and Camma followed her instructions without hesitation. Yelling and galloping toward the herd, leaning forward against their horse's necks. This forced the stallion to turn and race away, even more confused, right into the corral. He was a powerful horse and when he saw the barrier in front of him he bunched the

massive muscles of his hindquarters and secured freedom by leaping over the thorn bushes opposite the surround entry. His followers were not as powerful, or maybe they just didn't know what to do, because the rest of the herd piled into the surround and began to nervously mill around as Chandalar and Doroban rushed to close the barrier.

Three men and one woman shouted in excitement. They had succeeded in capturing the whole herd except for the Stallion and they were jubilant. Jonayla had remained quiet and called out. "Be silent!" she said in a commanding voice. "Now we need to cull the foals from the herd and let the rest go. We must calm them as much as we can, and yelling won't help us do that."

"But I thought we could kill the adults. We could use the meat this winter," Camma said as quietly as possible.

"No, not if you want to take the young. If we had more people who could kill the rest of the herd after we take the young away, that would be one thing, but to kill them with their young close by would not be a good way to start training them," Jonayla said. "Besides, when you start to rely on your horse and have horses around you all the time you stop wanting to hunt them for food. You'll see what I mean in time. But for now, it's not possible, not if you want to get the young away to your home corral."

Camma understood what she meant and said no more. They gathered at the now closed gate and Jonayla continued her instructions, "When it comes to culling the young from the herd, we'll have a far better chance if we act and think like wild horses. By mimicking its body language we can communicate with it, giving it a better understanding of what we want it to do. Horses are smart and learn quickly.

"Be calm. Horses are sensitive to the feelings of humans and if they sense that you are excited or nervous, they will feel the same. We will need to go into the corral and seek out those we want to take away. Walk slowly towards the horse you choose and avoid staring into its eyes. Predators will stare a horse in the eye, so we don't want them to think of us in that way.

"When you are close to the horse you want, begin to talk quietly and soothingly and avoid making any sudden movements which can scare it. If possible, walk sideways toward it. That is a non-threatening posture to a horse."

Jonayla climbed over the surround gate and demonstrated as she continued to talk in a soothing voice to a small, dark brown colt with a light tan belly. "When you get close enough to the horse, slowly, but firmly compliment the horse and tell them about all their good characteristics to make them feel calmer around you," she said, reaching out.

"There, there, you beautiful, wonderful horse. You will be a magnificent horse, a strong hunter who all the people will honor for your bravery and stamina. You are the most beautiful horse in the world and everyone will be envious of you when they see how beautiful you are." Jonayla kept up this soothing talk as she slowly held out her hand toward the colt.

Jonayla continued to give instructions to the others in the same soft sing-song way to keep the horse calm as possible. "Slowly move forward, and when you get close enough so you can pet it, slowly put your hand out with the fingers together. Don't put your hand out with your fingers spread out, this can give the horse the impression you are a wild animal with claws. Touch its neck," she said, resting her hand of the colt's neck. The small horse stood, shivering with nervousness.

Jonayla clicked her tongue soothingly, and then told the colt how handsome he was and how big he would be when he was grown. "Make an attempt to study a horse's body language," she instructed the others, still in a soothing voice. "This will allow you to understand how horses communicate with one another in the herd."

All this time Jonayla held a rope looped in one hand behind her back. "Once you're in the corral with the horses, always keep in mind that they are very strong. They weigh many times your weight and can kill you with one kick. One misstep on your part can get you killed or maimed. Be very, very cautious," she warned as she brought out the rope and carefully slipped it over the colt's neck, all the while speaking to it soothingly.

She slowly led the colt to the surround gate and indicated with a nod that Doroban should open his side a little. Jonayla slowly led the colt out and handed lead rope to Camma. "Walk him away from the corral. Always talk soothingly to him, let him smell your hand; he will smell your horse's odor on it and will feel reassured. Carefully lead him back to First Place on foot with your horse at his side, without stopping for any reason.

"I will bring the others out one at a time and each of you try to get your horse back to First Place without stopping," she said, still in a quiet soothing way. "If the young

horse bolts, let it go, don't chase it, it will only make it harder to get the rest out of the surround if the mares hear a foal's fearful voice."

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They took two colts and two fillies that day, all the young in the small herd. When Cambarre was away safely with the last young horse Jonayla waited for several more hands of time before pulling the barrier away and letting the horses free from the enclosure. This delay was necessary to allow the others to get far enough away so the mares wouldn't follow their foals.

As she mounted Grey, Jonayla looked back at the herd and waved, "Thank you! We will care for your children and honor them," she called out as they disappeared in the distance.

Watching the herd until the last one was out of sight, Jonayla finally reined Gray around and began the ride back to First Place. They had started out for a hunting lesson, only to find a much richer catch than animals for food. The Chimu now had six horses, assuming they could keep them fed through the winter. That would be an important discussion she must have with Camma before she and Cambarre left.

Chapter 38: Why the Sea is Salty

Durcan had just brought his sister's horses in from the field where they had been grazing. Making sure they were well watered, he herded them into the corral that he, Jonayla and their father had built near the Ninth Cave's summer place at the beginning of the Summer Meeting.

He didn't mind taking care of Jonayla's horses. After all, he planned to build his own herd someday and then she would help him. There were only three yearlings left from Jonayla's original nine plus his own horse Lightning, so it wasn't much of a chore anyway.

Since his mother had received the gift of Sky Wolf from the hands of the Earth Mother Herself, Durcan had become very popular with the other children from every cave. No longer were there taunts about flatheads or about his mother's past. All they wanted was to be close to the Zelandoni with the Sky Wolf. He of course was in the best position to make that possible.

Over the past ten days, many children had come to visit Durcan, even ones he didn't know very well. Of the two siblings from South Face, Artibon and his sister Folrian, only she had stood by him when the other children had teased him, so he felt closer to her than to any of the others. He liked her and liked the feeling of being close to her.

Durcan's thoughts were interrupted by a girl's voice hailing him, "Durc! There you are! We've been looking for you." It was Folrian and her brother. That was interesting, he had just been thinking about them and then suddenly there they were! He smiled and waved as they rode over to the corral and dismounted.

"Are you about done?" Folrian asked. "We're going to the Storyteller's lodge; I heard they were going to tell a story about the people that live by the ocean in the west. Do you want to come? We only have a short time before the storytellers begin."

"Yes! Let's go," Durcan replied enthusiastically. He loved listening to the storytellers, especially Ralev and his troupe. In his opinion they were better than the others and told more exotic tales. Durcan turned toward the trees and whistled, Blackie immediately appeared at the edge of the forest and with a few puppy yaps, bounded excitedly to him. Durcan's young wolf had been rooting around in search of

something fun to do. It still amazed Durcan that the pup had accepted him as pack leader so quickly. His mother had told him that it would take a lot of time and effort to train her but she seemed to take to him right away and learned to do what he told her to do after only a couple of lessons on a given task.

Durcan was proud of his wolf pup. She had grown to twice the size she'd been when he'd first found her only a few hands of time before. "Blackie, come!" he called, then turning back to his friends, "Why don't we walk? You can corral your horses here. It's more fun to walk through the Summer Meeting, you see more that way."

Folrian giggled, "You just like the way people stare at you and your wolf when we walk through the camp. It is funny to see grown men and women stop what they're doing to pay attention to us."

"Alright, alright," Artibon said, "let's get moving, they could already be telling the ocean people story."

This would be their last day together since the Twenty-Ninth Caves were striking camp the next day and returning to their homes for the winter. Within the next few days everyone would be leaving the Summer Meeting. This was the time of year when the final hunts and the last of the gathering of the natural abundance of grains and berries, nuts and fodder around the home cave areas would take place. It was a busy time just before becoming inactive as the long cold winter arrived.

As they walked through the main area, all three children enjoyed the reaction they got when Durcan's young female wolf stayed obediently beside him. People were slowly beginning to get used to multiple young wolves in their midst, but with the recent event concerning Sky, most of the Zelandonii now thought that a wolf that answered to a person might be something almost spiritual and more and more people began talking about it.

Durcan heard talk just the day before at the Ninth Cave's main hearth that some of the men might hunt for young wild dogs. They had known what a help Wolf had been to Jondalar and Zelandoni in their hunting and had heard about the stories where the animal had even saved their lives several times during their extensive travels. Dogs were physically smaller than wolves, ate less and would be more easily accepted. They thought it would be safer to trap young dogs rather than wolves and one man even said he thought they might breed them to trade to other hunters.

As the children made their way through the campsites toward the Storyteller's lodge, Folrian took Durcan's arm and hugged it to her as they walked. He was used to her acting possessively toward him and secretly liked the feeling, even though he would never admit it.

"After Ralev tells the Ocean story, let's go visit the traders on the hill and then I want to go swimming," Folrian chattered. "Summer Meeting is almost over and I love to swim in New Lake. You can see so many things down in the water since it is new from the time when the Mother spoke and because the water is so clear."

Artibon just grunted noncommittally, but Durcan replied, "That sounds good to me. I think this may be the last day before all the campsites start to come down. The trial couples should begin to return today and tomorrow and several of the caves that had no one in the last Matrimonial are striking their camps now and will probably begin to leave tomorrow as well, so this will be our last chance."

"I'm going to miss you Durc. We've had fun, haven't we? I just wish we lived at the same cave," Folrian said wistfully, looking up at the boy who was a year older than her.

"Stop mooning over Durc, Folrian. If you want to hear the storytellers then come on, we're here and there's the storyteller," Artibon said, as he ducked under the traditional low entrance to the Storyteller's lodge.

Entering into a Storyteller's lodge was always exciting, at least for young children, although many adults enjoyed the stories too. But the young always got the most out of the experience because it was all new to them and so different from everyday life.

The Storyteller's lodge was different than most of the others at the Summer Meeting. It was really a very large pointed tent, positioned at the back of a large open area surrounded by a log palisade and was where most of the stories were told out in the open. At its base the lodge was a good thirty feet across and had been dug down into the earth about six hands-width, with a ledge all the way around that served as places for people to sit during the day and places for the storytellers to sleep at night.

The floor of the dugout was paved with river stones, thousands of river stones that were several layers deep. This late in the summer they had been trampled down by hundreds of feet into a hard, flat surface.

Eight long thin logs were angled up into a peak and then tied together. The bases of the logs were evenly spaced and anchored into an earth rampart and then the frame was covered with a patchwork of hides forming a huge pointed tent.

Besides the low-cut entrance portal, there were two other portals cut into the back wall between two vertical support logs. But what was most unusual, were the thin colored panels that were placed over these cutouts. Someone had worked the skin of some unidentified animal to the point that it was almost translucent. Then they had colored one a golden hue and the other a reddish hue, making the light that shown through during the day seem otherworldly.

Many times there were flute players and drums and even singers who accompanied stories, or sometimes they just played the instruments and sang. It was a most unusual place and all three children quickly found a place to sit. Durcan held Blackie on his lap and was petting the pup to keep her quiet.

The lodge was full, with more than thirty people gathered around the raised-earth area before the hearth. There were small lamps that burned cleanly, sending a pale filmy smoke toward the smoke hole at the peak of the lodge.

Suddenly red-haired Ralev stood and stepped up onto the storyteller's platform and beckoned a young woman, one of his troupe, to join him. In a loud and commanding voice he said, "Be silent, children of the Earth Mother and I will tell you the story of 'Why the Sea is Salty.'"

Ralev seemed to shine a golden-red in the magic light. Durcan was instantly transported to another time and place as the storyteller began his tale.

"Long ago there were people living at the edge of the western sea. They were all fishermen and seldom ventured inland. They didn't live in caves or lodges, but each family had their own grass hut.

"In one of the villages along the edge of the sea there lived two fishermen brothers.

"The older brother was lucky and always brought in enough fish for his family and to trade for things his mate might want. Although the older brother had plenty, he was mean-fisted and arrogant." Ralev made his voice sound arrogant and unpleasing when he spoke of the elder brother.

"The younger brother was kind and generous of spirit, but was unlucky and seldom brought in enough fish to feed his mate and their children, much less trade for things they might wish to have to make their lives easier." Now Ralev's voice was soft and pleasing to hear.

"One day the younger brother and his mate found they didn't have enough food to feed their children. The seas had been too rough to take his boat out because the boat was old and in poor condition. They realized that they had eaten all of the fish that he had caught and had nothing left.

"'What are we going to do? We have no food for the children to eat,' said the younger brother's mate in tears.

"The younger brother did not know what to say.

"'Go to your brother and ask him to help us. Ask him for some food, any food, maybe just enough to make soup with,' suggested the poor man's mate. 'I know that he brought in a large catch yesterday - I saw him unload it while you were down the beach repairing your boat. Surely he will not begrudge us a little fish?'

"The younger brother sighed in resignation. He did not like to ask his brother for help, for he knew how mean-fisted and selfish his brother was. But he really couldn't think of any other way to get something to eat and his children were hungry. So the younger brother put on his ragged wrap and walked to his brother's hut.

"'What do you want?' asked the older brother as soon as he saw his younger brother approach.

"And then the older brother's mate screeched, 'Why do you come here? Tomorrow is a holy day and we are busy preparing the feast. Go away! We have no time for the likes of you!'"

Durcan and his friends were caught up in the fate of these people. Ralev's troupe of story tellers were joining in now to make the story that much more real to the listeners. The woman who stood beside him had taken the parts of both the brother's mates and responded to Ralev's voice as if their conversation were a real one.

Ralev continued, "But the younger brother, knowing that he had little choice, called out to his sibling, 'Brother,' he said, 'we have nothing to eat in our hut and my

children go hungry. Lend me a little fish-meat, so my mate and children may also celebrate the holy day.'

"'I knew it!' shrieked the older brother's mate. 'I knew your brother would come begging one day. Throw him out!'" the woman storyteller rounded on Ralev as if she were truly mad at him.

Ralev held his arms out beseechingly to the audience, "The younger brother ignored his brother's rude mate and begged, 'Please, brother, help us in our time of need,' he said, looking at his elder brother.

"'Oh very well,' grumbled his brother. 'Take this and go to Hetata the Wood-Spirit!' He threw a large fish at his younger brother.

"The younger brother thanked him profusely, folding the fish in his hide wrap and began walking home. But as he went he remembered what his brother had said. This fish was not his, but that of the Wood-Spirit.

"Hetata the Wood-Spirit lived deep in the forest and the younger brother had never gone into the forest very far before, only to gather wood, but there were those who did. They were wood-cutters who brought wood to the village to trade for fish and other things.

"The younger brother didn't know where in the forest the Spirit lived, but hoped to run into a wood-cutter who might know.

"Sure enough, the younger brother did run into a lone wood-cutter. He was an old man who had been a wood-cutter for many years and knew the forests better than most.

"The younger brother approached the old man and asked, 'Do you know where Hetata the Wood-Spirit lives? I must find the spirit and give him this fish I hold.'

"The old man squinted his eyes at the young man, not sure what to make of him, but finally said, 'You should walk to the top of that crest,' the old man pointed to raised ground in the distance. 'Where that tall dead tree stands you will find a cave in the hillside. That will be where you will find Hetata.'

"The young brother thanked the old man for his help and began to walk up the hill. The old man called out to stop him and said, 'I like you, so I'll tell you something you

should do when you meet the Wood-Spirit. He likes fish very much but because he lives in the forest he seldom gets any. Therefore you can expect to be rewarded for your gift.'

"The younger brother was about to thank the old man for this bit of useful information, but the old man held up his hand to silence him, 'The Spirit will offer you rare hides or excellent hunting weapons as reward, but you should not accept them. Ask instead for his stone bowl with the image of a snake on it. Tell him that you've heard of it and that is what you would like to have. If he refuses and offers something else, don't accept anything but the bowl.'

"The young man thanked the wood-cutter and walked on. Very soon he was at the rise and close to the tall dead tree. Sure enough, there to one side, in the side of the hill was a cave opening, so he went inside and there was Hetata, sitting by a small fire, warming his hands.

"'Why have you come here?' asked Hetata.

"'I have brought you a gift,' said the young man. 'A fish.' And he held out the large fish to Hetata.

"'Fish!' cried Hetata in delight. 'Quick, give it to me! I haven't eaten fish for thirty summers!' Hetata grabbed it and woofed it down, smacking his lips with pleasure.

"After he had eaten the gift, he said, 'Now I shall give you a gift in return. Here, take these Mammoth hides and these hunting implements,' he said, pulling out a huge beautifully cured white Mammoth hide and two Maga Spears of superb quality.

"'No, I don't want those,' said the young man, remembering the old wood cutter's advice.

"'The best flint then, and some fresh baked cakes with mountain pine nuts perhaps?' offered Hetata, pulling out two handfuls of the best looking flint nodules the poor man had ever seen and a basket of fresh cakes.

"'No thank you. I don't want that either,' said the young man.

"'How about these ten precious stones?' asked Hetata. 'These are shiny and very rare. You'll never see their like again and their trade value is ten times the worth of everything I have offered you so far.'

"No, thank you, I don't want any of those either," said the young man.

"Well, what do you want then?" asked Hetata.

"I want your stone bowl with the snake painted on it," replied the young man.

"My snake bowl!" exclaimed Hetata. "No, you can't have that, but I can give you anything else you like."

"That's very kind of you," said the poor man, "but I only want the stone bowl with the snake painted on it."

Hetata did not know what to do. He had eaten the man's gift and certainly could not give it back, nor could he let him leave without a gift in return.

"Oh very well," he said at last. "I suppose I must let you have my bowl. Take it. But do you know how to use it?"

"No," said the poor man. "Tell me please."

"Well," explained Hetata resignedly, "this is a magic bowl. It will give you whatever you wish for, just say, 'Snake Bowl, give forth food!' Then when you have enough food and want the bowl to stop, just say, 'Snake Bowl, this is enough. I have had enough, it is done!' Then it will stop. Now go!"

The younger brother thanked Hetata and wrapped the magic bowl in his tattered carry bag and began walking back to his home at the edge of the western sea.

He walked and he walked and he walked, and at last reached his home. His mate was weeping, having given him up for dead. "Where have you been?" she cried. "It has been days and days since you left us and I thought I'd never see you again!"

The younger brother told his mate the tale of his adventures. That it had only seemed like an afternoon, not days and days. Then, setting the magic bowl beside the fireplace, he said, "Snake Bowl, give forth a feast."

The Snake Bowl began to spin and suddenly food appeared; the most wonderful dishes of food they had ever seen. The younger brother and his mate and children ate and ate till they could eat no more.

"Snake Bowl, this is enough. I have had enough, it is done!" commanded the young man, and the Snake Bowl stopped spinning and no more food appeared.

"The next day the younger brother and his mate and children celebrated with another feast and were very happy. Now that there was enough to eat, he asked for new clothing to wear. From the beginning, whenever he asked for something, it appeared and they never lacked for anything. The Snake Bowl gave them a fine new dwelling and enough food to eat and more to trade. Soon they had so much that they did not really need to use the magic bowl any longer.

"The elder brother heard of his brother's change of fortune. 'How could my brother suddenly have become so well provided for?' he wondered. 'I must find out.' So the elder brother went to his brother's hut.

"How have you become rich in goods so quickly? And a new dwelling too," he said, looking around at everything in amazement.

"The younger brother told him everything - about his conversation with the wood cutter and how he had given his brother's fish to the Wood-Spirit and received a magic bowl in return.

"I want that Snake Bowl for myself," thought the elder brother. 'Show me the bowl,' he demanded.

"The younger brother, wanting to believe that there was goodness in his sibling and knowing that it was his fish that had made all his good fortune possible, did as he was asked. He put the Snake Bowl in his elder brother's hands and said, 'Snake Bowl, give forth a feast.' At once the magic bowl began to spin all by itself and out poured the most delicious looking food.

"The elder brother could not believe his eyes. He ran from dish to dish tasting the food and marveling at the succulent tastes and aromas. Finally the younger brother said quietly, 'Snake Bowl, this is enough. I have had enough, it is done!' The older brother was preoccupied, thinking to himself that he had to have the bowl, that his younger brother didn't deserve such powerful magic.

"Trade me your bowl!" he begged of the younger brother.

"No," said the younger brother. 'The Snake Bowl is not for trade.'

"Well then, lend it to me for a bit,' said the elder brother. 'After all, it was I who gave you the fish to carry to Hetata!'

"The younger brother knew this was true. What harm could there be in letting his brother have the bowl for a while?

"Very well brother, you may borrow it for a day,' said the younger brother.

"The elder brother was delighted. He grabbed the Snake Bowl and ran off with it, without having heard how to stop it.

"The Elder brother already had a scheme in mind. He put the bowl into his boat and rowed out to sea with it to where the village fishermen were hauling in their catch of fish.

"The fishermen must salt the fish if they want to stay out longer to catch more,' he thought. 'They will trade me part of their catch for some fine ready at hand salt.'

"The elder brother was far out to sea by now, far away from any land. There was no one to hear him as he said, 'Snake Bowl, give forth! Give me pure, fine, white salt.'

"The Snake Bowl began to spin on the bottom of his boat and out poured the finest, whitest salt imaginable. Soon the boat was full. The elder brother decided he had enough and commanded the bowl to stop, but when it didn't, he realized that he couldn't remember the phrase his brother had used to stop it.

"Desperately elder brother yelled, 'Stop, Snake Bowl! STOP! Stop now!' he pleaded again and again. 'I don't want any more salt!'

"But the magic bowl did not stop. It continued to produce the finest whitest salt imaginable.

"Soon the elder brother's boat was so full of salt that he was fighting to stay afloat. He began to scoop up the salt and dump it over the side, but the bowl just produced more, faster and faster until... Elder brother cried for help, but there was no one near enough to hear him and he sank into the sea, never to be seen again.

"Even at the bottom of the sea the Snake Bowl kept pouring out the purest, finest, whitest, salt. It is still there to this very day, making more and more salt.

"And that, believe it or not, is why the sea is salty."

As the final words were spoken, the accompanying flute and faint drumming receded and Ralev clasped his hands together and lowered his gaze, indicating the completion of the story. All of the people enthusiastically clapped their hands against their thighs and voiced their approval, asking for more.

Of course Ralev would not accede to the requests for more stories because there were other storytellers awaiting their turn to perform. As the people's acclaim for his story quieted, he stepped down and nodded to the people as he walked over to sit beside Durcan and his friends, waiting to listen to the next storyteller who was preparing to speak.

Ralev leaned close to the boy and whispered, "What did you think about my story Durc?"

"I liked it Ralev. I enjoy well told stories, especially ones I haven't heard before," Durcan replied. "Where did you find that story?"

Ralev leaned toward the boy and winked, "I found it in my imagination." He smiled and Durcan smiled back nodding. Then the next storyteller began to speak and everyone settled down to listen.

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The story telling done for the time being, Artibon and Folrian came out into the afternoon light and headed toward the trader's place. This area was the second most popular place at Summer Meetings, where the men and women displayed their crafts. One of the high points of the Summer Meeting was the exchange of goods and information and of course visiting friends and family they might not have seen since the summer before.

Besides talking to people they only saw during the summer, the trading area had the added attraction of displaying different types of hunting weapons, utensils and jewelry produced by other caves. There was always something new, someone was always coming up with a new idea and improvements on old ones.

Durcan, although he wanted to be a great hunter and horse breeder, appreciated the Knapper's skill, especially because his father was a renowned Knapper. He'd

grown up with the craft and was even a fair hand at it himself. So he was always on the lookout for new types of blades and spear points.

The children hurried up the slight slope leading to the edge of the camp where the crafts were laid out on hides or on flat rocks for display. This late in the Summer Meeting there were only a few craftsmen left displaying their items for trade. At the height of the gathering there could be as many people displaying crafts as there were people looking, but today there were less than a dozen traders and the trading area seemed almost deserted to the three children.

The advantage to having so few traders present was that not a lot of people were there and the children could talk to the men and women about their items on display. Normally they knew that children were only looking and if things were busy they wouldn't have time for them, but today the traders were bored with the lack of commerce and were willing to talk about their craft.

Having Blackie with them also made them more interesting than normal and they walked along the row of crafts on display, talking to each adult and letting them pet the young wolf who enjoyed the attention.

Finally they came to one trader who made spear shafts. Most spears now were made for spearthrowers and were slender and of differing lengths depending upon their purpose. But Durcan noticed several elaborately carved, hefty spears that were unusual. These unusual spears seemed strangely familiar. "What type of spears are those, master spear maker?" he asked.

"Those are Maga Spears like those flathead Clan people use in their ceremonies," the man said in reply.

"Yes, that's where I saw one before. My mother has one of those that the Mog-ur gave her when she was in the north," Durcan said, realizing that the spears he was looking at weren't really like the one his mother had, but only had a passing resemblance. "Why would Zelandonii people be interested in something like this?" He quickly added, so as not to offend, "Other than the artistic value of course."

The man looked at him and then at his young wolf cub and said, "You might not be interested in a Maga Spear because you are the son of the First Zelandoni, but most people don't have a powerful spiritual leader as a parent and Maga Spears have the power to protect. An example of that was when our First Zelandoni killed a cave lion with one just a short while ago. That was something that an ordinary spear could not

have done. So now other people want them for protection and I only have these few left, but I have made many of them this summer for people that were asking for them."

"Hmm, they don't look like the one my mother has," Durcan said, looking closely at one of the spears.

The man's face reddened, "Well, not every Maga Spear is the same, it only has to be carved to make it a Maga Spear. You'll admit that it is well carved."

"Yes," Durcan said doubtfully. "It looks good, you did a good job on the carvings, but I'm not sure that just any carving makes it a Maga Spear."

"Well, do you know that it doesn't?" The man said heatedly.

Durcan realized that he was antagonizing the trader. He hadn't meant to and was about to apologize and admit that he didn't know much about Maga Spears. He had only seen the one his mother possessed.

"Durcan!" Someone called his name.

He turned to see Jaradal hurrying toward him. "Durc! Joharran asked me to find you. Your sister and her mate have come back from their trial time and father wanted to make sure you came home to greet them." Jaradal was the hunt leader of the Ninth Cave and was Joharran's son and would probably be the next cave leader someday.

"Thank you Jaradal," Durcan said. "I'll return right away. How do they seem?"

"They're going to remain mated, if that is what you're asking," he replied sardonically.

"I-I... didn't mean anything by that," Durcan said. "I just was asking if they were alright." He felt embarrassed to have asked the question.

Jaradal brushed it aside, having had his fun. "They're doing fine and apparently they've had some adventures. I'm sure you'll hear all about it before the night is done. Now I have to go and find Jondalar. If you see him before I do, let him know." Jaradal hurried on.

"I guess we're not going swimming," Folrian said.

"No, I must return and hear what adventures my sister has had. You can come and hear too," Durcan offered. That, Folrian felt, was good compensation for missing their last swim of the Summer Meeting. She was more than curious to hear about Jonayla's adventures just as Durcan was.

Chapter 39: Homeward Bound

When Durcan, Folrian and her brother Artibon arrived at the Ninth Cave's summer camp they found Jondalar and Cambarre sitting together by the outdoor hearth. Joharran and Solaban, Joharran's close friend and cave elder were also there. They were talking about the Chimu and the horse hunt.

The children were fascinated by the way Chandalar, a Chimu hunter, was apparently able to master riding a horse on a hunt with no previous experience. "Yes, Chandalar is a natural rider. By the end of the hunt he looked every bit as comfortable on a horse as any Zelandonii. I think he just put fear aside when he saw how Jonayla and I rode. He knew it could be done," Cambarre concluded.

"Greetings Cambarre!" Willamar said as he joined the men at the hearth.

"Greetings Willamar," Cambarre replied.

"I assume you have been telling everyone about your trial mating time. Am I too late to hear the story?" He smiled, knowing that Cambarre had probably already had to repeat his story several times.

"We will be telling the longer version at tonight's feast but as you say, the short story is that on our first night we were attacked by a Woolly Rhino that destroyed our camp. The second day we ran into a Clan hunting party and Jonayla used her healing knowledge to help a Clan hunter who had been hurt during the hunt and we helped them kill Aurochs for their winter larder. On the fourth day, Jonayla organized a day of training on 'hunting from a horse' but when she saw a herd of horses she changed it into a horse hunt to help the Chimu build their herd." Cambarre was amused at Willamar's amazed expression.

"After that," he continued, "the two of us headed back into the south and just got to know each other for the rest of our time alone together. I admit that I am a very lucky man," Cambarre smiled contentedly. The young man looked at Jondalar and said, "I am a very happy man. Your daughter is quite a woman. I only hope I can live up to her expectations of me."

"I know what you mean. Jonayla is very much like her mother and I too feel blessed by the Mother for having found my mate. I feel pride in being her mate and that

makes me want to be the best I can be to keep her respect. I think being mated to Ayla makes me a better man than I would have been otherwise."

Cambarre nodded in agreement and understanding.

There was a pause in the conversation and Durcan took that opportunity to ask, "So where is my sister?"

"Jonayla and your mother went down to the lake to bathe," Jondalar said.

"Melodene just headed to the lake along with Proleva. I guess there will be a women's gathering down there like this one we men are having," Willamar smiled.

Durcan smiled with pride at being included as one of the men.

The conversation moved back to the Clan hunt and Cambarre was asked to describe it for the men. Everyone was interested to know more about the Clan's hunting methods. As the discussion continued Folrian leaned into Durcan and said, "Durc, I'm going to go down to the lake. Is that alright with you?"

"Yes, just let me know if they talk about anything interesting." He smiled mischievously.

Folrian gave him an exasperated look then rose to her feet and left, unnoticed by the men caught up in their discussion.

Folrian had no change of clothes. It was still comparatively warm and she had wanted to swim anyway, so joining the older women was nothing out of the ordinary. When she came on the women of the Ninth Cave she told them that she'd come from their lodge and the men were discussing hunting so she thought she would come down and join them.

The women readily welcomed the young girl. Jonayla knew her as a friend of Durcan's and asked, "Is my brother back at camp?"

"Yes, he is with the men. My brother and I found Durc at the corral. He was tending your horses, and then the three of us went to listen to the storytellers. Ralev told a new story about the sea people and then we went to visit the traders and that's when we heard that you had returned. The men said you were at the lake so I came to hear how you fared while away."

"Mother," Jonayla called out from the water, "do you know Folrian? She and her brother Artibon are friends of Durc's," Jonayla said.

"I'm pleased to meet you Folrian. I wish I could have spent more time at the Summer Meeting this year so I could have met my son's new friends, but there was so much happening that I had to spend a considerable time away." Ayla smiled welcomingly at the attractive young girl with the dark brown hair and the bright green eyes. "You have very pretty eyes, Folrian," Ayla said. "How old are you?"

"I'm nine summers Zelandoni," the girl replied seriously.

"I'm glad you are my son's friend. What cave do you come from?"

Enjoying the attention she was receiving from the First Zelandoni, Folrian smiled radiantly, "I live at South Face. My father is a master hunter and leads the hunts for South Face."

"That is an important function, you must be proud of your father," Ayla continued, enjoying her discussion with this bright young girl.

"Oh yes, and my mother assists Denanna who is leader. My mother does all the planning for feasts and special gatherings," the young girl preened in pride for her mother.

"Proleva," Ayla gestured toward the woman just coming out of the water to sit beside them as she dried herself, "is our leader's mate and she does for the Ninth Cave what your mother does for South Face. She organizes all feasts and special meetings. It is very important for any cave to have someone who has the skill of organizing."

"Proleva, this is Folrian of South Face," Ayla introduced the child.

"Greetings Folrian," Proleva said as if Folrian were an adult, making the girl feel welcome indeed.

Just then Jonayla came out of the water, followed by Melodene. The women began talking about Jonayla's trial mating time. Folrian remained silent as the older women talked about and compared their trial mating times and their men. Folrian found these stories to be very informative because they weren't talking to her as a young

girl, but to each other, and she was hearing what they truly thought. When it was time to leave the lake, Folrian still hadn't had her final swim of the summer, but didn't mind, she felt more than compensated.

-O-

It was late afternoon when Durcan walked to the edge of the Ninth Cave's camp with his friends. "I guess I'll see you both at the next Summer Meeting," he said, knowing that the Twenty-Ninth Cave would leave for their home in the morning.

Artibon and Durcan gripped wrists in a farewell gesture. When he held out his hands to Folrian, she rushed to him and hugged him, then kissed him on the mouth, surprising and embarrassing him, but also secretly pleasing him.

As his two friends hurried toward their home lodge, Durcan turned toward his own camp but stopped when he saw Willamar watching him with a big smile on his face. Durcan was doubly embarrassed now, knowing Willamar was smiling because of Folrian's kiss.

As he walked past Willamar the old man said, "Nothing to be embarrassed about young man. It's always a blessing when you get a kiss from a pretty young woman. Enjoy it while you can. The older you get, the faster life races by. Someday you'll wake up and realize that all you have left are memories, so make as many of those as you can."

Durcan looked at his deceased grandmother's mate and said mischievously, "So Melodene is just a memory is she?" Seeing that he'd hit his target, he scrambled away before Willamar could give him a half-hearted swat for the teasing he'd just received.

-O-

That evening would be the last meal when everyone would be together before leaving for home. Everyone wouldn't actually be leaving the next day. It would take several days to strike a camp this size. In the morning the camp would begin to be torn down and they would be packing away most of their things on the travois in preparation for their journey home.

After Jonayla and Cambarre had shared their rousing tales of adventures and had been told by Ralev that he would incorporate some of their details in future stories,

the gathering began to break up. There were many things to do on the morrow and everyone was resigned to make it an early night.

Jonayla was still standing by the fire when Lorala came to stand next to her. "Jonayla, I'll be leaving with my sister and her mate tomorrow." Jonayla turned to look at her friend and saw tears in her eyes.

"Lorala, why the tears?" Jonayla asked mystified by her childhood friend's sadness. "Is it that you don't want to move with your sister? You don't have to, you know. You're a member of the Ninth Cave and can stay if you want to."

"No, I can't stay. I can't watch you with Cambarre, it makes me sad to see you with him," Lorala said in a small voice.

"Lorala." Jonayla suddenly remembered their old relationship when they'd been secret lovers in Wooded Valley while they were growing up. "You're not angry with me are you? Because I mated Cambarre?"

"No, I knew you didn't feel the same way about me as I felt about you, but it still hurts to see you with him and to know that I've lost you," Lorala said quietly.

"We'll always be sisters Lorala. I love you, it's just that I love Cambarre too, and I want children. Don't you want children too?" Jonayla asked.

"Y-yes, I do, but I don't want to be with a man. So I guess I'll never have children of my own," Lorala looked into the fire as she stood beside her friend.

Jonayla reached out and hugged her, "Lorala, I'm carrying Cambarre's child. There is no going back for me. You need to consider what you want your life to be like in the future. I love you like a sister, not like a mate. You understand what I'm saying, don't you?"

"Oh yes, I understand." Lorala pulled away from Jonayla and quietly walked away. Mystified, Jonayla watched her childhood friend leave. She had always thought of their secret relationship as one to keep from becoming large with a man's child. They had the same urges that most young women had and she had thought that neither of them wanted to bear children unless it was with an acknowledged mate. She thought they had both felt the same.

With a heavy heart Jonayla went over to Cambarre, put her arm around his waist and stood with him, feeling a bit out of sorts.

Cambarre noticed that Jonayla seemed subdued. Then he looked across the fire and noticed Marilla watching them. He wondered if Marilla was what Jonayla was seemingly upset about. He hoped not. He knew he should confront the issue of his past with Marilla, but didn't know how. All he could do was show Jonayla how much he loved her. Cambarre took Jonayla's hand and led her into the big summer lodge and to their furs to show her how much she meant to him.

Being young and in love, they soon became magically one body and one mind, and shut out everything else. They only knew extreme pleasure in each other and knowing that this would happen again and again whenever they wished, salved their worries.

Soon, the young couple lay side by side, their breathing slowing as they enjoyed the feeling of togetherness. No longer concerned about tomorrow or yesterday, just holding each other in sated bliss as they slipped into a comfortable sleep. Star curled up at their feet.

-O-

By mid-day the Ninth Cave's summer camp had been stripped of anything useful. All of the usable hides, thongs and poles were stacked in separate piles. Each member of the community would be required to transport a portion of the construction material back with them on their family's travois, to be stored in a rock lined pit within the abri that housed them all.

Jondalar had climbed to the top of what remained of the structural skeleton that held the large, yet insubstantial structure together. With a shout he cut the bindings that held the poles together and with a loud groan the structure slowly collapsed. He enjoyed the ride to the ground, with a few whooping yells on the way down. This was the final step in dismantling the camp.

Ayla had stopped her packing of the family's belongings long enough to watch the place they'd called home for a little over three full moons collapse. What Jondalar had done was an informal tradition, but a tradition none the less. Seeing this, Ayla waxed nostalgic, thinking of all the summer lodges in her life.

When she was younger leaving the Summer Meeting had always been a sad time for her, but over the intervening years she'd become more and more involved in the fall hunts and gathering efforts and her thoughts had already turned to the journey home and the subsequent hunts that would be needed to complete their caches for the coming winter. Proleva would take charge of the gathering of fall grains, berries and nuts, as she had for as long as Ayla could remember.

Jaradal, Joharran's son and the Ninth Cave's hunt leader would lead the hunts. Of course Jondalar would also lead some of the hunters and she was sure that Jonayla and Cambarre, and even Durc would join in the hunts this year.

Yes, the coming Harvest Moon time would be busy for the people of the Ninth Cave, for all the caves for that matter. Even though every Cave would take with them their share of dried meats, herbs and hides from summer hunts and expeditions, they would all still need to have a successful Harvest Moon time or there would be hunger before winter's end.

"Mother, do you want me to set up the travel tents? We could place them beside the corral. That way, we'd have everything together to get an early start tomorrow," Jonayla offered, Durcan was standing beside her, ready to help.

"Yes, alright, but don't get your hopes up for an early start. With so many people to organize, it won't be an early start no matter how ready we ourselves might be," Ayla replied. She knew how impatient youth could be, and she wanted them to remember that there were others to consider, not just their family.

"Yes we know that," Jonayla said, looking sideways at her brother. "But it never hurts to set an example. You always say that and we've taken it to heart." She smiled at being able to use one of her mother's sayings to make her point.

Ayla laughed, "Very well, you're right. Why don't the two of you load the travois and position them in readiness for the morning. Don't forget to prop them up on stones, so they can easily be lifted from the ground."

"Mother!" Durcan cried. "I think we know how to load and prepare travois by now."

"Yes my son, forgive me for stating the obvious, I'll try not to do it again." She smiled, already turning away to continue packing their belongings. Of course Sky wanted to help; she indulgently bribed her young wolf with a soup bone that he

greedily snatched in his teeth. Trotting to the edge of the campsite, he settled down to do some serious gnawing.

-O-

Everyone was pleasantly tired from the day's work, but they were also keyed up for the trek they would begin in the morning. It would be an overnight journey if everything went as planned. A person on horseback could easily make the journey in one day, but weighed down with heaped travois and with so many people, some of who were walking, they would travel at half the pace at best.

If the old trail south were still passable, which it wasn't, they could have shaved several hours off their travel time. Taking the ridge trail would necessitate a slower, more deliberate pace, but no one really minded another day on the trail. They all knew that soon enough the snow would fall and they would be trapped in their caves or nearby them, at best. Before the end of winter they would all be remembering the freedom they'd had the previous summer and looking desperately forward to the coming Summer Meeting again.

The sky had just darkened into night as the people of the Ninth Cave cleaned their eating utensils. Those responsible for the task cleared away the leavings from the evening's meal. Everyone would find their sleeping furs early that night, in hope of an early start in the morning.

Most of the Zelandoni spiritual leaders had stopped by the Ninth Cave's campfire that night, bidding farewell to their First Zelandoni, including the first Donier from the southern caves. The two women walked away from the fire and talked privately beside the lake. Jonayla watched them and remembered how at odds they had been at the beginning of summer. It amazed her how so much could change. She had no doubt in her mind that the two were now the closest of friends.

She felt that she had learned a valuable lesson from them. Jonayla never thought it possible that the Zelandoni from the south would become a friend to her mother. She'd thought the other Zelandoni was arrogant and self-centered, but had learned that wasn't the case. She'd learned that other people might disagree with her mother because they believed they were right. She'd also learned that there were people with big enough hearts to change their minds when they realized they were wrong in their opinions.

"Jonayla," Cambarre stepped up beside his mate. "What are you thinking about?" he asked. He was still brooding over what she might be thinking about his past with Marilla.

"Oh, I was just thinking about how much I've learned about people this summer. How people can be honorable and caring." Then she remembered Madroman, who would leave with the southern Zelandoni to begin his servitude, "And I also learned about wickedness and deceit." Jonayla moved close to Cambarre and put her arm around his waist and pulled him close.

Cambarre wondered if the last part was directed toward him. He couldn't remain silent any longer. "Jonayla," he started hesitantly. "I saw you looking at Marilla last night and it, well... it occurred to me that you might be unhappy about my past relationship with her." He wasn't sure how to continue.

"Marilla? I don't remember looking at her. I certainly wasn't thinking about her. But now that you bring it up, do you know how she is doing?" Jonayla asked, releasing him and turning to look into his eyes.

Cambarre said nervously, "No, not really. I haven't talked to her all summer."

"You should ask her how she's doing Cambarre. I think you owe her some concern, don't you?"

"Um, I guess so... I just didn't think it would be appropriate. I didn't want anyone to get the wrong idea if they saw me talking to her," he replied.

"You mean you didn't want me to see you talking to her," Jonayla said, she smiled at him to make it plain she wasn't upset.

"That too," he said.

"Well, I trust you and I think you should see how she is doing. I only have one question about your relationship with Marilla, and it's the kind of question just about any woman might ask," she said. "When it comes to pleasuring each other, am I as good as she was when we're in the furs together?"

Cambarre was relieved that she wasn't upset about his past relations with Marilla. He gave her a broad smile and hugged her tightly. Looking directly into her eyes, he answered, "Jonayla, I've never been happier than I am now. And no one can

compare to you in the furs. Believe me when I say that I'm the luckiest man of all the Zelandonii."

"Good, because I don't want the father of my child to be thinking about past partners," she said playfully.

"So you're sure, you're carrying our baby?" Cambarre asked, holding his breath.

"Yes, I'm sure. I haven't had my moon time since the first time we shared pleasures, so it's been long enough to be sure. And besides, although I don't have severe symptoms, I do feel a bit queasy in the mornings. So yes, I'm sure you're going to be a father Cambarre."

He let out a loud whoop and hugged Jonayla again, spinning her around and praising her beauty and cleverness. He was sure that they would have the most beautiful and talented children anyone had ever seen.

-O-

The next morning, everyone knew that Jonayla was with child. There were other women of the Ninth Cave also pregnant, but theirs was the latest news and it was traditional that the women of the Cave would comment and give good wishes and make a fuss in general over a newly pregnant woman.

Jonayla was fairly certain that she'd conceived from their first shared pleasures and that would mean that her child would be born sometime during the Warming Moon when the temperature begins to warm and the ground begins to thaw.

This meant that their child would be about two moons old before the journey to next year's Summer Meeting. Jonayla was already calculating what she would need to prepare for that journey and looking forward to showing off her little one to the friends she would not have seen over the winter.

Jonayla was surprised when Marilla came up to her the next morning to wish her well. Jonayla thanked the older woman and asked her how she was doing. "Thank you for asking," Marilla replied. "You needn't feel sorry for me, I never thought I would mate Cambarre, we didn't have that kind of relationship. I think he just needed someone to be close to and I was willing."

"Umm, Marilla, I don't know how much experience Cambarre had before he knew you, but I think it was his time with you that taught him how to pleasure a woman. I thank you for that," Jonayla took Marilla's hands her hers. "I would be your friend if you will let me." The two women hugged and then went about their tasks, preparing for the camp's departure.

It was late morning before the first horses took to the trail south. As it turned out, it would end up being a three day trek. Almost half the people were unable to ride because their horses were too loaded down with traded goods and personal equipment.

-O-

Ayla looked at the trail that led off to the right, the one that would take a person to Sacred Mountain and the Zelandoni stone. Her eyes misted as she pictured the earthen pot that held the old Zelandoni's ashes, a woman who had been her friend and teacher. She envisioned the thin ring of grey ashes circling the container and the Zelandoni Stone pedestal it rested on. Her eyes misted with a pang of sorrow.

She knew that by next summer there would be little or no trace of those precious ashes, but that was the way of the Mother, as it should be. Ayla decided that she would make a special trip back here on her way to the Nineteenth Cave's Summer Meeting place next year. She would offer prayers for her two good and faithful friends, one human and one animal, both so important to her that she would never forget them for as long as she lived.

When her young wolf yipped and seemed to want to wiggle out of the sling that held him to her breast, she tightened her grip on the pup. "Next year Sky, next year we will visit Zelandoni and Wolf, I promise." She urged Summer Child on, with thoughts of friends still filling her mind.

-O-

The trip back was arduous. In addition to their belongings, they were bringing back more winter stores than ever before. All of the travois were loaded to capacity and slowed the trip. They arrived at the trailhead above the Third Cave's home site and were able to descend into the valley below for the remaining short trek home.

Jondalar halted at the trail head, looking out over the valley as people passed him. Ayla sat astride her horse beside him. "Just look at that," Jondalar said, sweeping his

arm outward, indicating the valley below that stretched for as far as the eye could see. "We're nearly home."

"Yes," Ayla replied, grateful that the Mother had spared Jondalar's life. He'd been so close to death no more than two moons before. "Summer Meetings are good for the people, but I wouldn't mind staying right here next summer, if I had the choice." She meant what she said. Over the past few years with more and more Zelandonii using horses, the Summer Meetings had become less important for survival than before.

With the advent of horses, a person unencumbered with a travois could ride the entire Zelandonii territory north of Big River in a day and a half. In the past, Summer Meetings were a way to gather as many hunters together as possible while game was plentiful and to store as much dried meat and grains as could be collected during good weather. It also served to let the surrounding areas of the home caves recover from constant use, letting nature grow grass for grazing game and their horses while also leaving a ready source of the summer's supply of grains and berries.

No one could remember a time before the Summer Meetings, but there were folk tales that had been passed down from ancient times telling of times of famine and want. The Summer Meeting's collective hunts insured an equal supply of basic preserved meats and hides to help every cave survive a winter's storm season.

In the days before the horse, people could only hunt a few miles from their home and even then they had to carry their kill home on foot. With horses they could - if conditions required it - hunt much further away than ever possible before and bring larger quantities of meat back on travois.

The Summer Meetings had really become a gathering of the people for trade and to mingle; a place to look for a mate.

These thoughts flittered through Ayla's mind as she looked out over the valley. She watched the long line of people descend the winding trail to the valley floor. Ayla looked back the way they had come and saw her daughter and some of the horses enter the bend in the ridge trail and said out loud, "Yes, it is good to be home." Then she urged Summer Child toward the trailhead and home, with Jondalar right behind her.

The afternoon sunlight stretched the shadows into long stripes that reached from one side of the long valley to the other. The pinnacle rock above the Ninth Cave

shone in the sunlight, standing out as a landmark, beckoning to them. The grass that grew on the valley floor had been virtually untrodden all summer long and now rippled in the breeze in golden waves as if it were an ocean.

-O-

Jonayla and Cambarre had been herding their horses behind everyone so that delays they themselves faced by the occasional obstinate animal wouldn't hold up the others. As they came to the trailhead and looked out over the valley below, they too stopped to enjoy the sight of their home cave on the other side of the valley. They would never forget this summer. It was their first together and would always be special to them.

There would be many more firsts for the young couple, starting with making their new dwelling into a home. Children were a very important part of everyone's life and to know that they had made a child so soon after their first sharing of pleasures bode well for the future size of their family.

Building her herd of horses, being an Acolyte of the Zelandonia, her love for Cambarre and having more children were all priorities for Jonayla. She wanted as many children as Cambarre could give her. Although just how many, she wasn't entirely sure... She would wait and see how the birth of their first child went. Guiltily, she hoped it would be a girl, but she knew Cambarre secretly wished for a boy. She also knew he would love their daughter just as much as she would love their son.

In complete harmony, the two urged the horses forward, following them down the trail toward the valley floor. Jonayla's young wolf investigated everything in sight as he wove in and out among the horses, contentedly accepting these animals and humans as his pack and enjoying all the new sights and smells.

Chapter 40: Home

The next few hands of time had everyone busy at the Ninth Cave. Every day the hunters went out searching for migrating herds of Bison and Elk to add to their winter larders. In a very short time most of the herds would migrate south for many moon cycles. The snow would come and virtually all hunting would cease until warmer weather returned.

During the time between fall and winter, most of the women were out each day. This was the time to harvest the bounty that nature had manufactured during their summer away. Over these last few hands of time there was a wealth of foodstuffs for the taking. Fall berries and grains, pine nuts and fodder for the horses. It always seemed that they could never bring in enough sun dried grass and grains for the horses to last through a long winter. Grains were harder to store but were essential and much of what was brought in this time of year would be reserved for the horses.

Once, when tamed horses were few, they had been kept in a corral at the southern edge of the Ninth Cave's great ledge, but when more of the people began to catch their own horses, it soon became obvious that there would not be enough room for all of them so close to the main enclosure. The problem was solved by moving the corral to one of the unoccupied caves near Down River. The cave chosen for the horses was close enough for easy access even in the worst of winter storms. Storage lofts were built there to hold the dried grass and tripod stands were made to hold the many hide bags of mixed grains.

That fall, Jonayla and Cambarre with some of the other horse owners their age, built several more corrals, enlarging what had already been there. Jonayla's plan for the coming year - after the baby came - was to concentrate on building her herd and then trying to breed them. She felt that taking young horses was not the best way to build a herd; that letting nature take its course and birthing young in the corrals would be more humane than catching a herd in a surround and taking the offspring from their mares.

She had spoken of this with both Cambarre and her mother, even asking her mother if she might be excused from her duties as an Acolyte at the next Summer Meeting, in order to stay behind to build her herd. After all, she had explained, if she was not going to trade her horses at next year's Summer Meeting, why take them all the way north to the Nineteenth Cave only to bring them back south again.

Unknown to them all, Jonayla was changing the future of summer gatherings by her actions that spring. In the future more and more people would breed horses and eventually many of those people would need to stay behind to tend their herds. As time passed, families still attended Summer Meetings, only to stay long enough to trade their horses or goods and then return home. This type of behavioral change would eventually bring to an end the large gatherings that had served the people so well before the mobility that horses had brought.

Melodene would be having her child around the same time as Jonayla and both she and Willamar were willing to stay behind with Jonayla and Cambarre that summer to help. Willamar said that he wasn't all that interested in traveling anymore, having traveled more than most people all his adult life. He would be content to stay behind and enjoy a quiet summer with the newborns.

Melodene confirmed this when she said, "There are nothing but unhappy memories for me in the north. I would be much happier just staying here. I could help with the elderly who can't make the journey and also help Jonayla and Cambarre by watching their baby while they're out working with the horses."

Ayla agreed that it would be pointless to herd the animals all the way up north if her daughter's intent was to keep them for breeding. She would miss having Jonayla by her side all summer, but agreed that if she wished to stay behind, that it would be alright.

Within a full moon of their arrival home, the meat was dried and seasoned and the grains, berries and nuts were stored away. Everyone began looking to the sky each day as the dawns came a little later than the day before. One day there was a coating of frost on the rocks beside the trail leading down to the valley. Then on another morning there was a dusting of snow across the valley floor and everyone knew that the time for hunting and gathering food was at an end.

Snow soon blanketed the earth. Familiar features were smothered and the game herds were gone. The younger hunters would still trek to the valley floor and sometimes journey into Wood River Valley looking for squirrels, rabbits and other non-migratory game, but everyone knew that winter had gripped the land and wouldn't release it again until the Mother won Her battle against cold winter. They also knew that there would be enough food to survive the winter with some to spare. Even with the turmoil of last summer in the north, they'd had many successful hunts and all of the caves would weather the winter quite comfortably.

Ralev and his troupe of storytellers had settled into the dwelling that Jondalar had originally built for Lanidar and Lanoga and her siblings who had now moved to Lanidar's home cave. Willamar and Melodene lived together, occupying Willamar's dwelling. Melodene, having been fascinated by Marthona's special weaving frame, began to try her hand at it. Some of the other women, including Ayla, had helped her learn the craft.

Cambarre and Jonayla worked on the dwelling that had housed Jondalar's apprentices and now would be their new home. The whole family helped, including Joharran and Proleva and even Jaradal when he wasn't leading a hunt.

Life soon settled into a pattern that would be maintained through the long winter days and nights. The only reason for leaving the main cave area now would be to tend to the horses' needs or to get firewood from the wood cache and if it was a clear day, check the snares for small animals to add fresh meat to their diet.

Wolf pup training became an issue. Ayla had forgotten what a small wolf could get up to. Her old friend Wolf had been so well trained and so comfortable with people that he'd fit right in when they first arrived at the Ninth Cave. Now with this addition of three young wolf pups, the training was a full time job. Keeping the two older pups out of other people's dwellings and belongings became a chore. Sky was young enough to remain in Jondalar and Ayla's dwelling and was less trouble.

Even with the problems the small animals caused, many people were thinking of getting their own. Most of the adults had seen what a help Wolf had been to their First Zelandoni and her mate in hunting. Some even hoped that they might gain a pup when these animals were old enough to breed.

Winter was a time for making things, repairing things and for improvements to dwellings and communal areas of the cave. Ayla spent much of her spare time working on interior panels for Jonayla and Cambarre's dwelling. The panels had been completed and now stood inside against the walls, adding a sound barrier, but they were still unadorned. Ayla had decided to reproduce some of the designs she'd seen when she and Jondalar had visited other people along the way on their journey from the east.

She spent extra time on these panels, making sure they were just right. Some of the designs were totally foreign to the Zelandonii, but she was sure that her daughter would appreciate them because of their uniqueness. In the back of her mind, she

wanted to leave something physical behind, something beautiful that would outlast her. Many of the panels in the Zelandonii dwellings were ancient and had been made by ancestors.

Several important ceremonies were observed during this time, the winter solstice being one of them. The Zelandonia were responsible for tracking movement of the sun and moon, which represented the Mother and Her lunar mate Lumi. Also during the wintertime there were birth and death ceremonies to preside over.

Ayla was expected, as the sole Zelandoni of the Ninth Cave, to officiate over all of the ceremonies. This kept her busy at planning the ceremonies and performing them. But even with all her spiritual and ceremonial responsibilities she made time for her family and close friends. Many nights she would invite guests to share a meal. On one such night, with only family members gathered, Jonayla disclosed a decision that she and Cambarre had made.

"Mother, father... Cambarre and I have decided what we will name our child," she announced. "If we have a girl we will name her Marthona after father's mother or if it's a boy we are going to name him Dalanar after father's father. We feel that this way we can honor them and keep their memories alive. Father's mother was a great leader and so is Dalanar still, so it will give our child something to be proud of and to live up to, don't you think?"

Jondalar was surprised. He'd never thought of that before, but it did seem like a fine thing to do and it was honoring his parents and it made him proud of his daughter that she had thought of it. "That is a wonderful idea Jonayla; I know that Marthona would have been proud to lend her name to your child, as will Dalanar, if it's a boy," he said.

Ayla was happy too, she'd admired Marthona and Dalanar ever since first meeting them. The idea of naming future generations after their ancestors was appealing to her and she thought to herself that the idea might catch on, that her daughter might have come up with an idea that all the people would eventually use, at least to some degree.

"Your idea is a wonderful one, daughter," Ayla agreed. "I can see this becoming a tradition. It's such a good idea, in fact, that it's hard to believe that no one had thought of it before this," she said, bemused.

"Well, that's not entirely correct mother," Jonayla said. "I remember you telling me that Creb had named Iza's daughter after an ancestor. Father named Durcan after Durc, mother's Clan son. That stuck in my memory and I think it is what gave me the idea."

They were all silent for a time. Ayla looked into the hearth fire, remembering Iza, the Clan Medicine Woman, her only remembered mother figure. What her daughter had said was true, Creb had named Uba after Iza's mother's mother and Jondalar did indeed name Durcan after Durc. The thought occurred to her that the Mog-ur of her Clan just might name Uba's daughter after her mother. Then another thought occurred to her, 'Maybe that was what they had always done, going back into the mists of time.'

"That concept is amazing," Ayla finally said, looking up at her daughter with misty eyes. "I'd never considered that before," She decided to leave it at that.

Durcan reached out and took a handful of pine nuts, popped some in his mouth, then said, as he chewed, "When I have a son, I'll name him Thonolan."

Everyone smiled at that, knowing that his future mate might have something to say about naming her baby. No one mentioned anything about that because they all thought it would be a good name, especially Jondalar who, even after all these years, still missed his brother as if his loss were only yesterday.

-O-

The winter wore on and the people of the Ninth Cave began to wish for sunny days again. There were whole periods where no one saw the sun and periods where the snow blew horizontally coating the cliffs with snow and ice so that the people couldn't even leave the cave other than the short distance to Down River for the care of their horses. This was a time when snow barriers had to be erected at the guest hearth to block some of the snow and as a wind break.

Jonayla and Melodene grew large with child as the winter aged. Cambarre and Willamar became close friends, sharing their worries and pride at their women's pregnancies. As the women reached their time of birthing the weather began to edge toward spring. There were still snow flurries from time to time, but ice was breaking up in The River and water could be seen again glinting in the sun from time to time.

There were three foods that traditionally signified to the Zelandonii that spring was coming. When the people had access to all three of these foods, it was considered the beginning of a new warm-time that would allow freedom of travel again.

The first food that the Mother would offer her children was fish from the thawing streams and rivers. When the young people from the cave could no longer walk safely on the ice, everyone knew the cold weather was well and truly in retreat. Other than the few animals that had been snared over the winter, fish were the first fresh food the people would eat in quantity since the winter cold had begun.

The second food to be offered the Mother's children, were deer and elk and other migrating animals that traveled in herds. When small herds of game began to appear, migrating north, the young hunters would trek down to the valley floor to hunt animals for fresh meat.

Just as Jonayla lay in her mother's dwelling, pushing her child from between her legs, groaning in the agony of giving birth, and while Cambarre paced just outside, bolstered by Jondalar, Joharran and Willamar, a woman came by with the third food clutched in her hands. She held wild celery, the first growing food to reach out from the warming soil, denoting that spring had arrived.

Even though Cambarre knew he had little to worry about with Ayla in attendance at their child's birth, this time was always dangerous for a woman. In this case he was positive that his mate's mother knew everything there was to know about birthing, having assisted in births more times than anyone could count.

So it came to pass that the young couple were proud parents of a healthy screaming baby girl. Ayla assured Cambarre that her daughter's birthing time had gone well and that Jonayla had only had contractions for a normal period of time and furthermore this easy birth foretold that they would have more children in the future.

When Melodene gave birth to a boy less than a moon later, Ayla was there for her too, as well as Jonayla. Willamar named the boy after Melodene's father, Shankar - whom she had loved - in the spirit of the family's new tradition, begun by Jonayla.

Five women from the Ninth Cave had conceived the previous summer and when the last one gave birth, a feast was held in thankfulness to the Mother. It was a very good sign from the Mother when there were no deaths from birthing or from illness during the winter and spring. The year before there had been sadness over the

death of a mother and her child and the illness of their previous Zelandoni, but everyone pushed that sorrow away and enjoyed the good luck that these births foretold.

During the thanksgiving ceremony and feast the new mothers sat in a place of honor as the people of the cave came over to them to complement them and their new babies.

-O-

Soon it was time for the trek north to the Summer Meeting once again...

Two days before they had planned to leave, for the Summer Meeting, Jondalar heard a commotion coming from the front of the cave. He had been kneeling over the many spearheads and knife blades he'd produced during the long cold winter to trade during the summer for things he knew they would need.

As he stood, Ayla pulled the hide covering aside and spoke excitedly to Jondalar, "They're saying that people from the Lanzadonii have arrived, come quick, let's see who they are." The hide door drape dropped closed and Ayla was gone.

As Jondalar made his way to the guest hearth he heard excited voices and a man saying, "...and we will be there by the end of this moon. Dalanar asks that the Ninth Cave keep a place for the Lanzadonii close to them."

Approaching the guest hearth through the crowd, Jondalar recognized Robonar, hunt leader of the Lanzadonii. Once pressing news had been exchanged and everyone knew that the Lanzadonii would attend this year's Summer Meeting, the crowd of people began to drift back to their packing and sorting for the awaited trip.

Ayla had been sitting close to the Lanzadonii hunter eagerly taking in all his words. She had been wishing that there were a way to see her extended family to the east and now this was her opportunity. "Robonar, please share a meal with us, you must be tired and we have plenty of space in our dwelling for you," she assured the Lanzadonii hunt leader.

"Yes, please come with us and rest," Jondalar said. "I would like very much to hear how everyone is doing. It's been too long since I've seen Dalanar and everyone else. So much has happened over the past few years we haven't been able to get away long enough to make the journey there."

As the Lanzadonii hunter leaned back with a full belly and a contented look on his face he said, "That was good cooking. I don't remember ever tasting Elk steak with spices like that before, it was wonderful." He took a swallow of the exquisite tea with a raspberry taste to it and wondered how they had captured that flavor, "And this tea is so unusual," he concluded.

"I'm glad you like it. It is made with baskin flower buds and dried raspberries. The baskin has a taste similar to raspberries and it increases the raspberry flavor," Ayla said.

"Yes, I keep forgetting that some of the foods Ayla can cook and some spices that she uses are unknown to most people. I can tell you that it is always a treat eating her meals," Jondalar chuckled.

Robonar looked at the couple before him and thought to himself that he would enjoy being in Jondalar's place. Of course he'd met this woman before and had heard interesting things about her from time to time, but he'd forgotten how attractive she was. She had to be close to forty summers by now but she still looked excitingly healthy and vibrant.

Ayla couldn't hold back any longer, now that the hunter had eaten, she had to know more about how Lanzadonii friends were doing. Being a healer, her most urgent question was asked first. "How does Joplaya fare? Has she had more children since we've seen her? It's been five summers since we've heard anything from the Lanzadonii." Ayla felt a pang of guilt that it had been that long since she'd looked into the startling green eyes of her friend and extended family member. She had never for one moment forgotten Joplaya's sorrow.

The first time she had met Joplaya it was obvious that she was in love with Jondalar. If they hadn't been hearth siblings, Ayla realized that she might never have met Jondalar. Joplaya would have won him over as her mate and he might not have left with his brother Thonolan on their journey to the east.

"Joplaya and Echozar do well," Robonar replied solemnly. "It is said that her trouble in birthing their boy, Bokovan, has made it unlikely that they will have more children. We all remember how much trouble she had at that birthing so maybe the Mother is watching out for her."

Ayla sighed inwardly; it was probably for the best, although she knew that Joplaya would be saddened by that outcome and probably also Echozar, although he had been very frightened when he saw how much trouble Joplaya had in the birthing of their son.

"And Dalanar and Jerika? What of them, do they fare well also?" Jondalar asked.

"Yes, both are fine, although last winter we lost Ahnlay, Hochaman's mate. She had been in failing health after Hochaman died ten summers ago. Dalanar is still strong, although he and I are beginning to feel our age, that we can't deny," he concluded, smiling.

"I'm happy that the Lanzadonii have decided to attend our Summer Meeting this year, but I'm also surprised since I know it is Dalanar's intention to grow his people and hold his own Summer Meetings," Ayla said.

"Yes, that is true," Robonar replied. "This could be the last time we attend a Zelandonii Summer Meeting. This year Dalanar and some of the other Lanzadonii in both caves definitely want to trade and maybe find mates outside our own people. I think that's the real reason we will be attending this year. In another year or two we'll have three caves and it might not be so important to travel so far again"

"Well, I'm glad that the Lanzadonii are coming this year. Maybe in the future my family can attend your Summer Meeting, I think I would like that. I sometimes miss traveling with just family and I always like seeing old friends and other places," Ayla said sincerely.

Ayla and Jondalar asked the Lanzadonii hunt leader to stay and travel to the Summer Meeting with them but he said that it had been decided that he should return as soon as possible so that he could let his people know where the meeting would be held this summer. It would save the Lanzadonii travel time knowing that the river trail was altered and they would need to take the Ridge trail.

Ayla and Jondalar could see the sense in that and didn't try to change his mind about coming with them. Jondalar assured him that they would do their best to find the perfect place for them close by the Ninth Cave's campsite.

-O-

Soon it was time for the people of the Ninth Cave to leave for the north. They all wanted what had become their traditional place when the Summer Meeting was held in the Nineteenth Cave's vicinity. Joharran hadn't waited for the trek north before dispatching hunters, including his son Jaradal to the north to mark out their campsite for themselves and the Lanzadonii so they wouldn't lose the site to another cave.

The people would leave the next morning for the four day trek north. At least most of them would. This year, there were more people than ever staying behind for various reasons.

Now that the Lanzadonii were going to attend the Summer Meeting, Jonayla assured her mother that she and Cambarre would come north for a few days to visit. Jonayla even suggested that she and Cambarre and their young daughter, Marthona, might visit the Lanzadonii Summer Meeting next year if they decided to hold their own. That is, if her mother would allow her Acolyte to be away long enough to make the journey there and back and also time enough for a brief stay.

-O-

Jondalar opened his eyes. It was dawn and he recognized the enticing aroma of Ayla's Elk stew. He could tell it was her recipe from the peppery fragrance. As he raised himself on one elbow he caught the scent of Ayla's mint tea. What more could he ask for?

Jonayla was there with baby Marthona strapped to her back. She was helping her mother carry the last parcels to the travois being loaded for the short trip to the corrals. This was it. In a few hours, almost the whole community would be on the move to another Summer Meeting.

Jondalar drew himself out of the warmth of their shared furs, remembering the pleasures they had shared the night before. It would be days before they had the privacy to enjoy themselves like that again. He then stood to don the travel clothing that Ayla had laid out for him the night before.

Their sleeping space was sectioned off from the main area of their dwelling by reed frames with taut hide panels that were painted with traditional Zelandonii symbols and hunting scenes. The panels had been painted by Jondalar's mother when he had first built their dwelling. These panels weren't as tall as Jondalar, so the top of his head could be seen from the main area when he stood.

"Ah ha! Finally, sleepyhead has awakened!"

He smiled at Ayla's playful teasing. "It's your fault," he teased back as he emerged from their sleeping space. "You tired me out last night."

Ayla looked into his eyes and gave him one of her pleased smiles, "I'm just glad that you still find pleasures with me to your liking."

"I'll never tire of them, nor of you woman. You were made for me by the Mother, you fit me like no one ever did before," he said, meaning every word.

He'd always been well endowed and because he had been tall and good looking he'd had a lot of experience with women. One of the things he'd learned was that many women couldn't comfortably take all of his manhood. But Ayla had, right from the very first, and she'd been eager and always willing to share herself with him. Every time he thought about it, he felt truly blessed.

"Why don't you come over here and have some stew. I also made you some mint tea. If this year is the same as all the others we won't be getting away until nearly mid-day. While you eat, Jonayla and I will be loading the travois and Durc is bringing the horses up from the corral."

"Where's Sky?" Jondalar asked, not seeing the young white wolf in his spot by the door.

"He and Blackie are trailing around after Durc. I'm proud of how well both Jonayla and Durc have trained their animals. They are really very patient with them."

"Yes, well I'm not surprised at all. They're your children after all," Jondalar said. "They aren't afraid of hard work and they know the value of doing things right."

"They learned those things from both of us," Ayla replied. "Now eat your meal and then help us load up." She said the last part as she stepped through the door to the outside with her arms full of parcels.

-O-

True to her expectations, the sun was well up in the sky before the people began to assemble in the valley below. This year there would still be many people traveling on

foot, but now more than ever, most people wanted their own horses and there would be brisk trading at the Summer Meeting. It wouldn't be too many more years before everyone who traveled beyond the immediate vicinity of the Ninth Cave would be mounted.

"Jondalar!"

Jondalar looked over his shoulder at Ayla's call. "What is it you need Ayla?"

"I need you. Let's take a walk. It will still be some time before the slowest to prepare are ready to go and I need some peace and quiet for a few moments."

He didn't say anything, he knew where she wanted to go. Taking her hand in his, he led her out of the cave and around to the side where the path wound upward to the place where the rock pinnacle jutted out from the earth. When the weather permitted they sometimes went there to find quiet and to just sit and look out over the vast valley below.

On this day they climbed, gratefully leaving the noise and bustle behind. Soon it was quiet, as if nothing unusual were happening that day. They came out at the top of the path and walked over to stand with their backs to the pinnacle as they'd done many times before.

It was a clear spring day and it looked as if they could see forever. The air was brisk but not too cold as they stood there side by side. Jondalar, looking out over the vista before them, reached out and gripped Ayla's hand in his. She turned to face him and he looked into her eyes and smiled. He noticed tiny little lines at the edge of her eyes, laugh lines, he thought.

She was getting older but had lost none of her attractiveness as far as he was concerned. Even when younger women teased him, trying to interest him, he thought of how much he loved his mate and how much happiness she'd given him over the years. But the deepest feeling he experienced when he looked into her blue-grey eyes, was pride. Pride that she felt he was worthy of her and pride in who she was and in her accomplishments.

He also felt awe. She had given him and in fact all the people, so much. Never trying to gain from it, and never reminding anyone of her gifts of knowledge like most people would have. All she'd ever wanted was to fit into the Zelandonii life. She'd done that, he thought; she'd done that without question.

In her turn, Ayla looked into Jondalar's brilliant-blue eyes; eyes that had always captivated her, even the very first moment she'd seen them open after his near death from the cave lion attack so many summers ago. She'd gloried in her nearness to him and in his manliness. He'd been the first of her kind she'd ever met and since then, having met many men of her kind, she was still convinced that he was the best example of a man that there was to be found.

They'd had their ups and downs, she reflected, but their love and mutual need for each other had won out over any conflict that had arisen in their relationship. Even at almost forty summers, he was still the most handsome man she knew. He could still make her blood surge and her heart beat faster when he looked at her in his special way.

Jondalar put his arm around Ayla's waist and pulled her to him, hugging her close, feeling the warmth of her body next to his. She was tall enough so that strands of her blonde hair tickled his cheek as the wind picked at it.

"Jondalar," Ayla said in a quiet voice, "I feel like we're living in the perfect moment and I don't want to move from this spot. I don't want this," she indicated the vista in front of them and then toward themselves with a deft wave of her hand, "to change."

"I know what you mean Ayla, neither do I. Sometimes I think that if I died at any moment, I would go to the Mother completely satisfied with my life, that I couldn't ask for anything more than I'd already received."

Just then their attention was taken by a distant cry, a cry of the wilderness, a wolf's call to its mate, the cry seemed to echo across the valley. Then an answering cry came from closer by.

"I miss Wolf," Ayla said. "And Whinney and Iza and Creb and Marthona..."

Still holding Ayla, Jondalar replied, "Something to look forward to when it's our turn to walk the Spirit World. They'll all be there waiting for us, Thonolan too."

"I miss Durc most of all, I wish I could see him, speak to him, hold him in my arms. At least I know he's still alive and seems to be doing well... that will have to be enough." Ayla hugged Jondalar and sighed.

And with that they began the descent to the noisy activity below. Together they would begin the trek to the Summer Meeting once again.

THE END



Afterward

When I began this FanFic novel I had to decide how to narrate the story. I could have had Ayla sitting by the hearth in her dwelling, in extreme old age, telling her story to the young people gathered around her. Instead I decided to leave Ayla and her mate Jondalar a hopeful future stretching before them, while still answering some of the many questions that hadn't been broached in the original series. The other books in the series were all set in the here and now and I felt I shouldn't break away from that format.

I set the story some 15 years after Ayla's arrival in the valley of the Zelandonii and by this time she had been a full-fledged Zelandoni spiritual leader for at least 10 years, I couldn't leave her the innocent that she'd been in the first 5 books. After all, people do mature and I felt I owed it to the character to let her grow up, though I did try to remain faithful to her selfless attitude and honest personality.

Since the setting is sometime between 30,000 to 35,000 years ago, I had no alternative but to allow for a shorter lifespan for both people and animals, therefore Jonayla's mating at the tender age of 17, (or even earlier) would have been a reality of the time. The passing of Ayla's Wolf and Whinney were both issues somewhat distressing to write, but I felt it was necessary.

-O-

Oh, and one last thing. If you enjoyed my novel please take a moment to write a brief review at this address: <https://goo.gl/DFzSDm> - Scroll to the bottom of the page and write your review. This is the only feedback I get and it's much appreciated.

Thank you

AB

-O-

Cast of Characters:

Artibon and his sister Folrian, Tomalar and Bundiman (Young friends of Durcan)
Ayla (Main heroine of the story)
Bagba (Old Clan hunter whose wound was treated by Jonayla)
Brog (Personal name of Mog-ur of The Clan north of the river Neema)
Broud (Ayla's childhood tormentor and eventual leader of her Clan, father of Durc)
Brukeval (Man of mixed essence who hates Flatheads and is the cohort of Madroman)
Bandoman (Hunter from the 3rd Cave, sent to alert the 19th at the Summer Meeting)
Cambarre (Originally from the 2nd Cave (Elder Hearth) who moved to the 9th cave as an apprentice to Jondalar. He is also Jonayla's love interest)
Camma (Strong female leader of all the Chimu in the north)
Cammadon (Camma's deceased father, leader before her)
Chandalar (Chimu hunter who assisted in the first Chimu roundup of young horses)
Dalanar (Jondalar's natural father)
Denanna (Leader of all three caves that make up the 29th Cave)
Doroban (Chimu man, mated to Zolana, guarded the trail leading to First Place)
Dula (Medicine Woman of The Clan north of the river Neema)
Durc (Clan son of Ayla and Broud, hearth brother to Jonayla and Durcan)
Durcan (Nicknamed Durc, Ayla and Jondalar's son, brother to Jonayla)
Eyzinah (Mother to Robinar, a boy who was mauled by a cave lion.)
First Zelandoni of the South (A rival for the position of First Zelandoni who becomes Ayla's friend)
Folara (Jondalar's hearth sister)
Gandora (Acolyte from the 5th Cave)
Groog (Clan hunter sent to warn the Others of retaliation if attacks continue)
Jamicon (Friend to the son of the leader of Old Valley Cave)

Jaradal (Son of Joharran and Proleva)
 Joharran (Leader of the 9th Cave)
 Jonayla (Ayla and Jondalar's daughter, sister to Durcan, love interest of Cambarre)
 Joplaya (Jondalar's hearth sibling and daughter of Dalanar and Jerika)
 Jondalar (Son of Marthona and Dalanar, Ayla's mate and a main character as well as being the father of Jonayla and Durcan)
 Kimadar (Helped pull Groog from storage pit, became an Acolyte to the 19th Cave)
 Kimeran (Leader of Elder Hearth)
 Kemordan (Previous Leader of 5th Cave or Old Valley Holding)
 Lanidar and Lanoga (One armed hunter mated to Lanoga)
 Latinar, Lamiae and Tarmidar (3 youth who helped Ayla and Jondalar with a travois)
 Loral (Younger sister of Lanoga and special friend of Jonayla in her youth)
 Manvelar (Leader of the 3rd Cave)
 Madroman aka Skytalker (An ex-Acolyte, who became the Chimudonii false Shaman)
 Mageb and Durg (The two Clan Men who find Jonayla and Cambarre on the run)
 Mandolar and Dlania (Cambarre's deceased parents)
 Marambar (Master Hunter of legend and once leader of Elder Hearth)
 Marilla (Girl that Cambarre was sharing pleasures with before falling for Jonayla)
 Marona (Bitter ex-girlfriend of Jondalar)
 Marthona (Deceased leader of the Ninth Cave and mother of Jondalar, Thonolan and Folara)
 Matagan (One of Jondalar's apprentices after being mauled by a Woolly Rhino)
 Melodene (Chimu woman who helps the Zelandonii and couples with Willamar)
 Mongar (Leader of The Clan Cave north of the river Neema)
 Monkam (Dead Chimu mate of Melodene)
 Norgreb (Clan Hunter killed by the Shaman's men)
 Proleva (Mated to Joharran, Leader of the 9th Cave)
 Ralev (Son of Tricie and Ranec - storyteller)
 Ranec (Dark skinned man, Ayla's second choice as a mate, lost out to Jondalar)
 Ramacol (Leader of Old Valley and Two Wolf Lodge)
 Robinar (Son of Blandar who was killed by a Cave Lion and his mother is Eyzinah)
 Robonar (Lanzadonii Lead Hunter who visited the Ninth Cave)
 Rubio (Son of the leader of Two Wolf Lodge and leader of sacred cave attendants)
 Rushemar and Solaban (Friends and advisers to Joharran)
 Shura (Mate of Brog who is Mog-ur, with a son Bran and daughter Ulla)
 Shandar (Melodene's father)
 Tormaden (Leader of the 19th Cave)
 Trivodan (Leader of the 1st Southern Cave)
 Willamar (Mate to Jondalar's mother Marthona (deceased) and natural father to Thonolan and Folara, coupled with Melodene, a Chimu woman)