

The Mine

Anita Moran

Fan Fiction for the Auel Board

Chapter 1

She could feel the grim on her face as she wiped away the sweat with her arm as she continued to reach. Just a few more inches and she would have it. Working the past year and removing the various pieces she had uncovered has been good but the last piece had been excellent and she was determined to get to more of that type stone. Wiggling her fingers around the large stone that blocked her way she could feel nothing but air behind it and she knew if she could get into that protective chamber, it was more likely than not that the flint within would be at least equal to that in Dalanar's mine if not better. Using the leg bone of a horse she pressed the sharpened tip into the edge of the stone she could see and began to press with one hand while the hand behind the piece of stone pulled as hard as she could.

There were many who had offered to help, mostly men who thought to control the flint and her in the profession of wanting to protect her and her talent, but Dosalia knew better. There were flint knappers among the Losadunai but none were master flint knappers, none except her. For three years at each summer meeting she had provided tools to carvers, wood workers and hide workers the like they had never seen before. The knives and spear points she made were sought after now that she had to work the entire winter just to have enough blanks so that her own cave had what they needed first before she began on any one at the summer meeting. She rested for a minute and looked around the mine front. She had dug several feet into the side of the mountain from when they had found the mine and against one wall were nodules of flint that she traded to other knappers and though the stone was good it was not the best the mine produced. Those nodules were buried just outside the entrance where she could collect them before leaving for the summer meeting. The wind blew past the mammoth hide covering over the mine opening and with the chill against her heated body just as the stone gave way and she fell forward, striking her head on the edge of the thin hallway she had dug out of the mine.

There was no telling how long she had been unconscious when she opened her eyes for the area was dark but for the slit of light the small lamp she used while she work still illuminating the work area. Rolling on her side and sitting up cautiously she got to her knees and went to where she had removed the stone and into the work area. Taking the small lamp from its hollowed out area Dosalia turned and entered the chamber. The area was large enough to stand and lifted her hand to touch the ceiling of the chamber and twice the height in width and breath. Nodules of flint poked out of the walls in varying shade of chalk covering the stone from dark brown that was nearly black and light tan that was nearly white. There was a vein of red and yellow ochre and other stones she did not recognize.

Near the entrance to the thin hall way she had carved out was the stone she had been working on that had blocked the entrance. The force she had put on it had chipped a large portion of chalk off the cortex and the deep grey of the stone shone through. Most pieces of Flint that large usually had impurities but the small area she looked at now showed no signs. She thought of the mammoth spear points Jondalar and Danug had taught her to make and she was determined that this piece would be perfect.

She had spent four years with the Ninth Cave of the Zelandoni and during that time she had learned so much not only about working with flint from Jondalar and Dalanar but about personal interactions and the Clan from Ayla. She was now quite good with their language and since it was something that pleased Ayla was a bonus but she had seen how that knowledge had helped on their travels to the Zelandoni when Danug used it. Ayla's delivery of a second daughter just before she was to leave pleased all of the Ninth Cave but Dosalia was stunned when Ayla named the baby Flordina after her and Jondalar's sister Folara. She knew by now Ayla would probably be First among those that serve for the First was going to abdicate her position and be strictly an advisor to Ayla.

When the Zelandoni returned to the Ninth Cave there was such a difference in her that everyone had notice. She was no longer as somber as she had been when she left to take care of twenty-first cave which was now in the hands of her acolyte who the First was sure would be accepted as Zelandoni of the Twenty-First at the following Summer Meeting. Her announcement that she would be stepping down as the First among those that serve sent a shock wave through the Zelandonii that lasted to the end of the summer meeting and longer as they returned to the Ninth Cave, but she was adamant wanting to spend the time with the child the Mother had blessed her with so late in her life and with her mate Akmor who had finally gotten her to agree to join with him while they were at the Twenty-First Cave.

Thinking of the Twenty-First made Dosalia think of Trilon and sighed. Each summer had been wonderful as they spent much of their free time together. Their last encounter before she returned to the Losaduni had been wonderful and terrible for she could not return to the Twenty-First cave as he wanted she had to return to her own people who were depending on her. His anger was quick as he left her alone near the Wood River pond where they had spent three glorious days. When she returned to the summer meeting area she was not allowed in the area of the Twenty-First cave and she could tell that Lendera, Trilon's brother was not happy about keeping her out and apologized even as he turned her away. They had not seen each other after that for Keylo and the rest of the Losaduna had arrived and she had left with them.

She knew that the hours she spent working in the mine these past years was more to exhaust herself so that she could sleep while her mind fought to remember every encounter with the leader of the Twenty-First. She was thankful to Ayla for giving her the tea to keep from being blessed for she knew that had she been blessed the Mother would have surely used Trilon's spirit. Only concentration on what she was making kept her thoughts at bay. Those men she had shared pleasures with since her return had left her wanting but she was sure it was her own fault more than theirs since she expected all men to be like Trilon.

Sighing she wrapped the large flint in a hide to carry back to her hearth that Laduni had assigned to her when she had returned and had demonstrated her skills. She had little time to herself after that first summer meeting when others saw her work and the carvers especially inundated her with request for special tools. Smiling at the thoughts of all the special tools she had made for the Zelandoni of White Hallow what was requested of her by those who carved stone, ivory, bone of the Losadunai was not as difficult as they thought it would be but Dosalia never told them that the simple tools they request she had learned in her first year with the Zelandonii. She had been proud but the men who approached her that first year were not interested in her but her

skills with the stone. The second year was much like the first except the knowledge of the flint mine was now common knowledge for neither she nor Laduni had thought the men wanting control of the mine would have tried to go through Dosalia. Thankfully Laduni had made it clear to the other leaders that the mine belonged to their cave and under Dosalia's control. While many were not happy, Dosalia was pleased that he gave her that protection but now the men came to her trying to get her to mate with them not because they cared for her but because they wanted control of the mine. They did not seem to understand that the flint meant nothing without a skilled knapper to work it.

Placing the large stone on the small travois she used to carry her tools and the stone, Dosalia looked one last time in the inner chamber before extinguishing the lamp. Feeling the air coming through the leather that covered the entrance, she knew she would have to make a second hide to block as much wind as possible from entering the chamber and drying the stone.

Chapter 2

Checking to make sure she had everything she needed, she pushed aside the hide door and pulled the travois out into the cold winter day. Squinting from the bright sunlight she knew she would have to move fast in order to return to her home cave before sunset. She wondered if Keylo made it safely to the Lanzadonii for he had decided to take a trade mission over the glacier and had planned to return by the end of winter. She had joined others who braided flax and leather into thick sturdy ropes so that those traveling would be better protected incase a canvass opened while they were on the glacier. She hoped that Jondalar was pleased with the ivory carving of a lioness and lion for it also traveled with a new tool she had been working on that allowed those that carved softer material to have better control. Wanting some affirmation of her direction before allow others to use the tool to test it among her own people.

By the time she reached the main entrance to the Hot Spring Caves she was exhausted and her head still stung where she had hit it. The sun was now completely blocked by thickening clouds and she was pleased she had been able to finish getting into the rear chamber before the storm Losaduna warned of struck. Removing her parka at the entrance she smiled as her mother approached her.

“We have waited until you returned to eat.” Hugging her daughter after she hung up her parka, Solandia, who still was not happy that Laduni had given her daughter a hearth even though she was not mated, always had food for her daughter knowing that her work with the stone always came first. “That is a very big piece of flint.” She noted the large nodule near a pit Dosalia had dug on one side of her chamber.

“I am going to start heating it this evening and when it is ready I am going to work on some mammoth spear heads for the spear throwers and for the spears the others use. Larogi is making me some spears to put them on for the summer meeting.”

“Well come and eat and then you can start your stone on fire. Laduni is talking about going to get more burning stone when the weather breaks in the spring perhaps you might want to go with him since there is usually flint in the area as well.”

Dosalia knew her mother did not understand her need to work flint which required concentration and often done when she was alone and she was not pleased that the attention she got was not from prospective mates but from those wanting her to fashion a tool or for other means, she saw it as her biggest failure by allowing her daughter to be taken to the Zelandonii for training. I will think about it but so far the stone I have gotten from there has been flawed but it cannot hurt to look especially since I always need spear points for the bird spears.” It was another thing that she returned with that made her popular with the hunters is her knowledge of making the spear throwers and all the types of spears that could be used with it. Many had tried to make their own since Jondalar and Ayla’s visit and Danug and Aklmor’s presence brought it to the attention of the hunters of the Losadunai again.

She enjoyed eating with her parents and siblings for as they had gotten older their interests varied so greatly. Larogia loved working with wood of any type and as young as he was his spears were as good if not better than some from men with much greater experience. Neladia having had First Rites thought of nothing except whom she would mate and there were many who sought her out during the summer meeting but none had captured her heart. Micheri had spent many years hating his younger brother Daniua who had been born the year after Dosalia had left and still knew that it took very little to get Micheri to react but Dosalia knew the little boy just wanted attention from his older brother. Their father did nothing to stop Daniua’s actions for Micheri had expressed an interest in becoming One Who Served and he thought that Micheri needed the lessons in patience that his younger brother provided. When she had returned she spent many hours with her younger brothers and still each time she came to her family’s hearth Daniua crawled into her lap and cuddled against her as he did now and she shared her food with him.

“You are going to spoil that child, Dosalia.” Her mother reprimanded her lightly trying to keep the smile from her face.

“I think as an older sister that is my job, Mother. Why don’t you let me take him for the night? I have a few birds I got on the way back and he loves to pull the feathers.”

“And he makes a mess of it, but if you do not mind he can go it will allow Micheri some peaceful time with Losaduna.”

Dosalia listened to her little brother tell of all the things he thought that Micheri had done wrong since he had last seen her and she tried hard not to laugh at his recitation. “Daniua you need to love you brother more and forgive him if he does things you think wrong.”

“Why?”

“One day you will need him and he will not be there because he will think you hate him.”

“I love Micheri, he’s my brother I just don’t like what he does and beside he hates me.”

“I will guarantee you that he does not hate you but you act like you hate him and that has confused him.”

“What’s confused?”

Dosalia sighed, that is when someone thinks you mean something when you really mean something else. You say you love your brother but he does not know it, maybe he is acting like he does because he thinks you hate him just like you think he hates you.”

“So I’m confused too?”

“Yes I think you might be.”

“I’ll be back.” Before Dosalia could stop him Daniua ran from her hearth and she went after him only to find him at her mother’s hearth with his arms wrapped around his brother. “I’m sorry Micheri I don’t hate you, please don’t hate me.”

Micheri was startled when Daniua came into his bedspace and wrapped his arms around him and had almost thrown him away from him when he heard his words and he wrapped his arms around the little boy and held him tightly trying to control the tear that threatened. Dosalia and his mother also looked close to tears and thought his little brother was taking the blame, Micheri knew that he was to blame for how his brother felt. “Oh little brother I do not hate you. When you were first born I thought Mother loved you more than me but by the time I knew that I was acting like a child you already hated me. I think we were both wrong little one but from now on no more, we will talk to each other and spend more time together would you like that?”

Tears streaming down his face the little boy smiled and nodded his head, laughing when his brother ruffled his hair as Losaduna did to the both of them and he knew this was a good thing. Turning to his sister his little face sobered. “Dosalia I am going to stay with Micheri for now is that alright?”

“That is more than alright, but you know you can come to me any time you need to.”

“I know, thank you.” He did not release his brother who had pulled the boy into his lap.

Chapter 3

Dosalia looked at the blanks from the large nodule of flint she had brought from the mine and was stunned. For three days she worked on the nodule removing the blackened chalk and removing blanks, now before her were some of the finest blanks she had seen. All had the sheen and all were close in size and thickness just as the smaller nodules she had worked after Jondalar had fired them. Taking two soft leathers she placed the best of the blanks to work later after she was sure of her techniques rolling them carefully to protect them then placed the rest of the blanks in similar hides to work on as she had time. The smallest of the blanks she took from the center of the nodule she began working on to make new hide scrapers and tips for spears that

could be used for birds and smaller animals. The spear points were the easiest and those she worked on first knowing her brother would want to attach them when he had completed the small spears for the spear thrower he was working on.

She was surprised when she left her hearth to see that the dawn was breaking while she worked and she could not remember taking a break since she started working on the blanks the previous afternoon.

“You did it again didn’t you?”

Dosalia looked around and saw Losaduna looking at her from his bedspace and smiling. “It seems so. It did not seem as if so much time had passed but the large nodule I was working with turned out just as the smaller nodules I have tried and I wanted to make sure I finished getting as many blanks and wrapping them before I stopped. Then I remembered Mother needed a new hide scraper so I made her one then started working on the spear points for Micheri’s spears. I just took a break to see if Mother needed any other tools while I was working.”

“The storm ended last night and was not as bad as I feared it would be, why don’t we take a walk this morning and see if you can clear your mind enough to sleep.”

“I would like that.”

“Neither of you will leave until after you have eaten.” Her Mother’s voice held a hard edge and Dosalia knew that neither she nor Losaduna would be able to leave until she determined it was alright. She smiled at Losaduna and left to get her parka and change into warmer clothes.

“She didn’t sleep again, what are we going to do?”

“Nothing Solandia, she is an adult and all we can do is be here to support her. She had a lot of responsibilities and she is handling them well but I think her world is about to change.”

“You have seen something?”

“Nothing I can share right now and since you have made it clear that I cannot take your daughter on a walk until you feed us perhaps we should rise and dress for the day.”

Solandia rose and dressed quickly, placing water over the fire to heat and putting in the cooking stones to heat up the stew she had made from the leftovers the previous evening and start the grains she had soaked cooking. Losaduna disappeared into his small alcove to meditate before starting the day and when he reappeared he was dressed warmly and looked about as the other children began to rise and get ready. When Dosalia returned she was surprised to see her entire family awake and getting ready for the day.

“I did not mean to wake everyone.”

“We were awake but did not want to leave the warmth of our furs.” Micheri told his sister. “I heard you worked of the points for the spears, I have most of them done and I made some that are thinner and I want to test them before we add any good points to them. The split spears I made I used the one you gave me from Jondalar and I did the same for the smaller spears but I do not know if they will hold together when it is thrown.”

“I have some points I made for my practice spears we can use those for your test and see what changes need to be made.”

Dosalia was a little disappointed when Daniua went to sit next to Micheri while he ate but knew it was best for them both. When Losaduna nodded that he was finished eating, she put on her parka and followed him out into the bright sunlight. It was not often that he was in error as far as the weather was concerned but she was glad he was this time. There was little wind and the snow that fell made the world look bright and beautiful.

They walked in silence for a while and Dosalia knew that she was going toward the mine and was going to turn around but Losaduna stopped her. “I have never been to the mine and I would like to see it if you do not mind.”

“I don’t mind, I am so used to trying to hide where it is I even take a different route each time so that I do not leave a trail.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Laduni thinks it is better that we keep its exact location a secret for now.”

“But it has already been established that it is your mine and under the province of Hot Spring Cave. I will have to talk with Laduni about this for he should not be putting that much pressure on you, which brings us back to you. Your mother and I have noticed that since your return you have not slept well but it seems worse since the summer meeting. Is there anything I can do?”

“I spent some time with a man at the summer meeting that I thought I could be happy with for he understood my need to work the stone. I took Daniua fishing for he so enjoys it and I know you and Mother have so much to do during a summer meeting. I do not think the men saw us when they came to the river but I heard the man I was thinking about joining with telling the others that he would soon have control of the mine and they would all be able to get the stone that I used to make the tools. He never asked me about the mine when we talked so I believed that it was not that important to him. I probably should have stayed hidden but I did not and I stood and faced him.”

“The anger in his face was something I had never seen in him but it was apparent he realized his mistake and that I knew of his plans. After a few days he tried to excuse himself but I knew he spoke the truth to his friends and for the first time I was happy that Laduni took care of trading the stone I take from the mine. I wonder if they all want the mine and no one wants me.”

“You know better than that. I have seen somethings and I know your world is going to change. I do not know if it is for the better or not, just that it will change.”

“Can you be a little more specific?”

“No not really.” Dosalia laughed knowing that this was typical of Losaduna and his predictions for she had heard him more than once tell her mother that people should not know what was to come for it could change their fate.

“Then I will wait for the change to come.”

Chapter 4

Dosalia looked at the large basin she had been working on for the past weeks that would allow her to have a larger fire in the mine entrance and not damage the mine with oils and fats from foods she might cook over it. Finding a second large nodule of flint in the wall separating the entrance from the inner chamber she had hoped it would have been the same quality as the first she took but she was disappointed when she had tried to take off the chalk cortex. The large nodule of flint had split in half with her first struck to reveal that it was badly flawed with chalk veins spreading throughout the center radiating into the flint. She had placed the nodule to the side to dispose of it later of use what she could get from it for other uses until she thought of the hearth and that veins of chalk with in the center had made it easier to chip away the center. It was small enough not to be in the way but large enough to give off plenty of heat and gave her the ability to cook should the need arise.

Since the hearth rock gave so much light she was able to move the smaller lamp to the rear chamber where she examined the walls for natural fissures to start extracting stone for test the quality and perhaps open even more chambers. Small and large cracks were noted and at first she tried to remove extending nodules with her bare hands to retrieve only those that were loose before she took tools to the walls. Before returning to the rear chamber she looked out the front of the mine and saw that she would have to wait to investigate further for the clouds forming to the west looked ominous and she was not willing to bet that Losaduna would be incorrect twice. He still claimed the storm that struck three days after when he said it would strike was the one he was talking about but his smile belied his sincerity.

Taking two small nodules with her for she wanted to make small spear points for the first one she had given to Micheri had proved to be too heavy for his new spears. She had made bone tips for him and they worked well but the spears were not heavy enough to travel as far as Ayla's Bird spears. She thought of the thin spear points Jondalar made and hoped that she could make these smaller points as thin while still maintaining the strength needed to not break on impact. She was still going over the method she wanted to use when the first flakes of snow began to fall and she looked across the river and saw a curtain of snow coming towards her and she hurried toward the cave entrance and safety. Removing her parka after entering, she was surprised to see several people gathered at Losaduna's hearth and knew that it was too early for anyone to be traveling for visiting.

“Here she is.” She smiled at Losaduna’s introduction to her arrive but then she froze as the tall dark hard man turned and it was the sightless eye she saw first then his smile. His face was raw from traveling on the glacier while around his eyes it was pale from the protective covers that he still held in his hands. She recognized the tunic he wore as the one he used when he went hunting which fit his broad shoulders so well. How she had loved that face with its faint scar across his blind eye that only made the blue of his good eye so startling. Feeling the heat in her body start as it did each time she saw him she closed her eyes to stop her body’s traitorous feelings from showing but it was too late for she could feel him approaching her. When she opened her eyes he stood in front of her so tall and though she knew he had been traveling for many weeks he smelled so good. Thoughts of the heated pool jumped into her mind and she tried to push it away but it refused to go.

“Hello Dosalia.” He bent and touched his lips to hers and it took all her will power not to wrap her arms around him and capture the fire she knew was burning in him as hot as it burned in her.

“Hello Trilon. I am surprised to see you joined a trading mission.”

“I was just telling your people that I have given up the leadership of the Twenty-First Cave of the Zelandonii to my younger brother since he has no infirmities.”

Dosalia was stunned for he had always enjoyed being the leader of the Twenty-First since he took over after his mother’s mate died. “That would not have made a difference before or you would have done it sooner.”

“I would suggest we discuss this later when we can be alone.” His smile was devastating and Dosalia could not control the tightening of her stomach muscles as she walked with him into Losaduna’s hearth. Though she listened to the stories as everyone gathered for the evening meal she could not remember what was said except for Trilon’s words as he told of his first travels outside the Zelandonii territory.

“I had never been any where that did not include a summer meeting for the One Who Serve the Mother for the Twenty-First would put himself before his people and though my brother who is younger and mated with children the leadership came to me. The first time I lead a hunt I was over confident and lost the use of my one eye but since I could still do everything expected of a leader it was not an issue except to the previous Zelandoni of the Twenty-First. I would never have chosen to travel during the winter but I was wintering with the Lanzadonii when Keylo and the rest of the Losadunaii arrived. I have heard of the glacier since I was a child and knew that Jondalar and his brother crossed it on their journey and then when he returned with his mate he barely made it across for he started too late in the season. The stories I heard from Dosalia and others that had been to the Losadunai it was a chance I could not pass up since I had already passed the leadership to my brother.”

“It is a good thing you returned when you did Keylo for as fierce as the storm is outside the melting winds will occur soon.”

When the visitors were given bed spaces and the rest of the cave returned to their own hearth, Dosalia left to go to her hearth for she needed to be alone to deal with the fact that Trilon was in her home cave.

Chapter 5

Dosalia placed the leather containing the nodules of flint just inside her hearth and then sat on her bed space and pulled the top fur over her shoulder and leaned back against the wall of the cave. She did not know how she felt for she was angrier at seeing him after he refused to see her when she made the decision to return to the Losadunai and now he come and she burns to be with him. How could he give up the leadership when it had meant so much to him that he could not even think of going with her to her people and then turning on her when she could not stay. Bringing her knees up she pressed her aching head against them and tried to calm her body which clenched to feel him again but she knew that was just her body, did she trust him enough to give into that urge and share her body with him again. Finally she lay down and closed her eyes knowing that she would get little sleep that night.

He watched as she left the hearth that was not only the hearth of the One who Served the Mother but also her mother's hearth so he was confused that she would leave the hearth and have one of her own since he knew women stayed with their mother until they were mated. A wrenching of his stomach nearly made him sick wondering if she had mated in the time they had been separated. When he turned and saw her he was surprised by the quick response of his body to just the sight of her as he watched the various emotions from pain to anger to confusion show on her face and he was just happy there was not apathy, the rest he could work on. He wanted to go to her and talk with her about all that had happened but her attitude and his lack of knowledge of the Losadunai and that he did not know if she was mated or not kept him at the bedspace assigned to him. Being hard and heavy with need of her was something he was used to for each time he relived their times together he was in the same condition. Though he had been angry with her when she would not stay until he could train his brother to take over the leadership of the twenty-first he given the order to keep her out of the camp until he cooled his temper but when he went to the Ninth Cave area two days later he found her gone. Not just gone for a few hours and returning but gone back to her people. He had walked into the plains stunned that she had not even told him good-bye. It was not until he returned to his own cave that he learned that she had come to see him.

He startled awake by the first touch of her fingers on his cheek, and he knew it was her immediately for he could smell her. When he touched her hand she pulled his hand and he got up to follow her not wanting to take the time to even put on his leggings over his lion cloth even though she was wearing a parka. The freezing wind and snow hit his exposed body and brought him up short but when she pulled his hand he continued until she pushed aside a hide covering and pulled him into a supper heated room that brought a tingling pain to his skin but he did not move in the darkened chamber until Dosalia lit a small hearth and then from that lit a lamp which she placed in a recess carved into the rock of the cave. The heat came from a deep pool in the center of the chamber that had what appeared to be stair cut into the rock in a circular pattern

around the pool going deeper and deeper into the water. In the four corners of the cave were piles of soft hides and furs covered the floor.

Hearing her move, Trilon turned to see her removing her parka which was the only clothing she wore. There was no hiding his immediate response to her as he walked to her and pulled her into his arms capturing her lips at the same time. He felt her stiffen then relax against him but all the flame left him when he pulled back and saw the deep sadness in her eyes. “Why Dosalia? Why would you do this if it is not something you wanted?”

She did not answer him as she pulled his head down and captured his lips but he felt the tears and pulled away from her lips and picking her up sat among a pile of furs and held her closely. “Tell me Dosalia.”

“I have a different life now Trilon and I never expected to see you again. I was angry at first but the more I thought about you the worse the need was and I think I just wanted to see if it was the same.”

“Then why are you so sad?”

“Because it is only temporary.”

“Why does it have to be temporary?”

“Because I no longer trust you and when I realized that was how I felt, it was as if you broke my heart all over again.”

Trilon pressed his forehead to the top of her head and knew he should have known that he had taken that one thing from her that was so important to her. “I did not want to see you after the argument because I did not want to say something that I could never take back because I was so angry that you could not put off returning home for just a little while. When I calmed down and went to look for you it was too late because you had already left. I admit that in my anger that you had thrown what we had away so easily kept me from following you right then. Oh Dosalia, I was such a fool. I wanted you next to me every morning I woke and every night while I slept and I have never felt that way before and it frightened me which made my anger even greater. I could not leave for I never trained my brother to take my place because there was no need for I liked being the leader but the power was empty after you left and I no longer wanted the responsibility of it. The new Zelandoni was perfect for the Twenty-First and I went to her often and told her my plans. I do not think I could have convinced my brother that he should be leader without her help.”

“There was never a day Dosalia that I did not think of you, that I did not want to bury myself in you and feel the pleasure I could give to you. There wasn't a night that I did not think of different ways of sharing pleasures with you and how you could give me pleasures.” As he spoke he could not keep his hand still as he captured her breast and teased them to hard peaks. “I do not want it to be temporary Dosalia I came to ask you to be my mate. I want you in my life always. I will earn your trust back I promise.”

“I thought of you as well, but all my dreams came back to this place which is why I brought you here to see if all of it was just my imagination.” She kept her face averted so that he did not know how his hands were affecting her. She had wanted to see if it would be as good as her dreams but now she felt foolish at allowing her body’s needs over rule her mind. Trying to fight her body’s response to his exploring hands and his lips on her shoulder as he moved her hair away from her neck she wanted to stay that way forever. Suddenly she knew it was wrong to come to him this way when she was no longer sure of him for he would have little respect for her and the respect she had for herself would be less. Jumping up and pulling on her parka she could not look at him. “I’m sorry I should not have done this.” She ran from the sacred pool knowing the Mother would not have appreciated her sharing pleasures in such a way.

Chapter 6

Trilon sat on his bed space shivering wrapped in one of the furs that had been available next to the pool. He had been confused at first, knowing he was giving her pleasures, but he remembered the looks that had crossed her features when she had first see him and he knew as much as her body wanted him, her mind would always be in control. He could not face returning right away and decided to use the pool, shocked that it was so much hotter than those north and west of Zelandonii territory but the smell of sulfur was so much less with this pool. Testing it slowly he almost stopped so hot was the water but step by step he slowly entered until he was completely submerged and then remained still until his body accepted the heat. As he relaxed he was not looking forward to going back to the cave through the storm with little to wear but at least he had some furs to use. Seeing a pot of foam he recognized it as some of the cleansing foam the Zelandonii of the Ninth made and offered to all at the summer meetings. Wondering how it would work with hot water instead of cold he got out of the pool not wanting to taint the obvious special pool with whatever the foam was made of. Once foamed, he used a nearby basket and rinsed himself and went back into the pool.

As he relaxed Trilon thought of Dosalia and knew that her responses to him were as sharp as his own toward her but there was something missing now and he could not put a name on it. Granted he was been an idiot but still he had come all this way to be with her including giving up his leadership. He was also worried about her lack of children for surely she had shared pleasures with others at least during ceremonies since her return, still as he thought it he knew it did not matter he would still want her. His brother had given him nothing but grief when he realized that he was planning on visiting the Losadunai, and perhaps that had made him delay coming to Dosalia sooner than he had, finally realizing that she was the one he wanted to wake next to for the rest of his life. Shaking his head he got out of the pool and dried himself quickly then wrapping up in a fur to brave the cold.

Now as he lay in the bedspace of the Losadunai, he truly wondered if perhaps he was too late. No he could not be, no matter what man wanted her he was going to make her his mate, somehow. Seeing the lightening at the entrance he could also hear the wind that continued to roar with the storm and was glad they had arrived when they did and did not have to try and survive this storm in tents.

Losaduni watched the visitor as he returned to his sleeping space and the odor that came with him he knew that he had bathed in the pool. He had seen the daughter of his hearth return and knew that she was upset by this man which he knew was not a bad thing. He did not need his talents to know the trying time she was going through and this man's arrival was not going to make her life any easier. He had heard the same comments she had for the young never thought that the old could hear and understand them. Several times his anger had nearly bested him but he had controlled it enough to leave the area before doing something he would have regretted later. However this visitor may be the inspiration for Kaunai needed to approach Dosalia after watching her from afar for the past years. The next leader of Second Spring cave had always been quiet even as a child, examining things from all angles before committing to them. As hunt leader for Second Spring he knew that many of the hunters from that group were often conflicted but since he had taken over that responsibility they have never returned empty handed according to their Losaduna. Hilmoi had not been the same since his injury during a reindeer hunt but he was too hard headed to see that the son of his hearth would make a better leader.

Kaunai had come to him several times at the last summer meeting but never approached Dosalia, now if he was to have any chance he would do so. The only problems he could see was the flint mine which Laduni mistakenly put Dosalia in charge of. Perhaps one of these men can make her realize that there is more to life than working a mine filled with flint. Her thought of the worry he and Solandia felt that she had not been blessed but dismissed it when he saw her drinking an oddly smelling tea and remembered the conversation he had with Ayla while she was visiting. Smiling at the thought when he changed the ingredients in her tea and he was sure eventually the Mother would determine when it was best to bless Dosalia. He had not interfered until now because he had could not believe that someone could subvert the will of the Mother but when it proved to be effective, he did not want the spirit of the men who wanted Dosalia as a mate thus far to be used for any child that Dosalia might bare. Now however it was a different matter but he still wanted to talk with her to find out exactly what happened between her and Trilon. Looking at the bedspace where Trilon lay he decided that perhaps he would talk to the young man first.

Dosalia paced in her hearth after closing the hide covering that separated it from the central passage so others knew she did not want to be disturb. Most would think she was working with the flint but she knew she should not touch the stone for she would make mistakes as upset as she was. She could not even escape to the mine with the storm still raging outside but that is what was foremost in her mind. She did not want to deal with her feelings right now and without the hard work of working in the mine she knew she would be tempted to once again succumb to her longing to be in Trilon's arms and furs. Seeing the flawed pieces of flint she had wanted to try and get some spear points from at least for practice spear, she laid out her cloth and placed her tools and the pieces of flint that had various veins of the chalky material similar to the cortex she placed in just the right position so that they were easily accessible. There was no pressure for the flint was poor but it would be a difficult task to get a good point but these nodular were different in that the usual chalky cortex on these nodules was hard, not as hard as the flint but perhaps hard enough for at least one use.

She was appalled when she took her striker in her hand and it shook. Her hands had not shaken when she worked flint after the first few months she was with Jondalar. Placing to stone striker

down she closed her eyes and tried to remember all the calming techniques that Ayla tried to teach her and she thought of the blanks rolled in oiled leather waiting for her to make them into special tools and weapons, then of the nodules in front of her that she knew she could get something useful from them. Taking up the stone striker, she rubbed her thumbs across the surface and it felt like an old friend.

Chapter 7

Never having used working the stone as a means to calm herself, Dosalia was surprised that she was able to think clearly about Trilon and their attraction to each other and still keep her mind on what she was trying to accomplish. The first points had turned out well but there was little cortex associated with the blanks and though they were shorter and thicker than what she usually produced she was sure that the tips would be strong enough to use in a hunt at least for birds or small mammals. As she pulled some of the larger blanks to her, several were rejected for they were poor quality and unworkable even for what she was trying to do.

She felt the flush of heat and put down her re-toucher when she thought of her flight from the hot pool. The pull to be with Trilon was strong but she was determined not to make a fool of herself again. Wondering what his plans were she called herself a fool for not finding out why he had joined a trade group and why he had really given up the leadership when she knew it was something he enjoyed. Putting her head in her hands she finally felt the call of her hunger and wondered what the time was. Taking some of the dried meat she kept at her hearth, she started some tea and absently chewing as she waited for the tea to seep. Feeling the touch of cold she looked up to see Losaduna entering with a basket in his hands she knew held food from her mother and she smiled at the man of her hearth.

“Your mother figured you had lost track of time and I asked her to allow me to bring it for you seemed very upset this morning and I thought we should talk.”

“I would like that.”

Losaduna handed her the basket that held a shallow bowl carved from the tip of a mammoth tusk with stew and two of the few remaining apples that the children had collected before the first frost. “I take it that is has something to do with the young man that arrived yesterday?”

“Yes. I knew him while I was staying with Ayla and Jondalar and we spent many days together during the summer meetings.” Taking a bite of the stew, Dosalia closed her eyes and smiled when flavor exploded in her mouth, there was no one who could make stew taste like her mother. Not wanting to dilute the taste of the stew with the apples she quickly finished the stew and saw that Losaduna was patiently waiting for her. “I’m sorry I did not realize I was so hungry.”

“It is nearly midday but it is difficult to tell with the storm still raging. Your mother is sure that this will be the last storm and though she has no training she seems to know weather and I will trust her on this.” Dosalia put the bowl down and sipped her tea then quickly made a cup for Losaduna. This is very good unusual though.”

“It is one of Ayla’s mixtures she like adding sage in with black root and chamomile. It is a stronger tea than others and I really like it in the morning.”

Losaduna continued to sip the tea knowing that there was no longer anything in it that could harm him or the daughter of his hearth. He knew that Dosalia failed to tell him about the widow wort that Ayla used in her mixtures that although seemed to not cause harm to her if she made the tea just a little stronger it could cause breathing problems even though he knew those with healing knowledge used it extensively for those with problems breathing and he has burned it himself for those with thick mucus during spring illnesses. There were other uses but he did not know them but he did know that the other Losaduni used the plant with great caution that it worked to block the Mother’s will had never sat well with him but at least this daughter of his heart would now have a chance at a normal life. “So tell me of Trilon.”

“He is a good man and I watched as he used his power as leader of the twenty-first cave of the Zelandonii to rid himself of one who served the Mother who wanted power more than he wanted what was best for the cave. The First agreed to help him when the majority of the cave did not want to separate from the Zelandonii even though the zelandoni of the twenty-first did. He never raised his voice but he has a temper and I saw it firsthand. When I could not stay with him but had to return here, he shut the twenty-first area off to me so that I could not talk with him. He acted like a child and it was the first time I had ever seen him do something like that. He had a younger brother but he never saw the need to hand over the leadership to him even after the injury that left him blind in one eye. I am not sure I trust why he is here.”

“Netdi’s brother Kaunai has come to me several times wanting to court you but he is shy. I think with a serious rival he may become bolder during the summer meeting and perhaps that is what you will need to see what Trilon’s true intentions are.”

Dosalia thought of the young man that would one day lead Second Spring Cave now that Netdi decided to stay with his mate here at Hot spring Cave. She remembered he was a serious child as he was a serious man who many thought was the best hunter of the Losadunai because of his infinite patience. He was tall though not as tall as Trilon, with dark black hair and deep green eyes that were wholly focused on what ever had his attention but never could Dosalia remember that attention focused on her except when he had approached her to trade for several of her spear points. He was also one of the few Losadunai who worked with the spear thrower until he was as proficient as Jondalar in Dosalia’s opinion. She did not know how she felt about his wanting to court her for she knew he would be the next leader which meant that he had no interest in the mine. Second Spring was also close enough that she would still be able to work the mine and leave the guarding of it to the Hot Spring Cave.

“It is just something to think about if you are interested. I do not want you to feel forced to make any decision that would make you unhappy.”

“Thank you Losaduna, I have always known I could go to you but Trilon’s sudden appearance bothered me more than I wanted to admit to myself and I think I may have made a fool of myself in the process.”

“How do you think you made a fool of yourself?”

“Since I returned, I guess I was not ready to let go of Trilon and my imagination got the better of me, then after seeing him all the dreams I had about us sharing pleasures by the pool got the better of me but when I took him to the pool it was as if we had not been separated, he acted as he had before he forbade me entrance to say goodbye to him and I felt something was wrong but I did not know what it was and essentially ran away thinking the Mother would not want me to share pleasures that way. Now I am not so sure.”

“The Mother wants her children to share her gifts, but you are right, she wants them to share them. It sounded as if you were giving pleasures but not receiving what you were giving. There should never be a question when sharing pleasures and for most men there is never any question for they will for the most part share pleasures with any willing woman. That is why the gift is really for women. If you felt uncomfortable then it was right that you leave that situation, whatever repercussions Trilon felt are his to deal with but from what you tell me I think he knows why you left.”

“I will think on what you said Losaduna and how I feel.”

Losaduna nodded and collected the basket Dosalia had placed the empty items in and left his daughter to decide her actions.

Chapter 8

For the next two days that the storm raged Dosalia did not avoid Trilon but neither did she seek him out and her brother helped greatly by his need to try the points from the flawed flint if nothing else to test the weight with the lighter spears. Keeping Laduni informed everyone was happy to close the heavy hide covering over their hearths so that they could use the main hall for the testing of the smaller spears that everyone hoped could be used to hunt the giant marsh birds that filled the western marshes of the river in the spring. Torches and lamps were placed strategically to give the most light down the hall so that all could see the results of the tests. Having all the children staying at Losaduna's hearth, Netdi made a target that could be hung from the rafters of the furthest hearth that was seldom needed except for extra guests and there was not room at Losaduna's hearth. Many thought the distance was too great for the thin shorter spears that Larogi created for Dosalia's small spear points. Since they were using the flawed spear points they tried each variation of the spears and points without worry of missing and breakage of the points. Since the spears were so small they were easily made so Larogi did not bother to make the two piece spears for these thinking a single piece would be the better choice for birds as the weight of the spear would help keep an animal on the ground.

The first spear proved too heavy as it went through the target which might have allowed a bird to escape though wounded and it would eventually be found. They were both pleased that the spear was able to hold the weight of the flint point but both were eager to try the slightly longer spear with a narrower but longer point. When the point shattered without even making a mark in the target they both decided to put a wider and longer point on the same spear to try it later when the glue made from tallow set. A short squat point was next to be tried and both were pleased that

the spear stayed in the target and though the point did break, Dosalia was sure it was due to the flaws of the point and would not have happened with a point made from unflawed flint. Looking over their choices of those they still wanted to test, Laduni suggested a midsized spear with one of the newer points Dosalia was working with that were just slightly barbed that she thought would be good for fishing.

Although they did not get the giant sturgeon that Jondalar talked about seeing in the Mother River to the southeast, the sturgeon and salmon making it to the upper regions were sought after each spring before the summer meeting. As Dosalia and Larogi checked the spear as they had each tested, Netdi added a sheet of sturgeon skin to the target that had been taken by Madenia to make a protective cover for her infant daughter during the heat of the summer. Now that Lonia was older they no longer used it but it would be good to test the spear with. Dosalia decided to use the shorter spear with the fishing point while Larogi used the one Laduni wanted tested. The thicker point on Larogi's spear was good since it stopped with the point on the opposite side of the target and as he pulled to remove it the barbs were just large enough to hold the spear in. Dosalia's smaller spear just barely made it through the target but they still had to pull the spear out by holding onto the spear point end of the spear.

“Well, Dosalia, Larogi, all we have to do is wait for the weather to turn and we can test them with a live hunt.” While Dosalia was the best with the spear thrower based on her time with Ayla and Jondalar, Laduni knew Larogi was nearly equal to her and others at Hot Spring cave were catching up quickly. There were others in the other camps that were good but few works as hard as those in Hot Spring Cave to perfect the use of the new weapon. If Larogi's new spears and Dosalia's spear points allowed them to hunt the marsh birds and fish then there would be even greater attention for Hot Spring Cave.

Trilon watched as the leader talked with Dosalia and her brother and wished he was closer so that he could hear what was being said. Since the incident at the hot pool he had not been able to get near her to even talk with her. He had learned from the Losaduna that when people had their hearths closed they did not want to be bothered and until this morning, Dosalia's had been closed to him. He ached to get near her and knew they needed to talk but the demands of his body were making it difficult. He watched her face and saw her excitement and he knew he wanted that look for himself but did not know how he could achieve it if he could not get near. As he turned to walk away he saw the Dosalia went into her hearth and did not close the hide covering. Waiting only long enough to allow the others to leave the area, he went and entered her hearth and stood just inside. The only sound he made was when he sucked air into his lungs as he watched as Dosalia pulled her heavier clothing needed in the unheated central hallway were the cold air moved freely.

She was as beautiful as he remembered but as much as he wanted to gather her to him he remain still and watched as she dressed herself in less cumbersome clothing. Her hair shined as she pulled it out of the tunic and it fell to her waist where she quickly gathered it and twisted it and tied it with a leather thong. The light from the single lamp and the glow of her fire gave her skin a rosy glow that his hands itched to touch her. He cleared his throat when he saw her replace her parka knowing she was planning on leaving the shelter of the cave.

Chapter 9

Dosalia spun around at the sound stung by the multiple things she felt at seeing Trilon in her hearth. She had seen him watching the testing of the new spears and had thought he would approach her sooner and she was unsure if she was disappointed or relieved that he kept his distance. Now that he was here and she was confused about how she felt. The thoughts of how they were physically together were almost painful so much so she had to look away from him. She rubbed her chest for it felt as if a stone was sitting on it knowing that she was now uncomfortable in his presence because of her own actions.

She felt his hands on her shoulders and resisted only a moment when he tried to turn her to face him. “Dosalia I never wanted you to feel uncomfortable in my presence. I deserved what you did.”

“It was not retaliation Trilon, it just felt wrong.” Even though her words were soft he heard them and knew now what had been bothering him. He had first thought that it was her way to repay his rejection of her at the Zelandonii summer meeting now hearing her words he knew that if she had been retaliating her face would not have shown the pain that it had when she left.

When he went to her he saw the flash of fear in her eyes and stopped and closed his eyes. “This is my fault Dosalia, me and my temper. I have been spoiled since my birth and always knew I would lead the twenty-first and after I went to a doni-woman I found women were very giving and never had to struggle to keep any woman until you. Even you came to me because of the rumors you heard but after that you came only when it pleased you and did not stay for long in the beginning. I did not understand why you would want to leave when I wanted you near me but I was so fascinated I never thought to be angry until that summer. I could not stand the idea that you might share pleasures with another when you would not stay with me. I have never spent as much time with any woman as I had with you and I believed you should have felt fortunate that I wanted you to stay with me.” He closed the distance between them and gently gathered her to him.

“I knew you had to return to you people, the Zelandoni who is First told me this, but I wanted you to stay with me while I taught my brother all he needed to know. I did not know that you people had arrived for I was more interested in preparing for you traveling with me to my home, not in what mattered to you. When you came and told me that you would be leaving soon I was angry for that was not what I wanted. I was not ready to leave my people. I am so sorry Dosalia for I was uncaring and mean and that was never my intention. It was all I could do to teach my brother what he needed to know to lead the twenty-first. I truly do want you Dosalia for my mate. I am willing to stay with your people and earn back what I so foolishly threw away.” He kissed the top of her head closing his eyes as he did so. Never had he wanted to hurt her, and the years that had passed, she had thought he had rejected her and in a manner that was just what he had done. His lips gently touched her cheek and travel to her lips and he was prepared for her rejection again but her lips relaxed and molded to his, opening slightly so that he could explore the hot cavern of her mouth. His body tightened even further but he knew if he was ever going to convince her of his intentions he had to allow her to make the decision.

Dosalia relaxed against his warm chest, inhaling his scent that she had missed. She could feel his need but she was not ready and she wanted that more than she wanted the moment of release that she knew he would give her. “I had to leave Trilon, I was sent so that there could one day be a master flint knapper, that was why I was sent to Jondalar. Before I left to travel to the Zelandonii I found a flint mine. Only Laduni knew of the mine beside Losaduna. Had anything happened to either the mine could have been lost to the Losadunaii people. While I was gone the mine was never touched for Laduni did not want to take the chance that the good flint it produced would be very limited. I have been very busy since my return and have had little time to myself, but I thought of you often even when I did not want to remember. That you would not talk with me was bad enough but to not allow me to say my good bye to those I came to care for was cruel and I never thought of you in such a way.”

When he tightened his arms around her shoulders she wrapped her arms around his waist and pressed herself against him and closed her eyes feeling safe for the moment but there was no telling when he would change. “My people need me Trilon, as much as the Twenty-First needed you, but for me there is no one to teach right now. Most know how to make spear points and every day tools, but not spear points that can be used again and again without breaking, and axes that sharpen themselves as they are used, or carving tools, and the fine drills to drill holes in bone and beads and the even smaller ones to make thread pullers. There is so much that Jondalar and Dalanar taught me that I want to give to my people. There are many flint workers of the Zelandonii, and Jondalar is not the only master, though he is the best, here there is only me. I could not wait until you trained your brother.” She suddenly felt exhausted and her mind could no longer hold the anger she had felt earlier. All she wanted was to remain in his arms without thinking that she was lowering her worth.

Trilon feeling her exhaustion picked her up and placed her on her bedspace placing the soft furs in the corner over her. “Sleep Dosalia and I will come back later.”

“Please stay with me.”

Trilon knew if he stayed then he might be unable to share pleasures with her and he was not sure that was what she wanted so he lay beside her but on top of the furs allowing her to put her arms around him and lay her head on his shoulder.

Chapter 10

She woke to the feel of being warm and protected which she had not felt for a very long time and she did not want to open her eyes in case she was dreaming once again. The smell of meat roasting filled her senses which was unusual for she seldom cooked in her hearth eating instead at her mother’s hearth so that Solandia would not feel left out of her oldest daughter’s life. Since she was not mated Solandia was not yet ready to give up her hold and Dosalia needed that still. Keeping her eyes closed she could hear the movement along the hall was muted but the sounds made were those of people getting ready to leave the cave which meant that the storm must be over.

He felt her waken and though he had risen earlier to get something to cook for her when she woke, he did not want to release her just yet. She never moved from his arms the entire night and when he rose to release his water and get the meat for their first meal, her soft groan had pulled at him. When he had returned to her bedspace after starting a fire in her hearth and closing the opening to keep the fire low, he had returned to the bed and she had resumed her place. He could not remember a time when he had spent a night with a woman and had not shared pleasures, even with Dosalia. Though they had talked for long hours it usually occurred between their bouts of passion. This night after she had fallen asleep he could not believe how contented he was in just holding her close to him. "It is time to wake up Dosalia. They are preparing a hunt and want to use the larger spear points with the smaller spears. I told them that you needed just a little more time. There is hot tea and fresh meat and some roasted vegetables."

Dosalia opened her eyes and looked up at him and at the spur of the moment pulled his head forward and captured his lips. "Thank you. I think that is the best sleep I have had in a very long time." She kissed him again then crawled over him having to use the night basket quickly before she even thought of food or tea. He smiled to himself that she still felt confident enough to seek such a mundane need in front of him when many women would leave the area first. Standing he went to the hearth and cut some of the meat from the roast and pushed some of the roasted wild carrots, pepper, and onions onto a scapula plate and then filled what he assumed was her horn cup with fragrant tea that Losaduna had given him for her, then made a plate for himself. They ate in silence each watching the other and Triolin had to hide the smile at the appearance of a red flush moving onto Dosalia's face.

The both heard the scratch on the leather covering the entrance and Dosalia was relieved to have something to distract her and gave permission to enter but was not prepared to see Losaduna entering and closing the hide behind him. Smiling at both the young people he knew that whatever had happened in the night they had not shared pleasures for Dosalia was still dressed in the same indoor clothing she had been in the evening before but at least she had not sent the Zelandonii back to his hearth. "Laduni is getting anxious to leave and I thought you might want to join them. I believe he also wanted to talk with you about the mine."

Dosalia knew what he wanted to talk about but right now she just wanted to relax for a short while, the long sleep she had made her realize just how exhausted she truly was. "I will be out shortly." There was nothing else to do. She had been instrumental in developing the spears and she wanted to see them work but knew even if they found anything it would have to be a very small animal. Not even thinking of Trilon, Dosalia quickly removed her clothes and placed them where she had others that needed cleaning and put on her reindeer tunic and leggings and grabbed her parka. When she turned to leave, Triolin stood staring at her and then pulled her into his arms.

"That was not nice. I want nothing more than to take those clothes back off of you and spend the day in the furs." He kissed her hard and as she responded he softened his attack on her lips before he released her. His eyes bored into hers and she knew she had been thoughtless.

"Come with us." Her voice was soft and he relaxed knowing suddenly that she had not meant to tease him but had felt relaxed in his presence enough to do what needed to be done. He nodded

and followed her out of the area and grabbed his own parka when they passed through Losaduna's hearth.

The sunshine streaming through the front entrance was nearly blinding as several men and a few women dressed in their winter gear prepared to leave the relative safety of the cave. Dosalia saw her brother's sigh of relief when she appeared and hid the smile that threatened by looking at her spear thrower as if it was something new in her hand. Laduni led the group out and Dosalia and Larogi took the point each with several of the smaller spears as well as longer spears just in case. Walking toward the broad grassland north of the cave they had not gone far when several partridge flew into the air. Both siblings were quick with their response and several of the birds fell and were quickly retrieved. Larogi was very pleased that one of his spears had two birds attached in order to keep the bird from being destroyed he had to break the spear to remove them and began to think of how to use the two part spear he was also carrying.

"I think for birds we definitely need a two part spear or points that have no flare so the birds can be removed easier and the spear does not have to be destroyed."

"Let's try them and see what happens. The ones Ayla uses are heavier than the ones you made so they stay together well"

It took a little longer but when Dosalia stopped so did the rest of those hunting with them watching as she slowing raised her arm to a bush. Seeing her brother nod that he saw the small group of birds huddling under the bush they each prepared a spear and walked toward the bird until the birds took flight. Although they did not get as many birds, the spear did their job and with a quick twist, Larogi was able to remove the point end of the spear and remove the birds.

Trilon touched Laduni's shoulder and pointed to a small treed depression and the small group of Dik deer hiding from the continued winds. Smiling at Laduni's nod he watched at the rest of the hunters were told and they knelt to set a plan of attack.

Chapter 11

Laduni knew that Losaduna would be happy that the hunters returned not only with fresh meat which they all desired but one of the females had a near term fetus that would do well for the Spring Festival. He was not happy that the visitor Trilon was accompanying them to the mine but since Dosalia invited him there was little he could say. Though most knew the area of the mine, the exact location of the mine was not generally known and most of the people in the Hot Springs Cave did not care to know it where about of the mine since Dosalia made her points and tools readily available and she had a supply of Flint near the cave entrance should there be a need or if someone wanted to make their own tool or points. Other members of the Losadunaii were not so lackadaisical and tried repeatedly to find the cave and now that they were hosting the summer meeting many he knew were going to try and get the Losaduni to claim the mine a general asset. The mine was just far enough away from the cave entrance that Laduni worried that they might very well make that decision. I would be in their best interest to make sure no one found the mine.

Trilon saw that there was an obvious path that they followed since the wind had blown most of the snow against the foot hills and across the river, and though it looked as if several other paths joined and separated from it there was one path that was used more than others. "Wait." Seeing the shocked looks on their faces, Trilon smiled as he stepped in front of Dosalia who was leading them. "Let me go ahead I want to see something, but give me a few minutes before you follow."

Dosalia looked at him strangely wondering what he was up to but she nodded and saw out the corner of her eye that Laduni had done the same. They watched him walk away and turned to each other. "What do you think he is looking for?" Laduni asked curious about what this man was thinking exploring an area he had no knowledge of.

"He used to be a hunt leader of his cave and then the leader when his mother's mate died. Even though he is missing an eye he is still a very good tracker. If he saw something we have missed then I am sure we will be glad to know what he has seen." They started to follow Trilon and both were surprised when a short time later they saw him leaning against the entrance to the mine. "How did you find this?" Dosalia was shocked for she had used so many different paths so that none lead directly to the mine.

Trilon saw her shock and knew the other paths were her way of trying to hind the path to the mine but she always came back to the same path eventually. "Anyone can find it, but..." he held his hand up to stop her argument. "But I can help you hide the paths."

"How?"

"There are piles of flint and chalk pieces in the mine but most of what you consider waste is in the main path where I assume you put it to dispose of it. That is what I followed. You may travel to the mine a different path but you return to you cave the same path more often than not especially when you are disposing of waste."

Dosalia looked at what Trilon was talking about and followed the path back toward the cave and though there were flint chips on the other paths the majority of the chips was on the most direct path from the cave to the mine. Returning to the mine she looked at Laduni ashamed that she had not been as careful as she should have been. "I do not know how I could have been so careless Laduni."

Laduni knew that if anyone was careful it was Dosalia about her mine and turned to Trilon. "You said you can help."

"It will take a lot of work but it can be done. We need to gather stones and put them on the paths as if you are trying to make moving around your cave easier for those visiting. Place none within three times my height near the mine, and take all the waste from the mine and take it up stream to one location and dump it in. That way it will be obvious and people will look in that area and leave this area alone. When the new growth begins on these bushes and briers, allow them to grow and do not cut them back and they will help hide the mine entrance and you can always add large rocks to the area from above and make it look like a small landslide occurred here."

“Madenia has been working on transplanting plants closer to the cave like the Urngauls do and has had some success, maybe she can plant more around the entrance to cover it even more.” Dosalia added seeing where Trilon was going.

“That would be a lot of work but if everyone in the cave helps we can get it done pretty quickly. Dosalia, you and Trilon and I will work in this area until the mine is hidden adequately then the others can work to finish here.”

Chapter 12

Losaduna had no problem with delaying any plans he had for a Spring Festival for he felt the time was not yet right for such a celebration. Laduni called a gathering only after seeing the rest of the trade group on their way the day after the storm stopped. All were eager to tell their caves about the advances that Larogi and Dosalia made to the spears for the spear thrower which many of the Losadunai still had not embraced. Keylo was sure those of North Cave would be very interested since much of their meat came from water birds and bird of the plains along with what they happened on during their hunts on the steppes. Laduni was not as opposed to the presence of Trilon now that he saw that the man did care for Dosalia and was willing to keep the location of the mine secret.

“The Hot Springs Cave of the Losadunaii need to protect its flint mine until the Losaduni announces that it belongs to this cave. Until that time any can come and take from the mine and possibly damage it enough to make it unusable. This is my failing for not assuring that the Losaduni knew of the mine and who found it but I thought that is would not be required until Dosalia returned to us. Dosalia has placed many pieces of flint in the ground outside of the entrance to the cave and those wanting flint from the mine will be given these pieces. Dosalia also has better pieces that she wants to bring up but they will only go to those she deems has sufficient skin to use them. I know the wind and cold makes it uncomfortable to work but we need to start now to collect River stones and cover all the paths around the Hot Springs Caves especially those leading to the River. Dosalia, her sibilings and Trilon and myself will work around the mine but I want it to look like we did this to make sure all who come to Hot Springs Cave will not be lost. If there is someplace that you think visitors should visit and there is not an obvious path then you should make a path to there as well.”

“We really should put stone around the front of the cave since it gets so muddy in the spring and during summer storms.” Solandia mentions.

“We should make a path to the waterfall canyon so people can go there if they wished it is very beautiful in the late spring and summer.” Madenia’s suggestion was agreed on by many and the others started to make their own suggestions.

“Those are all good suggestions and I will put Netdi in charge. Make sure the areas that will be used often are completed first by then we will be done with the cave and can help with the other sights.”

Netdi was surprised that Laduni would put him in charge of such an important task but the happiness on Madenia's face at the announcement made him worry that he might fail in the task. Since he mated with Madenia he had not taken charge of any of the work groups for he felt he gave up that right when he left his home cave to live at Hot Spring cave knowing that Flinon will more than likely follow his father as leader of the Hot Spring Cave and it was assumed that he would return to Hot Spring Cave before the summer meeting. There was Grenoli Laduni's second in command and good friend since they were children and other men in the cave that had more experience than he.

Dosalia went to Netdi and sat next to him seeing that he was startled by Laduni's request. The others need to hunt and collect for the winter before the people arrive for the summer meeting and they are going to have to travel to do it. You have the training to be a leader Netdi and this is a good task that we have faith that you can do."

"It is just I had not thought to be any type of leader in the Hot Springs Cave since I gave up my position to follow the man of my hearth. Madenia feels more comfortable here and I want nothing to distress her especially now that she is blessed." Netdi got a chagrined look on his face immediately for Madenia had not wanted it known until she announced it at the spring festival and Dosalia saw it immediately.

"I won't tell anyone but taking charge of this task can only raise you status." She knew that he lost a lot of status by giving up the leadership of Second Spring Cave but he had three other siblings that could take his place and Madenia was more important to him and for those in the Hot Spring Cave that raised their opinion of him greatly. "Laduni does not think it will take long to stone the paths around the mine but I will need Madenia or rather the plants she can spare but we will not be able to place them until the ground thaws."

"She piled snow over them this morning so that the wind does not burn them she said but if cold burns the plants I would think the snow would do the same."

"So would I. Well, I just wanted to say I am glad that Laduni chose you." She kissed his cheek and started toward her hearth.

Trilon watched Dosalia kiss Netdi and was shocked by the sudden urge to pull her away from the man he knew she thought of like a brother. The immediate anger in him made him turn away and walk from the cave shocked by the anger that would not leave him and as much as he wanted to go to Dosalia he knew now was not the time or he would say or do something that would increase the fear and displeasure she already felt towards him. As he paced he could not recall any time in his life he had acted as he had with Dosalia and the feeling was very uncomfortable. He knew he loved Dosalia but why would he react in such a way especially among strangers? If she chose another during a Mother Festival he could not see it as a problem then why would he react that way now?

"Because, you are not sure of her feeling towards you."

Trilon jumped at the sound of Losaduna's voice behind him and saw that the man was following him. "What do you mean?" He almost groaned at the sound of his question for he knew better than to ask such a thing of one who served the Mother for that would give them an opening to speak in such riddles that no one would know what the answer meant.

Losaduna nearly laughed at the young man's expression and turned until he could control himself before facing him once again. He had seen the flash of anger and then the remorse on Trilon's face before he left the cave and followed him and watched as he argued with himself. "You are not sure of her feelings because you are not sure of your own. Do you plan to stay with the Losadunai or are you planning to return to the Zelandonii?"

"I... I don't know. I had not made any plan past seeing her again. It was all I thought about since she left during the summer meeting, but I had responsibilities I had to see to or I would have followed her then."

"I think you might want to think of how you feel and what you want before you do something you might regret." He stared into Trilon's eyes then turned as returned to the cave.

Chapter 13

Trilon felt the power of the man when he looked at him and he felt a sick feeling that he never wanted to disappoint him if he could help it but was relieved when he turned away and Trilon felt once again himself. The questions however filled his mind. What did he mean that he wasn't sure of his feeling for Dosalia? He had traveled all this way to see her didn't he? But why had he come? Was it just because she left him without a word or did he truly care for her. Her image appeared in his mind and immediately he felt the need to be with her but more than that he did not want to see that cautious look on her face anymore. As he watched the retreating back of the holy man he thought of Dosalia and how she had first come to him out of curiosity. He had taken an interest in her because of her association with the powerful of the Ninth Cave and had been surprised when she had approached him during a Mother's Ceremony after the first matrimonial. He had shared pleasures with many women since his Doni woman trained him and he was often sought during the summer meeting to initiate girls into womanhood and like every other Zelandonii man it was a task he took seriously. But that summer it had been particularly difficult for the girl had been fed fear by her mother who had mated poorly to a man who took his own pleasure and often liked pain with his pleasure. Yet the girl's mother had stayed and Trilon thought that the woman probably enjoyed the pain, but the actions of the parents had left invisible scars on the child and she was so fearful, Trilon was not sure he would be able to overcome them. He had used all his experience and knowledge to stimulate the child yet though he left her open he was not sure he had given her pleasure and it had left a sour feeling in him that the new woman might never know pleasure because of him.

The matrimonial following the Rites of First Pleasure was something he wished he could have avoided but two women from his cave were mating and both couple would be moving into the Twenty-First. He had felt her eyes on him even as she listened whatever the Zelandoni of the Ninth was saying to her but his own misery took her from his mind. He was walking back to his camp when she approached him quietly and wrapped her arms around his neck and sweetly

kissed him. It had been like a breath of fresh air to him and his body had responded immediately. He had never been with a woman who was as inventive and willing to try anything as Dosalia and they had spent the three days after the matrimonial together with him leaving to retrieve them food and water as needed. When she had left he had not expected to spend the rest of the next two days in constant pain with thoughts of their time together playing in his mind until finally he went to the Ninth Cave area to find her only to find her at the flint knapping area. He had watched her work for a long time and could see that as young as she was she was very skilled, so much so that Jondalar had only given her pointers of how she might improve just a little more. The knife she was working on was placed in a handle Trilon recognized as the master carver Grentle's work of the Nineteenth Cave and wondered what she had traded for to get it. Seeing that she would be a while and knowing that artisans hated being interrupted he had returned to his own area.

Trilon pulled the knife from his side sheath and looked at it. She had brought it to him two days later when she had arrived in the evening to see him again. He had not even given her time to greet him as he pulled her into his arms then into his tent and was for the first time grateful that the leader of the Twenty-First kept a solitary tent during the summer meeting. It had been so that there could be private meetings but Trilon enjoyed using it for his own needs and if a private meeting was needed he often went to the other leader's camp. They had shared pleasures for hours when she rose and brought the knife to him. It had been a priceless gift leaving him speechless. That had been the best summer meeting of his life and the summer meeting she had left had been the worse.

He had always thought he would eventually have a mate but who that was had not made a difference. He wanted children of his hearth for he loved children but the woman who bore them did not matter to him as long as his life was peaceful. Since the day she left he had not found any peace within himself and the need to go to the Losaduna was strong. Now that he was here he found that Dosalia was more wary of him when he had expected her to be overjoyed with his arrival. He had thought of everything he wanted to do to her body and everything he wanted her to do to his had kept him painful for most of the trip here and it had only gotten worse the closer he came. He continued pacing as his mind rolled over the questions over and over.

The darkening skies forced Trilon back into the cave but he did not feel like being with anyone and returned to his bed space to continue to think. Women were supposed to feel affection for him not the other way around. He loved to share pleasures with women but he had never to go deeper until Dosalia who was so open and she brought him into her world. By the time they parted he knew everything about the members of her cave and seeing them now he knew she held nothing back from the way they acted to their skills, but as usual he had shared very little of himself with her, or thought he had share little. He looked down the central passage and saw that Dosalia's leather covering to her hearth was closed and he felt as if she had rejected him but he was not sure if that had been her intention or not. He found himself wanting suddenly to let her know everything there was about him and his feeling and yes he wanted her but he was unsure if he loved her for he did not know what that meant.

As the cave settled the second question rolled in his mind. He was Zelandonii but could he give that up to stay with Dosalia? There was no pull to return for he knew he left his cave in very

capable hands with his brother and the new zelandoni that the First assigned to the Twenty –First Cave. Though she was an excellent healer she was also a good negotiator and her advice was often sound. If there were any problems his brother could always go to her for advice. He liked those of the Hot Springs Cave and he was sure that he would be comfortable living with them for a short time but he did not know if he wanted to stay with them permanently, but could he honestly ask Dosalia to leave her people once again when they sent to become what she was developing into a master flint knapper. Could he ask her to leave her people and the mine she had discovered to people whose talents were so much less than hers? More, could he ask her to give up her people once again to travel with him back to the Twenty-First where he was no longer the leader?

Chapter 14

Dosalia returned to her hearth and cleared the flint chips and dust from where she worked and put them in a basket to take outside the next day. She checked the furs on her bedspace and made herself some tea knowing that Trilon probably would not come until after most had retired for the night. The feeling of his holding her through the night sent warmth through her for she knew he was a very sensual man who reveled in sharing pleasures with women. As she looked around her area she rose again and began to arrange the bowls, plates, weapons and other items around her hearth to make it look more feminine. Looking down at her stained tunic she wished she had thought to go to the pool for hot water was much better to bath in than the cool water in the back chamber.

Making up her mind she gathered a clean tunic top and left the hearth closing the leather cover to keep what little heat that came off the small fire within. The narrow passage at the rear of the cave turned inward away from the rest of the living area. The ponds were a mixture of melting ice from the glacier on top of the mountains and some of the heated water from the open pools just south of the entrance to Hot Springs Cave. Although the sulfur smell was greater than in the special pool that was mostly used by Losaduna these pools were not as clear or as hot. Stripping her stained clothing Dosalia entered the first pond which was the warmest and soaked for a few minutes before rising and exiting the pool to wash and then rise then she decided to wash her hair as well. With all the work that needed to be done it would be a while before she would be able to clean it again.

When she was finished rinsing herself she entered the pool again and allowed her muscle to relax. Allowing her mind to wonder back to when she was with the Zelandonii she remembered the friends she had made that first summer meeting with the Zelandonii, most had been among the girls that shared First Rites, but all were now experienced and eager to delve deeper into what they had learned. Too many times she heard the girls compare the men they had been with and those they wanted to share pleasures with and all wanted to share pleasures with Trilon, the leader of the Twenty- First cave. “I heard that he will pleasure a woman so slowly that it takes all night and the women who have shared pleasures with him sleep for all of the next day.” Gruneia’s words came back to her and she had to smile. Although Trilon had taken his time to make sure she received pleasure, he was tireless seldom disengaging unless either one of them needed something. She felt her body clench at the thought of how he had used her body those three days. She had gone to him when her friends had dared her to approach him. As she neared

him she saw that he seemed upset as though something terrible had happened. She could not remember a reason but she walked to him and kissed him as though she wanted him to know he was not alone. It was a shock to feel her immediate reaction to this man especially when he pulled her into his arms and took control of the kiss. Feeling him pick her up and carry her away from the area, she had panicked for just a moment then relaxed and put her arms around his neck. He stopped suddenly and placed her against a tree and pressed his forehead to hers and panting his lips reached for hers again. "I do not know if I can make it to my tent as much as I want to for you deserve only the softest of furs to rest on." He kissed her once again and then picked her up and carried her to his tent. She never noticed any people they may have passed only his lips on hers.

His hands were everywhere as he removed her clothing and she removed his wanting to feel him against her. Although the air was chilled and the interior dark, they did not need either heat or light especially when he lifted her and she wrapped her legs around his narrow waist and felt his manhood at her entrance. She groaned with pleasure as he slowly entered her and leaned her back so that he could capture her nipple at the same time drawing on it as he pressed into her. The deeper he pressed into her the more she wanted as she relaxed and settled over him feeling him seated deep. She felt him move then as he walked across the tent and felt the thick pile of furs at her back rubbing against her heated skin. "Now I can take my time." And he had. She did not know a body could be twisted in so many directions, not the sharing pleasures could include so much laughter. After three days she was exhausted and so was she but she knew from others that he seldom kept women with him so long and though she knew that she had come to care for him, she did not want to push him away by being clinging.

Smiling to herself, Dosalia got out of the water and dried herself then putting on a light weight tunic she made with Ayla's help knowing she wanted to recapture that again. The love she felt for him had not eased during their separation, but she was only unsure of why he would come to the Losadunai.

When she got back to her hearth she was surprised that Trilon was not present. She was sure he understood that she wanted him to return. Putting her bathing articles away she looked down toward her mother's hearth but could not see into the bedspace that Trilon had been assigned to. Wondering if he needed an overt invitation, Dosalia smiled and began walking toward the hearth.

Even with the fire banked low, Dosalia could see well enough to see Trilon sitting on his furs staring at the fire as if he saw nothing else. The lines of his forehead were deep and she knew he was contemplating something serious and wondered if he was regretting coming. Knowing she had not been pleasant to him at times she knew she did not want him to leave the Losadunai until they were both sure what their future held. As she had the first time she had approached him she went to him and lightly kissed his lips.

Chapter 15

He had not seen her approach but at the first touch of her lips he gathered her to him and held her tightly savoring the taste of her lips and the smell of her body. The feel of her wet hair when he

grabbed a handful to turn her so that he could seal their lips more tightly together, he knew she had bathed for him and wished he had done the same but the need to possess her burned within him and made him painful. He remembered that first time and his lips became gentle as he picked her up and started toward her hearth. He did not want to regret to filter into her mind wanting her to experience only pleasure and need. When he entered her hearth, he pulled the tunic from her pleased to see it was the only thing she wore. The years apart had only made her more beautiful with her softly rounded hips and generous breast that would someday feed a child.

The heat of his look pleased her as she stepped to him and began pulling his clothes from him. She was surprised to see that in their time apart, Trilon, whose body was always strong looking, now showed the muscle well defined without the covering of fat that most people had with the availability of food and with little work required. She knew that although he was an active man, most of his time was spent meeting with people or pleasuring women and as leader his hunt leader took the more roll that would have added more activity to his life. Now the sculptured look to his body made her step forward as she traced each muscle of his chest and abdomen. To feel the clinching of his muscles as her hands moved over his warm skin made her feel the moisture build within her.

Trilon allowed her to stroke his skin knowing it was something she needed, to feel in control this time but soon he knew he would lose control but for now he enjoyed the sensations she created gasping as she captured his erection, softly plying her fingers over the heated skin. When she knelt before him he knew he would never be able to control himself if he did not stop her but when her hot mouth closed over him he was lost to do anything other than try to remain standing.

Using her tongue and teeth, Dosalia teased and suckled him knowing it was the one thing that took away his control. Her hands grazed along his muscular legs feeling the muscle tremors as she worked to bring him to a fever pitch feeling his small thrusts of his hips trying to press more into her. Grasping his sack she gently played with the two harder nodules hidden within and was rewarded by a hard thrust of his hips. Not wanting his release yet, she pulled back to lick the entire length of him paying particular attention to beneath the now dull ruby head as he jerked with each touch. She did not fight him when he reached down and jerked her up capturing her lips and backing her until her legs hit the edge of the bedspace and he gently laid her down only to follow her and impale her with his shaft.

He rested his forehead on chest above her breast trying to get some control back even as his body made small short thrust. When she tightened her muscles around him he pressed himself as deeply as he could go continuing the short thrust he was not able to control. When she lifted her legs and wrapped them around him, he slipped just that much deeper and he was lost as he began to slam into her again and again trying to go deeper still even as his body pressed tightly against hers, he wanted more. Lifting himself he captured her nipple and sucked strongly in the same rhythm as his body invaded hers and felt her clench even tighter around him. He heard her mewling cried as he moved to the other breast and pull it into his mouth at the same time captured her nipple between his teeth and nipped slightly before pulling more of her into his mouth.

Each surge he made filled her channel to the bursting point as she pressed against him for more, needed more of him, pressing herself against him with each thrust he made. When he took her breast into his hot mouth she thought she would lose herself as she tightened her muscles around him feeling every inch of him moving within her then all thought was gone. Only need filled her as she held onto him tightly as her body tightened and convulsed with its release and she thought she heard his roar just before she felt him fill her with his essence. There was not stopping her body's contractions as she continued to milk him until both were exhausted by their efforts.

He rose his body and pressed into her again as he captured her lips. Needed more from her, he still remained hard and deep within her body as it continued to contract around him as he began to move again. How he had missed her, her body, her giving nature that when she gave herself she gave everything she was, holding nothing back for herself. His lips were once again gentle as were his hands as one capture her breast even as he bent his head to the hard nipple begging for attention. He felt her movements begin again as she brought her hands up to fill them with his hair as he pulled her against her breast wanting more so he suckled harder, lengthening his strokes feeling their combined moisture as he filled her again and again. There were no other thoughts than giving her pleasure as he raised her legs with his arms and filled her again and again until he felt her release and he could let go of his own control and follow her.

Dosalia opened her eyes realizing that Trilon was still within her even though they lay on their side in spoon fashion and were covered with furs. She had not felt this wonderful for a very long time and wanted to enjoy it as one of his hands covered a breast but was still. Smiling she pressed back against him and felt his hand clench on her breast as he came awake kissing the back of her neck as he moved closer to her. "You are insatiable woman, how you can make me want you again and again." He kissed her back as he kneaded her breast and moved within her and Dosalia could not help but press back against him. She could not stop the squeak when he lifted her legs over his hip and pressed into her, turning him over so that he could explore her body as he lazily pumped into her. As much as she tried she could not stop the explosion the rocked her body and still he continued. She tightened her muscles and held him tight until he lost all control and she felt his release just as she once again felt the sudden release of pleasure.

"I am not going to be able to work this morning." She panted as she felt him finally slip from her body.

"We still have a few more hours to sleep." He murmured as he took possession of her nipple once again.

Chapter 16

Dosalia threw the basket of flint debris on the ice covering the river and watched as it slowly melted into the white covering. It was the last from the mine and she looked up the river and saw that some of the chips were now completely taken up by the ice. When the melt occurred, which would be soon, then only some of the heaviest pieces would make it to the floor of the river the rest would be spread by the spring floods. She watched as Trilon and Laduni carried baskets of stones collected from the edges of the river as were others. Netdi decided that if all stones were taken from the river then no one could tell the difference in the paths. When she

arrived back at the mine entrance she saw that Trilon poured the last of the stone in the path in front of the mine and spread them but could not see Laduni though the basket he had been using was there.

Hearing the fall of pebbles Dosalia looked up to see Laduni on top of the cliff above the mine with a thick sharpened stick. Seeing her look up Trilon looked as well and then grabbed Dosalia and pulled her away as Laduni began moving one of several large rocks they decided to push over the cliff. Taking a similar stick Trilon watched as the first bolder came close to the edge and as if in slow motion it roll off falling to land directly in front of the mine entrance leave just enough room to enter. Trilon inspected the placement but left it where it fell. The second bolder fell a few feet away and using the stick he had, Trilon moved it so that it was forward of the other stone so that someone would have to weave to get between them. The two men continued until various stones were push from above to block the way to the mine at first glance but there was a path that led to the opening.

Dosalia walked back and forth in front of the mine and finally making her way around the stones, she entered the mine, removing the hide covering that blocked the elements from entering the mine. She had seen it move both times she approached from the west and knew that it had to take on the appearance of the surrounding rock. Once outside she scratched the hillside in various places catching whatever fell onto the hide and headed back to the Hot Springs Cave. The two men looking at each other followed her not knowing what she planned. They watched as she spread the dirt she collected and spread it out then taking the hide she covered the dirt. “We need everyone to walk on the hide for the next days so that the dirt permeates the leather. Both men smiled finally realizing what she was doing and began to walk around on the hide. Several children seeing them thought they were playing a game and joined them stomping on the hide. Laughing some of the older children joined then several of the women. Shaking her head Dosalia thought that it would not take long for the hide to be ready to remount in the mean time she went to her hearth and got a fur that she pieced together when she was younger as she learned to sew from scraps the other women did not want. It was old and much of the hair was missing but it would do to keep the mine closed to the elements for a while.

When she left the cave she saw that the children along with several adults decided to used the leather to take a break from their activities and eat. When she was handed a plate of food by her mother she decided to join them realizing she had not eaten since early morning that day. As she sat she looked around and saw that most of the paths were covered either with stones of the river while near and around the cave front flat stones and sand covered the beginnings of each of the paths. She wondered how they had completed so much in the short few days they had been working on the project. “Mother, how much more do they still have to do?”

Solandia looked at her daughter and smiled. “It is finished. They put the last of the rocks down this morning. Laduni, Netdi and Trilon are walking the paths now to make sure that they all meet and give access to the river. It is a good thing since Losaduna thinks a storm will come within the next day or two.”

“Then I had better get this mounted.” Dosalia finished the small portion and headed back to the mine. Putting up the temporary fur that she had drug along a new trail she was pleased to see

that a lot of dirt and debris stuck to the remaining fur. Since the fur was long enough she placed several stones on the bottom of the fur that lay on the ground to try and keep it in place. Once in place Dosalia again walked back and forth and was pleased that there was nothing to catch the eye of passersby. Please with the results of all their work, she started along the path that they had stoned and took another path that had been stoned. When she reached the rise above Hot Springs Cave she could see the pattern of the paths and noticed that the paths were all similar no matter which side of the cave visitors went. There were several stoned access to the river and she noticed that several large rocks had been placed next to where the shallow water allowed easy crossing except in the early spring then the melt began. According to Losaduna that would be soon but she knew that some of the most severe storms occurred between deep winter and spring.

Seeing that people were still playing on the leather below she decided that she would leave it for the night and then remount it over the opening of the cave and see which covering looked more natural. Looking over the steppes across the river, she noticed something moving. Excited that it might be game, she watched as it came closer. She was not happy when she saw that Hilmoi had brought his cave early.

Chapter 17

As they approached he saw someone on top of the hill surrounded by the mist up lifting from the heated pools locked within the special chambers of the Hot Spring Cave. The wind caught her hair and teased it away from her face and thought they were too far away to see her clearly, he knew it was her. Looking at his father who was leading the group headed toward the Hot Spring Cave, he knew that many in his cave were going to ask the Losaduni to replace his father. They had asked him twice this winter and he had refused. It was not his place to be leader of the cave that duty belonged to Netdi and it was time for him to return to Second Spring Cave and take up his duties. As much as he loved his brother and his mate, there was nothing that kept either locked to Hot Spring Cave.

He watched as she moved out of sight and knew she would go to Laduni and notify him that visitors were approaching and the entire cave felt uncomfortable arriving so many moons before the beginning of the summer meeting. His excuse was the poor hunting around the second cave but three times he passed up several hunting opportunities. Thought the rest of the cave did not know his reasons, Kaunai knew why the man of his hearth was traveling at the end of winter to arrive at Hot Spring Cave. Hilmoi wanted Laduni's backing to thwart the members of his cave to remain leader. But many were talking of leaving should the Losaduni not remove him and place his son in the leadership position.

As they approached the river they could see that the host cave was not ready for visitors since the stepping stones waited on the opposite shore as they should since the spring flood would surely come soon and there was no reason to place them only to lose them during the floods. Walking across the ice covered river they were met not only by the leader of the cave but also the Losaduni and several of the member. Hilmoi advanced quickly and grasped Laduni's arm in greeting, the smile on his face seemed genuine but those of his cave knew better.

Kaunai watched as his brother and his mate approached and with them Dosalia, but she was not alone. A stranger walked beside her and a hand crept to hers as if he had the right to touch her and her answering smile let him know the man did have her permission. He felt a wrench in his gut that perhaps he was too late. He shook his head and refused to believe that she was lost to him. Time, he would take his time and learn all that was going on but first he needed to convince his brother to return to the Second Spring Cave. Ignoring Hilmoi's look, he went to his brother and embraced him. "We need to talk brother." He whispered and he released him only to pull Madenia into his embrace. Holding her away from him he smiled at the pink blush he could see growing. "You are more beautiful every time I see you." He touched his cheek to hers and turned toward the second couple and pulled Dosalia into his arms closing his eyes and enjoying the feel of her warmth against him but released her before she could feel his growing excitement. He smiled at her and as he did whenever they met he teased her about the men who had approached her for mating because of the mine.

"I don't see Stelo, Marcum or Derlio around. You would think if they were so in love with you they would never let you out of their sight."

Dosalia groaned at the mention of the three men who were more persistent than the others wanting to mate her only because they thought they could control the mine through her. Stelo of the North Cave had little to recommend him since other than hunt had few skills and could not even produce a spear point for his own use. He had been mated before but it had not even lasted the testing time of couples and the woman broke the hearth. The high opinion he had of himself last any bases other than what his mother and her mate had told her son. Marcum and Derlio were both from Plains Cave and their association with Charoli had made them undesirable even though Derlio was the son of Tomasi, Laduni and her mother knew that she would accept neither of the men since both were older and there were rumors that they had helped supply the runaways even though they had remained with the cave. Though nothing was proven could only mean that Tomasi suppressed any more investigation after the men returned to their caves for punishment. "Well at least you are here and can run interference again for me." He nearly groaned himself at the sight of her smile but returned her smile as she turned and introduced the stranger.

"Kaunai of the Second Spring Cave this is Trilon former leader of the Twenty-First Cave of the Zelandonii." Kaunai held his hands out immediately wanting to give nothing of his feelings away yet since this man obviously had Dosalia's affections.

"Welcome Trilon to the land of the Losadunaii, I hope your visit is pleasant and you are able to enjoy all we have to offer. I assume you returned with Keylo and his trade group but I wonder why he did not stop at Second Spring on his way back?"

Trilon grasped the congenial young man's hands "He thought about it but we would have had to travel too far north since we came over the glacier. They all wanted to return to their homes. We arrived here just as a storm came so we were lucky. Didn't your cave send anyone?"

“No, our leader does not think that the Zelandonii have anything of value that we cannot make ourselves just as well if not better. It is not a position that I believe is correct. The Lanzadoni and Zelandonii are close friends and we need to keep those contacts.”

Trilon was impressed with this young man who he knew would soon take the leadership of the Second Spring Group and apparently he thought long about how he would lead. “There is a strong friendship between our peoples and it is good that both keep it active.”

Chapter 18

As the two groups gathered together reestablishing ties and connections to various families, Laduni and Hilmoi walked away from the meshing groups as did the two that served the Mother. Netdi saw his brother watch the man of their hearth and decided he needed to know what was going on. “Kaunai, do you want to talk now?”

“Yes.”

“We will see you later then.” Dosalia said knowing the brothers wanted to talk alone.

When Kaunai saw that Madenia was also moving to leave he stopped her. “This concerns you as well sister. Please stay.”

Madenia looked at her mate’s brother and knew he was telling the truth. “Why don’t we go to our hearth. Mother is visiting with Solandia and we will be able to talk privately.” Both men nodded and followed her into the cave away from the merging crowds. She would not allow the men to talk until she served Kaunai some tea and what was left of the stew from that morning. When he finished eating she refilled his cup and sat next to Netdi.

“I have no right to ask you this but I need to.”

“Ask Kaunai, we have never kept secrets before it is not the time now.”

Kaunai rubbed his face and combed his finger through his hair. “The Second Spring Cave is planning to split away from the home cave if the Losaduni do not appoint someone else as leader.”

“What do you mean someone else?”

“Netdi, since the accident he is not the same. He is actually attacking people if not physically then yelling at them until they leave his sight. Later in the day it is as if he remembered nothing of what happened. I mean someone else because they will not accept me as leader, I am too young. Netdi you and almost seven seasons older than I am and I think we all thought we would have time, but we do not. I am asking, no begging you to return to the Second Spring Cave as its leader.” He took Madenia’s hand and looked her in the face. “I know sister that you are most comfortable here and I would not put you in any pain of distress if it was not that important.” Looking back at his brother he could see he was confused. “Nedti, you should be the leader. It

is something you have been training for since your birth. I have only been training the few years since you moved to Hot Spring Cave.”

“Oh little brother I never thought it would come to this, he looks healthy and I thought that he was gored or stepped on what happened?”

“He was gored, and thankfully Losaduna of North Cave was visiting to teach one of her acolytes about the hot springs at Second Spring. We had a mixed herd of reindeer and megasorus trapped and Hilmoi was with Catroi and Voliric to close the trap gate but the big stag megasorus seemed not to fear the torches and charged him rather than go in the gate. I was too far away and he knocked the others off their feet but he caught Hilmoi in the side and the tines of its antlers became stuck in his tunic and he shook his head to get Hilmoi off his antlers and slammed him several times against rocks and the ground. I was finally close enough and used my spear but he was so badly injured we did not think he would survive. We quickly made one of those travois things that Danug and the Urngaul man showed us and took him back while the others finished the hunt.”

“Voliric and Catroi were both bruised but neither was injured severely but Hilmoi never woke while we were taking him back and Losaduna of North Cave was with him a very long time. She would not let us in until the next day when he finally woke up. He looked bad but he was joking about his injuries and we all thought he would recover and he did seem to physically. It was only a short time later that we went to the summer meeting and he would not hear about staying behind with the others who could not go. He had headaches at the summer meeting but he did well even though we knew that many of the others though he would not survive the winter. He changed once he was able to move on his own and our Losaduna thought him well enough to hunt. He would not go back out and started to send me as hunt leader even though there were others with more experience. I had to make perfect plans to make sure the hunts were a success and they all were but the hunters were not happy with me leading them. It seemed the more success I had the worse he got. At first it was just me he yelled at and I thought it was because his head was hurting but when he went after Pacclon for simply suggesting that someone else might be better leading the hunts, of which I agreed with. You know the Hilmoi and Pacclon grew up tighter as if they were siblings when Pacclon’s mother died of some illness.”

Kaunai stood and began pacing the chamber that his brother now called home and looked about the very comfortable surroundings. “Netdi, there is more. There is a woman I want as my mate who cannot leave her cave for she controls a large portion of that caves value. She is an artist beyond compare. I am telling you so you know that I am not hiding anything, but it is not just that the others will not accept me because of my age, it is also because this woman means more to me than the Second Spring Cave and I am ashamed of that.”

“There is no reason to be ashamed Kaunai, I am just a guilty for staying her to mate with Madenia.” Netdi took Madenia’s hand in his and squeezed it. “There is nothing more important to me than she is especially now that she is blessed.”

“You have been blessed?” Kaunai grabbed Madenia and held her close and swung her around. “How wonderful.” He put her down and kissed her cheek gently. “I would understand if you

told me no Netdi.” He looked at his brother and saw the love he had for his mate written on his face.

“I am not saying no, but there are many I have to talk with. Perhaps it is a good thing Second Spring Cave came early.”

Chapter 19

Laduni looked at Hilmoi as he sat hard on a large boulder in the meeting place many used when they wanted to talk to someone or a few people wanted to speak together without others knowing what they discussed. He had placed the red ivory tusk into the hole in the ground that was now lined with flat rocks making it less likely to need renewal every spring. “Tell me Hilmoi.”

“They want to replace me, I know it and even the sons of my hearth have turned against me. Netdi leaves without even a backwards glance never once since I was injured did he think to return to lead the cave while I recovered and Kaunai plot with those against me, he is a traitor to me and I can no longer trust him. I need the leaders and the Losaduni to stand with me and not replace me as leader until I can train someone else.”

“I thought Kaunai was doing well as your hunt leader?”

“He never comes back without something but the hunters are not happy in the time it takes for him to make a decision. The boy can worry something to death with his thinking and planning. If I had the time and he had been loyal, I know he would have been a good leader but there is not time left and he has not been loyal.”

“Who would you train that your Cave will accept?”

“Retchen is my brother’s mate’s oldest. He is a good man and he would be a good leader.”

Laduni knew Retchen and also knew that this cousin of Charoli through his mother had spent time with the renegade group but returned quickly never being one to be without his comforts. This was not a man any of the caves would accept as leader. Although there was no proof not many trusted him even within his own cave, but Laduni remained silent knowing he needed to talk with others in the cave to find out what was really going on. What he had expected was not what he saw for Hilmoi looked as if he recovered well from his injuries even though he remained painfully thin but there was something that Laduni could not identify that bothered him. “Is that why you came early?”

“I thought if I came early I would be able to convince you to side with me and Retchen and convince the people of the Second Spring Cave that this is for the best.”

“You know that I accept you as the leader of Second Spring, but what you are asking goes against our ways. Kaunai is the son of your hearth, perhaps it would be better if I talk with him to see what his feelings are. He may be acting the way he is out of fear of leading at such a young age.”

“No he is a coward never advancing on game unless he is positive that he will not get hurt which is why he has become so good with the spear thrower thing. He won’t even hunt like a man anymore.”

Laduni felt his stomach roll at Hilmoi’s words. Never had he heard that either son of his hearth were cowards and knew that it was not true of Netdi and from the various stories he heard of Kaunai he was sure it was not true there as well. He needed to talk with Losaduna and get his input. “I will talk with Losaduna Hilmoi and see if perhaps we can see what the other Losaduni are thinking.”

Losaduna looked at his counterpart shocked at what he was hearing. He had known Hilmoi for a long time and knew the man as jovial and outgoing but never had meanness been a part of his nature. Something was wrong and though it looked like the leader healed well from his injuries, Losaduna knew that evil spirit sometimes entered people that had been severely injured because their own spirits were so weak, especially those that had been so close to death as Hilmoi had been. The Losaduna of North Cave had been more assured of the leaders recovered than she had been when she had first arrived at the summer meeting after not seeing him for several months. Now he looked even better but something was wrong.

“I cannot explain it Losaduna of Hot Spring Cave, but Kaunai has worked tirelessly to help the cave cope with the changes in Hilmoi even going so far to take the abuse that would have fallen on other shoulders but a short time later it is as if the incident had not occurred and Hilmoi will deny that he said any such thing especially to the son of his hearth. I no longer know if he wants to stay as leader, but I know that many of the Second Spring Cave are thinking of leaving if something is not done. I am also worried about the relationship developing between Hilmoi and Retchen who arrived just before the hunting accident. If there is something he should be imparting to Kaunai it is Retchen that is usually the one being trained. As much as the other hunters complain, when Kaunai leads the hunt team they return with something, and when Retchen leads the hunters they are seldom gone long and more times than not return empty handed. Hilmoi will use that against Kaunai telling him he is wasting too much time on hunts when he could be doing something else, but I will tell you that without Kaunai the Second Spring Cave would have been without meat much of the winter because Hilmoi sent Retchen on all the fall hunts and kept Kaunai with him with the pretext of training him to lead someday.”

“When was the last time Losaduna of North Cave has seen Hilmoi?”

“You know the North Cave left the summer meeting first so late last summer. She was convinced he would recover and gave me instructions to treat what might occur as he healed.”

“I would like to talk to some of your people if you would not mind but it seems that we will have to wait for Losaduna of North Cave to arrive and examine him. She needs to know what has been happening since she last saw him especially since he look healthy. I know that the Losaduni were planning on seeing if they could get him to step down based on how he looked last year. Now they may not be so ready to do such a thing and still Kaunai would be next in line to lead the Second Spring cave.”

“They will not follow him. Most of the hunters think he is too young to lead the cave no matter they know he has essentially being doing just that this past year. The women fear he will not know how to handle their needs and I am not sure why.”

“The blessed of Duni need little fight against accepting a change they are not pleased with. Perhaps I should talk with Kaunai.”

“He had been under a lot of stress this winter and had been successful in not challenging Retchen but Retchen has not made it easy especially since he has Hilmoi backing him.”

“Retchen will never be acceptable to the other leaders and Losaduni not I believe the people of Second Spring Cave.”

“Do not count the backing of Second Spring Cave they just want Hilmoi gone and I am not sure he would even find welcome at the cave even if he gave up his leadership.”

Chapter 20

Kaunai was glad that his brother and his wife invited him to join them in her hearth to stay for with her mother in residence there was no other bedspace for the man of his hearth. Because Madenia and Dosalia were friends and he was delighted when she joined them for the evening meal not so much that the man Trilon join them as well.

“Mother is hearing a lot of complaints from the people from your cave Kaunai, they all are trying to get to see Losaduna as if they do not trust your Losaduna.”

“I am not sure that they do. They are not happy to be traveling early when we should not have left until the blooms are strong on the trees that produce fruit but Hilmoi demanded we leave early. It is actually a good thing because we were running out of meat. There was plenty of grain and dried fruits and other vegetables and dried plants, roots and such but we have been struggling to keep enough meet.”

“What happened, you are the hunt leader of the cave now.” Netdi said shocked that his brother would not make sure the cave was stocked with meat before winter.

“I am not sure that I am. Retchen came back to the cave after the last summer meeting and Hilmoi has had him lead the hunters. There was not enough meat at the beginning of winter and several of the hunters went out with me but before we could go the first storms hit and there were other problems I had to take care of because Hilmoi could or would not. When we got a break I went out and a few of the hunters followed me and we were able to get a few animals but we had to hunt every few days and you know more of the herds leave the Second Spring Cave area in the winter except for a few small herds or individuals. It got to the point that the three of us using spear throwers had to sneak out of the camp to hunt because Hilmoi said I was not allowing Retchen to prove himself. We have had several women deliver children during the summer

meeting and the winter and we were not interested in anyone getting credit for the hunt we just wanted to make sure that at least these women had meat.”

“What is Retchen doing at the Second Spring Cave?”

“I think Hilmoi is planning to put him above me to follow him. They have been spending a lot of time together and I do not think it is for the good of the cave.”

“Hilmoi knows he is lazy and a poor hunter there has to be something else going on.”

“It all comes down to Hilmoi.”

“I know Retchen,” Dosalia mused, “he has never been one to take responsibility for anything and if I remember right he was thought to have been with Charoli at least for a short while. I remember your mother telling Losaduna the different men that Charoli had with him but at the summer meeting after they attacked you, Retchen was there with his cave. Laduni mentioned to Losaduna that several of the caves were running low on supplies and they thought that someone in their cave was helping Charoli and that bunch.”

“He was caught taking food out of Plains Cave and walking west where they knew Charoli and his gang was staying.” Netdi offered. “Reggdi will have nothing to do with him and I think that might be someone to talk to when the rest of the caves arrive.”

“Netdi, remember Laduni said he would be traveling to the flatheads again this year. He brought back some wonderful leathers and furs last time he was with them. That is where I got the soft auroch calf skin from for Lonia.” Both looked to the bedspace in the rear of the chambers to where their first and only child lay sleeping. She had exhausted herself on the leather and then with the children that arrived with the Second Spring Cave. Madenia held her hands to her stomach and prayed to the Mother that this child would be safe and healthy.

“Then all we can do is talk with Olandi when he gets here. I think he would be more than willing to get the focus that has been on him since Slindi’s death and put it on someone else. We will have to make sure he knows that we will verify what he tells us through Reggdi when he arrives.” Kaunai said. He could hear the various voices as the people of the Second Spring Cave visited and joined those of Hot Spring Cave in the meal. “Netdi, I think we need to make a hunt to supply food for this cave. It is not fair that Hilmoi put them in the position of feeding themselves and those of Second Spring Cave.”

“I will talk with Grenoli and see if we can make a hunt but Laduni will want us to go far afield but I think that now it probably would not matter. There is plenty of room in the storage pit that if we can get a good number of animals then there should be plenty for both caves. Let me go now and we can see if we can get a hunt in before the storm Losaduna said was coming.”

When Netdi left the hearth, Kaunai could not help looking up at Dosalia. He watched at the man introduced as Trilon touched her as if she was a possession yet even though Dosalia’s hand rested on his knee, it was as if she were assuring a child and he wondered again at their

relationship. He knew that if she would accept him he would take her even as a co-mate. Looking at the man in the eye he could see that somehow he knew that Dosalia had more than one person interested in her but the hardening of his features, he would have to be careful or this man could cause him problems.

Chapter 21

There were twelve men and women pulling six hastily made travois but the wind and the snow made it difficult to see and the constant complaining from Retchen only made it harder. Grenoli still questioned himself as to why he had agreed to take the man when he had never seen him hunt on any of the summer meeting hunts. The hunters he chose who wanted to go from both Hot Spring and Second Spring caves he knew except for Kaunai who he knew from tales and would have taken him for Netdi's request alone. Where Retchen had proved to be a hindrance during the hunt, it had been Kaunai's idea that the animals would be looking for shelter from the coming storm that proved correct and allowed them to be so successful. Now that it was Retchen's turn to pull the travois the complaining was even worse.

All the hunters had been made aware that there was a storm coming and the need for speed but all had agreed that the hunt was needed. He was confused why Hilmoi had talked against the son of his hearth while promoting Retchen. Sure that they would have gotten a good number of aurochs in any case, Kaunai's plan allowed them to take as many as they had and they were able to take the best parts of the animals to return to the cave. Knowing there were fetus for the spring festival, he was pleased that one of the cows had a near term fetus that would feed not only Hot Springs but Second Spring as well. Every plan that Kaunai had put forth Retchen had denied would work and put one of his own forward but as Grenoli looked at the situation both he and Daraldi knew that Retchen's plan was nonsense. Now they were returning with plenty of meat to feed both groups until well into the summer meeting without making Hot Springs Cave short in the coming winter.

Tired of hearing the complaints, Netdi took the travois from Retchen even though he had pulled a travois since the site of the hunt. Seeing that his brother take a travois again, Kaunai joined him and grabbed the second pole so that Netdi did not have to pull the entire weight of the meat. He saw that Dosalia had seen him and moved to help Daraldi and those who were free even though they had pulled before helped those now pulling the travois except for Retchen who acted as if it was his right that others did the work leaving him free to his own devices. Even as exhausted as they were pulling the meat and fighting the gathering storm, they began to move even faster as the light was fading in the already darkened landscape. No one had brought shelter and it would mean death if they did not get back to the caves.

When Retchen jogged ahead, Grenoli nodded his head thinking that the young man had finally seen something he would do. At least the cave would be warned and would come and help with the results of the hunt. That his was soon lost in the swirling snow bothered him little for he knew they were headed in the right direction and should be close to the cave. After walking another hour with no sign of torches or others to help them, Grenoli had different thoughts toward Retchen.

Laduni looked into the gathering night and the swirling snow worried that the hunters had not returned. The storm had started much earlier than they expected or rather hoped it would not start until the following day but as the afternoon approached Losaduna had become convinced that the storm would come sooner rather than later and even now the two Losaduni were preparing to search for the hunters. Just as he was ready to turn away he saw movement in the white curtain and was amazed when Retchen ran to the entrance and without a word moved past him to the central hearth to stand next to the fire. "Where are the rest of the hunters?" Laduni demanded as he watched the man cut meat from the roast that was cooking over the fire without even asking or removing his outer ware as he sat next to the hearth.

"They will be here soon, I just came ahead as I could feel the freezing injury in my feet and I did not want to take a chance."

With disgust that he had not told them before seeing to himself, Laduni called to the rest of the cave that the hunters were returning. The front of the cave was filled with people quickly as they gathered to help putting on their outer ware as they moved toward the front of the cave. When the rest of the hunters could not be seen quickly, Laduni through a look of disgust at the man that Hilmoi was thinking of making leader over his own sons. "Laduni maybe if we took torches out we could see them or at least they might be able to see us." Not trusting himself to speak Laduni only nodded and went with others to make quick torches and then they went outside the cave glad that the wind was not strong enough yet to be a blizzard.

"Look!" Dosalia cried when she saw a sudden light. It had seemed so bright when she had first seen it now it was a dull glow but they all saw it and moved toward it as quickly as they could as the sight of the light gave them all new energy knowing the end was near. The wind picked up as if to thwart the hunters return to the cave but they doggedly moved toward the light that was increasing as they moved. It was almost a surprise in their exhausted state when those from the cave reached them and started to take control of the travois filled with the results of the hunt. When Laduni took the travois from him and Netdi, Kunai immediately went to Trilon seeing that he was having trouble seeing in the deepening night and snow. Dosalia saw what Kunai saw only after he took Trilon's arm and stepped to the opposite side and took Trilon's other arm. "I am fine."

"We know you are but we are all exhausted and we have two good eyes and are having trouble seeing so shut up and let us help you."

Chapter 22

All of the hunters experienced some pain as the heat of the cave washed over them but they refused to stop and relax until all the travois were empty and the items stored. Everyone except for Hilmoi and Retchen unloaded the travois taking most to the areas in the outside edge of the caves that were dug down to the permafrost so that the items would remain frozen until they were needed. Three double thick hides loosely sewn together covered the short entry into the storage pit. Lonia and Akloria held the one that separated the short hallway from the main cave and the second hide that separated the short hall from the storage area. The third covering separated the area that was nearly frozen, containing fruits, nuts, gains and greens, from the

deeper area that remained frozen throughout the year. After the adults put all the hides and meat into the pit, the young girls of the cave took the stomachs, bladders and intestines to rinse them one again and put into a basket of water to keep them from drying out until they could be put to use. Baskets of hooves, horns, and bones were added to the collection of such things to make adhesives, cups and other utensils and the bones could also be used in soups and stews.

When all was stored Laduni made all those who had hunted take a seat in the central hearth while those that remained served them hot food and tea to warm themselves. Losaduni from both caves checked those who had returned last ignoring Retchen, much to his and Hilmoi's irritation, until all other hunters were cared for. When Losaduna of Second Spring Cave went to examine him, neither man was happy that he was the last to be seen to. Looking down at the man to abandoned the rest of the hunters and was currently filling himself with additional food while taking a place close to the fire that one who was in greater need could have been, made the Losaduna ill that Hilmoi would even consider this man for a position of power. "You look like you are fine." His deep voice resonated so that those near could hear that he thought Retchen had no effects of being exposed to the weather.

When the young man would have stood and challenged the one that served the Mother, Hilmoi held his arms and shook his head. Relaxing back, he watched as the man left to get his own meal. "When you are leader you can ask for a replacement."

"Why can't you ask for one this summer meeting?" Retchen's eyes never left the one that served the Mother as he bent down to listen to a child speaking.

"I need to give you more time to learn to be a leader, you do not know as much as you think you do. Angering the Losaduni when I need their help is not a wise decision neither was it wise to leave the hunting party."

"I lost feeling in my feet and they wanted me to pull one of those contraptions. I have no intention of injuring myself just because the sons of your hearth are not strong enough to pull a little meat back to this cave." Retchen got up and returned to the sleeping area assigned to him, tired of always having to defend himself for his actions. Laying on the furs supplied he wondered how Hot Springs Cave could possibly be the highest ranking cave when they gave their visitors such poor quality furs for their bed spaces. Though his face was blank his emotions were seething, he had learned long ago to keep his thoughts to himself. When he had arrived at the Second Spring Cave it was to get him away from those that his mother believed were keeping him from advancing. When Hilmoi awoke from his injuries though at the time he had not wanted to help care for the man who soiled himself but once awake and confused, Retchen saw his chance and took it. For months he had pointed out everything that showed that the son of his hearth was plotting to take the leadership away from him. Before he had awoken he had already convinced many that Kaunai was too young to be leader should Hilmoi die without recovering his senses. He had awoken and Retchen could not believe how easy it had been to institute himself as an advisor to the leader.

Hilmoi was frantic to get to Hot Spring Cave to get the backing of Laduni and no matter how much he had talked against it, Hilmoi was determined. Now there were too many influences on

him. Vonlia that was it. Getting Vonlia to share pleasures with Hilmoi during the Mother Festival they were planning would be simple enough since the stupid woman would do anything for him, she had already proved that when she placed Hilmoi's small speaking staff in Kaunai's sleeping space for Hilmoi to find when he was directed there. Yes that's what he would do, taking a deep. He looked through the crowd and saw her looking at him and he smiled at her and motioned for her to join him. The pleasure on her face allowed him to relax for now he had a plan.

Chapter 23

Losaduna looked at his counterpart as he moved around those finishing eating the Mother's meal that Solandia and some of the other women prepared. They had gone over the ceremony over that last few days much to disappointment of Laduni who had tried three times to get Losaduna alone to talk with him. Knowing what the leader wanted to discuss, Losaduna wanted no negative energy to interfere with this ceremony. Since it was his cave he would take the lead role but he did not want the members of the Second Spring Cave to feel lost so both Losaduni worked to combine the different types of ceremonies they performed. Since their arrival he had heard from nearly everyone at the Second Spring Cave except for Kaunai and he knew that eventually the boy would come to him as well, but the stories were troubling to say the least. Knowing that was what Laduni wanted to discuss with him, he knew that this night needed to be a night of comfort for both caves. The Mother would control what happened and all they could do was treat her children as they were given the power to do.

The central hearth was filled past capacity with the presence of the second cave as Laduni and several men put all the fires out in the cave except the central fire of Losaduna's hearth. People huddled even closer as darkness surrounded them looking around no one saw either Losaduni and turned looking for those that served the Mother who had been there just moments before. The saw small sputtering in the fire as if grease was dripping into it but no meat was over the flames and as a unit they moved away from the flames as they grew larger and larger then suddenly with a loud pop exploded to the ceiling only to return to its hearth and burned normally. When they turned around Losaduna sat cross legged, the lines painted on his body made him appear to be a part of the rock unless one looked close and saw the geometric designs they all knew meant the Mother. One hand held a spring of hawthorn with leaves and a willow branch that was dried and obviously dead in the opposite hand.

Throwing the willow branch all eyes were drawn to it as they watched it burn until nothing was left of the stick. "As we use dead wood for fire to battle the cold of winter and feed ourselves, so the Mother asks her son to come nearer to conquer the death of winter bringing her various children alive once again so that all may benefit from her bounty. We welcome the Mother's son to break the cold of winter so that we can walk safely once again on her lands and gather all she has provided us." Although it was a trick of the light the hawthorn branch seemed to be growing as they watch and a low humming was heard in the back ground. "The Mother blesses her children well. She blesses the women to bring forth new life." He pointed the hawthorn towards Madenia who smiled then once again to a woman named Lengia from Second Spring who burst into tears and many knew that it was because she had thought the Mother would never bless her. "We have shared the Mother's gift of food in the form of new life waiting for birth, now we

share her other gifts of friendship with our brothers and sisters, shared pleasures that honor the mother, shared joy in the life granted by the Mother for renewal, and the Mother's drink."

The Losaduna from Second Spring entered the crowd with a container that he poured into each adult personal cup while the children received the liquid from a second cup. Each were told not to drink until all were served and none would go against the edicts of the one who severed the Mother especially on this day. Those from Second Spring were used to receiving this special drink made by their Losaduna that seemed to make sharing the Mother's gift of pleasure even greater. All of them smiled at the concerned looks on the faces of those from the Hot Spring cave and their smiles seemed to ease the fears that were growing. When finally the two Losaduni held their cups it was the Losaduna of the Second Spring Cave which spoke.

"The Mother gives us knowledge to allow her children to seek ease with each other and share her gifts." He gulped his drink down as did all the others including the children. Losaduna began striking the skull of a bison with the thicker end of the hawthorn branch making a soft sound as if it were a heartbeat. The children fell asleep quickly allowing the adults the freedom to move about the cave without worrying about the care of their children. Losaduna knew that Solandia would enjoy sharing the Mother's gift then return to care for all the children, keeping them until their mothers retrieved them the next day. He had no worries about himself for some women were drawn to those with power and if the Mother wanted him to join the festival she would provide a partner, if not he would enjoy watching those who shared her gift and the interactions.

Chapter 24

Dosalia closed her eyes and enjoyed the feeling of heat that perfused her body as if Trilon had teased her body. She could feel her womb clinch and her nipples begin to ache. She turned to look at Trilon and was shocked to see him stand and walk away with a woman from Second Spring. She could feel his hands on her yet she watched as he moved into her hearth. With her stomach clinching tightly she got up but was unsure where to go. Every step caused pleasure and pain with the knowledge that the one man she wanted now wanted someone other than her. She almost groaned aloud when hands touched her shoulder and when she looked around it was into the eyes of Kaunai. Why had she never noticed how large his hands were or how tall he was and why had she never noticed the ice blue of his eyes.

"Come with me Dosalia. Share the Mother's gift with me." He bent forward and lightly touched her lips with his.

An instant bloom of need filled her at the light touch of his lips and she allowed him to take her hands and pull her toward the back of the cave into what many believed was the last hearth. Almost never used since Charoli and his mother had been housed in it so long ago, Dosalia was a little hesitant to enter the hearth but allowed Kaunai to pull her into the area but he did not stop. Going to the back corner he pulled her around a section of wall into a thin passage into an area she had never known existed. The small space had a deep bedspace and a small hearth area that showed signs of use but it appeared old except for the small fire now burning in it. To the rear was an even smaller hole that looked as if it ended. "I never knew about this." Dosalia said as she looked around.

“Larogi showed it to me when we all gathered because of Charoli. Laduni showed him the outside of the cave and told him that he sit quiet and listen to what was happening in the main room. I do not know why Charoli or his mother never caught us but they didn’t and we heard everything they said to each other and were able to tell Laduni. It was an adventure.”

When he turned toward Dosalia she was removing her tunic and he jumped to stop her. “What are you doing?”

“I am getting ready to share pleasures.” She looked at him wondering if she had misunderstood him and quickly moved to put tunic back in order but he would not release her hands.

“Dosalia, sharing pleasures is so much more than joining our bodies and I intend to explore them all with you.” He captured her lips as if exploring every inch, tasting the edges with his tongue until she relaxed and opened her mouth but he did not enter immediately instead he ran his tongue over her teeth, lightly touching her own tongue until she also began to explore. He rose his hands to her head and removed the leather tie and ran his fingers in the thick mass to remove the braids she had put them in. With his body hard and heavy, demanding that he take her, he refused not knowing if he might ever get this opportunity again. Releasing her lips, he explored her face, pressing light kisses on her eyebrows and lids, the tip of her nose and each corner of her mouth then took possession of her lips again. He took each of her hands and pressed them to his lips and felt her try to pull away as his lips traced the ridges on her palm from the many cuts that came with working with the sharp flint. Even the best knappers had such ridges from cuts occurring during very fine work when the stone could not move at all and needed everything the knapper had available to keep the stone still. “They are part of you Dosalia, not something to be ashamed of, be proud since it shows your art of making tools is part of you even when you are not working with the stone.” He put his mouth over each finger running his tongue along its length and felt the ridges on his tongue and was surprised by the sudden surge in his body that he had to stop a moment to get himself back in control. “Touching you is such a great pleasure for me and I want it to be for you as well.” Just the thought of her hands on him made his body jerk in anticipation.

Dosalia could not speak knowing if she uttered a sound it would be a groan of pleasure. Never had she thought that just the feather touches of his lips and tongue could cause such a sensation in her. Although Trilon had never said a word, others had not wanted her to touch them for fear of injury from the roughness of her hands, but he had pushed her hands away from his manhood more times than she cared to remember. Though they were softer now thanks to the wild rose cream that Ayla had taught her to make, the ridges were still obvious. Feeling his hands until her leggings she almost sighed in relief but all he did was remove them and guide her to the bedspace that was filled with furs. She almost screamed when he took her toes into his mouth after removing her indoor footwear. How could her feet produce such a rush of heat as her body clinched with need as his hands caressed her calves. Each sensation made the need in her grow as his hands moved up her legs followed by his lips. When he turned her over and bit and licked at the back of her knees, she could not stop the orgasm which immediately burned through her. Still he did not stop, as he gave all his attention to that part of her legs until she was once again squirming with need.

When he turned her so she lay on her back she was almost relieved as much as she wanted him to continue his assault. Opening her legs as he moved up her thighs biting and licking as if he wanted to know every inch of skin intimately she raised her hips when he neared the apex of her thighs but he did not stop as his hand roamed over her abdomen beneath the tunic until it bunched at her shoulders and she lifted her arms so that he could remove it. She looked at him when she felt him stop all movement and in his eyes she was uncertain what she saw except wonder. "I never knew you were so beautiful Dosalia." He bent forward and kisses her belly as if in dedication.

Softly he placed his hands over her breast tracing the lines softly then pinched each hardened nipple as he twirled them between his thumbs and forefinger as if testing them and she could no longer control the groan that demanded release. The sight of him still clothed brought a need to see him as he saw her. Sitting up quickly before he could stop her she grabbed his tunic and pulled it from him gasping at the sight of his broad muscular chest. This was not a man who sat in meetings but was involved in the day to day needs to keep the people of his cave fed and alive. Wanting to see more she undid the ties of his leggings and with his help pulled them from him gasping at the size of his erection. She could not help but reach for it and softly placed both hands around it groaning with Kaunai as he lay beside her and captured a nipple, just holding in his mouth occasionally licking at the tips as Dosalia continued her assault on him. Realizing that she had the same power over him as he had over her, she released him and moved her hands to his face breaking his hold on her nipple. Touching lightly as he had her and then continued down his body reveling in the clenching of his muscles under her lips. Licking at his nipples she saw his erection jump and she felt a similar reaction deep within her as she felt the moisture gather at the entrance to her body, but she did not stop. Following the thin train of dark hair she spent time investigating the swirls of hair and rejoiced at the feeling of his erection sliding up her body the lower she moved until thinking was no longer possible when the swollen ruby head was so close she could do nothing except take him into her mouth.

The heat of her mouth nearly undid all his control. He had been pleased that she also wanted to touch him as he did to her but all his thoughts were on the tightness of her mouth as she suckled him as he tried to remain still and allow her the freedom to do as she pleased but when she ran her nail behind his knees he jerked deeper into her and felt her momentary gag until she relaxed her throat and took more of him only to suckle hard as she pulled to the tip and scraped it with her teeth. No longer could he control his body's movements making short rapid thrust as she continued her assault. Unable to stand the torture any longer he grabbed beneath her arms and pulled her until she knelt above him.

Dosalia laughed at the look of pain on his face when she rubbed her entrance against his hard shaft only to move away when he would have impaled himself as she bent forward and captured his lips again. No longer was he in control and she enjoyed the power she had as he growled with frustration until she once again pressed lightly against him spreading her moisture over the hard head then she slowly lowered herself onto him, reveling in the feeling of him filling her. She stopped and forced herself to relax as he took over and began to penetrate deeper until he was fully encased within her body. Knowing she had never been with any man with such size it was almost painful to have him fully within her body but she wanted all of him as she tightened her muscles around him and felt him shutter with need.

With his hands on her breast he lifted himself to take her nipple deeply into his mouth and pressed himself even that much deeper into her causing her to gasp as she relaxed even more. She pressed forward wanting, no needing to move but he held her hips still as he groaned and moved to the other breast as she continued to contract around him almost painfully but he did not let her breast go. Grabbing his hair and pressing her breast against him even as they both began to move. Grabbing her legs and lifting them over his arms, Kaunai lifted her more and more until he was nearly out of her before allowing her to settle over him again and again. Hearing her pants of pleasure he continued until all thoughts were gone and only the feel of her moist tight body surrounding him again and again until he felt her body completely relax and he slipped into her completely as she began to tighten her arms and body around him, bathing him with her heat and squeezing him tightly even as he exploded within her nearly crying with the pleasure.

Feeling his body soften she was surprised that he remained deep within her even as they worked to regain their breath. He held her tightly against him and she felt as if he truly cherished her and she relaxed and allowed sleep to find her.

Kaunai had never thought to feel this great protective need toward the woman in his arms. He had admired her and thought of her as a friend and wanted her as his mate and thought he loved her. Now he knew that all he had felt was infatuation, it was no longer fascination. How could he let her go if she decided to mate with the stranger who acted as if he owned her? Gently he kissed the top of her head knowing his earlier words were even truer now. He would do anything to assure Dosalia of her happiness even if it means being a comate with Trilon, but he so wanted her to choose him for himself. There was this one night he had to make her care for him before they had to face the problems that lay beyond the walls of their little hide away. Moving slightly to make them both more comfortable, he pulled some furs up to cover them so that she could sleep at least for a short time for already he wanted her again.

Chapter 25

She slipped out of the bedspace at the first snore knowing that he would never wake until morning. It had taken longer than she thought to get him excited enough to give either of them pleasure but fell short of giving her any pleasure. Knowing that he listened to what she had told him about the hunt would make Retchen very happy. When she opened the leather covering his black eyes were immediately on her while a young woman used her mouth to stimulate him. Not knowing what to do, she squeaked in surprise when Retchen grabbed her and lifted her over him so that she kneeled over him. At the first touch of his tongue she became still and sighed with relief for she knew how talented Retchen's tongue was and after receiving little from Hilmoi she wanted the pleasure that was her due.

Losaduna looked at Solandia as she entered his small cave where he meditated and knew that she wanted to share pleasures with him this night. He knew that she had joined Laduni and Grenoli as she often did in the past few years but she always seemed to need someone gentle before she considered a Mother festival complete. He was glad that she came to him, for though they shared pleasures often, he enjoyed her more during these times for she seemed even more

outgoing that normal. When she sat before him, he noticed that she was showing concern and not passion as he had expected. “What is the matter Solandia?”

“Brimlic from Second Spring Cave told me some distressing things for the man talks incessantly while he shares pleasures.” Solandia loved the fact that she could go to her mate for any reason without feeling uncomfortable. “Did you know that many in the Second Spring are planning on moving to other camps if the Losaduna do not remove him from leadership?”

“I have heard rumors, but I have not talked to many from that cave for I wanted to talk with Kaunai first.”

“I am so mad about that. Brimlic is convinced that Kaunai could not possibly be a good leader because many think he is too young.”

“He is much younger than Netdi and I think many were comfortable with the thought that Netdi would lead them next and were disappointed that he gave up his cave to mate with Madenia.”

“It is still not right, but even so Brimlic thinks Hilmoi is planning on naming Retchen to follow him. Everyone knows even though it was not proven that he was part of that mess with Charoli and though he did not take part in attacking Madenia, he still helped them by giving them food, supplies and information.”

“That may be true, but the Losaduni can only interfere at the request of the cave. It is not something we would initiate on our own, still there are many who would be worried at the loss of a cave for so minor an incident.”

“I am not sure what has been happening is so minor.”

Netdi gently rubbed Madenia’s abdomen even though she was not yet showing when she was dress, now while she lay beside him without her clothing he could see and feel the small bump where her child grew. She was so beautiful when she was blessed he had gone to Losaduna of North Cave during that summer meeting and asked if it was safe to share pleasures. When she explained that is appeared to not only be safe but needed by the woman as long as precautions were taken there should be no problem. This time he was even more drawn to her as the child grew within her.

“Netdi, I really do not mind if you want to return to Second Spring. I know you have been thinking about it and talking about it with Kaunai and he is right that it is your camp and you should be leader after Hilmoi.”

How could he explain to her that the people of Second Spring had turned against his brother and he was not sure he wanted to have anything to do with them? But it was his home cave and in the back of his mind he could understand their fears. Hilmoi had been a good parent but as much as everyone though he was the man of his hearth, Netdi knew better. His mother had mated to the leader of Second Spring Cave for only a few months when she was blessed and her mate died in a hunting accident when he slipped on ice hunting mammoths. An enraged female crushed

him beneath her feet before the hunters could kill her. It had been her mother that arranger for his mother to mate with the hunt leader of Second Spring Cave and her mother had been so shocked and numb from the death of her mate she had never fought it. He was glad she had finally told him the story for he thought the man of his hearth a silly man. Apparently enough people remembered the former leader and guess that his spirit had been used by the Mother to bless his mother with it prior to taking her mate.

“I promise I will begin to talk with the various leaders of the cave tomorrow after I talk again with Kaunai.”

She turned her head and kissed him sweetly and then snuggled against him once again and slept.

Chapter 26

Dosalia woke to the feeling of being full and smiled as she felt the light touches of Kaunai’s hands on her breast and the heat of his body pressed tightly against her back. How had she missed being with him all those years since her return and why had he never approached her before. Pressing her hips against him she felt his groan throughout her body and all thoughts of getting up faded as he began to press into her again and again, filling her as she had never been before.

When she woke again she felt his arm loosely around her and knew he was asleep. Gently untangling herself she used a night basket and put on only her tunic wanting to get something to eat for them both and to see what time it was. Just as she was getting ready to leave she heard him say, “I will be waiting for you to return.” Smiling she shook her head and headed toward the main hearth to see what was left over from the night before. As she moved down the passage most leather drapes were closed except for the one for her hearth. When she looked in to see Trilon asleep with a woman who was not the one he had started with and she felt heaviness in her chest but continued on. She was surprised to see her mother awake with fresh meat cooking over the fire and tea already brewed. When she kissed her mother’s cheek in greeting she noticed that it was still dark although it was getting lighter. “What are you doing up so early Mother? I would have thought you and Losaduna would still be sleeping.”

“We had a lot to talk about this morning. Losaduna is meditating this morning and I thought I would take the time to cook something for when he come out. You know how exhausted he is when he is talking to the Mother, but since there are so many visitor I thought making a roast would be a good idea then as they awake they can have food and I will not have to watch it.”

“I would like to take some of the roast and maybe any leftover vegetables if I may.” Her mother waved her arm toward the food and Dosalia took a tightly woven mat plate and cut some of the roast and placed it over cold vegetables then took a small water bag her mother often had hanging nearby.

He watched her walk by and for the first time since he arrived he knew he had made a mistake in not choosing to spend the Spring Celebration with Dosalia. Pushing the woman off him as if he could no longer stand her touch, Trilon pulled on his tunic despite the woman’s moans. When he

looked back she was already back to sleep and he realized he did not know her name but he was sure she was from the visiting cave. Pulling on his legging he left the hearth just in time to see Dosalia enter a chamber at the end of the passage and ran so that he could talk with her but when he entered the chamber was empty looking around he saw a smaller passage in the hall and followed it sure that she had gone in that direction.

Dosalia entered the small chamber surprised but pleased to see that Kaunai, still undress, had restarted the fire and it had warmed the small area. "You do fire and I do the food." Kaunai returned her smile as he rose and took the food from her then pulled her tunic off and placed a feather light kiss on her lips. "I missed you."

Looking down she could see he was once again becoming excited and she laughed. "Food first Kaunai then we will see what happens." Even as she said the words she could feel the moisture gathering.

Chapter 27

Netdi looked at Brimlic stunned by what he heard. "How long has this been going on? How could you all have allowed it to go on so long?"

"Netdi, when your mother's mother arranged to have Hilmoi mate with her, we all felt that she was strong enough to control him. It was known to all that she would not share pleasures with anyone including Hilmoi for four summers so deep was her grief. We turned to him because he had been the hunt leader for so long it just seemed a natural thing to do. When she found she was blessed with you shortly after her mating to Hilmoi, she started to appear her old self but after you were born and it was obvious that the spirit of Nonloi was used, she became very protective of you and would let no one near you for a very long time especially Hilmoi. People eventually forgot about Nonloi and just assumed Hilmoi was the man of your hearth and essentially he was since he was your mother's mate at the time of your birth. Hilmoi was not a pleasant person during those years for you were everything to your mother. She told me once just before she was blessed with Kaunai that she thought the best way to protect you was to share pleasures with Hilmoi."

"I know she never joined Mother Festivals so Hilmoi knew that his spirit was probably used for Kaunai but he looked so much like you mother he was never sure. When you were sent to North Cave after your mother died to supposedly learn leadership from Gulloni he began to change then. I do not think there was a day that went by that he was not yelling at the boy and believe me we did our best to ease the harshness of Hilmoi's taunts. When you returned he never said a word to Kaunai but concentrated on you and how you were going to be his legacy. When you never returned to Second Spring Cave, Kaunai took the brunt of Hilmoi's disapproval. I am not sure when it changed but Hilmoi put him in position to fail and every time Kaunai succeeded Hilmoi found fault and when he did not react to Hilmoi's degradations there were times when Hilmoi struck him though seldom in front of others. If Hilmoi started degrading anyone else in the cave, no matter whom it was, Kaunai took the blame for whatever slight Hilmoi thought had occurred. It was his attack on Stelio for not going to a bead woman that many in the cave had

enough, but Kaunai again stepped up telling Hilmoi that he had advised Stelio to wait another year.”

“When Retchen joined the Second Cave Hilmoi’s abuse of Kaunai became worse even going so far as to accuse him of stealing. If Kaunai had been a lesser man, he would not have survived especially when Hilmoi gave the position of Hunt Leader to Retchen. Granted he was older but I have never seen the man hunt during a summer meeting and he handles a spear as if it was just a stick. None of the kills from those few hunts that were successful can be attributed to him even though everyone hunting saw him throw his spear. If Kaunai had not taken some younger men out behind Hilmoi’s back and brought back meat many would not have made it through the winter. The younger men were all well versed in using that spear thrower because Kaunai taught them everyday even though Hilmoi hated the weapon telling Kaunai that it was a weapon for a woman. I personally talked with Losaduna but he felt until they met at this summer meeting there was little he could do and I am sure he gave the same to everyone who came to him.”

Netdi covered his face with his hands not realizing that his brother had been so abused and even when they talked just after Second Spring Cave’s arrival Kaunai had said nothing about what he had suffered. “I want to talk with some of the others Brimlic before I talk with Hilmoi and Losaduna. Send them one at a time to Madenia’s hearth and I will talk with them there.” He ran his hands through his hair absently thinking of how selfish he had been. “I want to talk with Kaunai first, have you seen him?”

“Not since last night.”

He pulled from her body and they both groaned with the feeling of loss but he knew that he needed to stop or they would both be too sore to function and he knew that she was already sore now. Holding her tightly, he wanted so much to stay here alone with her but there was too much at stake and they both needed to pick up their lives again. “I still want you Dosalia.”

Her laughter melted his heart as he kissed her forehead. “I am not going to be able to walk as it is but I want you again Kaunai but right now I need to go to the pool to bath and then I have to help my mother take care of all these people.”

Kaunai closed his eyes and groaned thinking of the pool she had showed him earlier. Remembering how she had looked slick and wet from the tepid water he had not been able to stop himself from taking her again within the water they had just cleaned themselves in. When they had returned to the little chamber it had been Dosalia who had been the aggressor and he had allowed her to do whatever she wanted until he thought he would explode and pulled her to him as he had taken her again. Now there was no more time for them and he had to let her go as much as he hated the thought of her returning to the man who had ignored her the evening before. He kissed her one last time for he knew that until the problems within his cave were solved or the cave disbanded he had nothing to offer her.

Dosalia kissed his quickly then rose and dressed quickly and started to leave when she suddenly turned and kissed him hard before releasing him and leaving before she said something she

would regret. When she got to the pool she quickly disrobed and entered the water grateful for the cool temperature of the water which only brought memories of the night before screaming back to her including this morning when she had taken Kaunai to the pool. Even though she was sore from his attentions, she wanted him again. Feeling the heat rising in her face at the thoughts of her actions Dosalia still could not stop the smile from forming. Kaunai had been so shocked by her aggression that he had allowed her to use his body as she wanted until he could no longer control himself. Groaning, she washed herself quickly with the foaming cleaner they had left next to the pool earlier.

Chapter 28

Dosalia was surprised when she entered her hearth to see the furs neatly covering the bedspace and her clothing piled neatly at the end. The fire was out but the hearth was neat as was the rest of the area. Quickly changing her moist leggings and tunic which had been used to dry off from the pool which would have dried but she did not want to walk around the cold cave with moist clothing. Feeling more comfortable she joined her mother who was entertaining Verdegia and several of the women from Second Spring cave that Dosalia was not sure of their names. Not wanting to interrupt, Dosalia got some tea and saw that her mother had started to dig out the front pit that many used if they were cooking a very large piece of meat or whole animal or if they were planning on making a stew. Looking back at her mother she saw that next to her was a basket of meat slices with a large amount of fat on them and her mouth began to water immediately, her mother was going to make a mammoth stew.

Unlike those that lived further north near the big ice, Mammoth was a rare site in the area of Hot Spring Cave and usually required a long trip except for midsummer when occasionally a small herd might move into the area. She and her brother were hoping that this would be one of those years so that they could test the mammoth spears they had made for the spear throwers. Right now however she was going to finish what her mother started for the sooner she got the stew started the faster they could eat it. Taking a shovel made from the antler of a megasorus and the tightly woven basket it was kept in, Dosalia began to dig the ash from the pit and put it in the basket where she would have to dump it well away from the front of the cave to be used to cover the waste trenches that would need to be covered soon. When she lifted the basket it was quickly whisked away by Kaunai who smiling took the basket out of the front of the cave. Even with the sun shining it was still cold but Kaunai wore just a light tunic. He returned quickly and waited until it was filled again and left to empty it.

Dosalia jumped into the pit and removed all unburned wood and burning stones that had been smothered as the ash was formed and then finished taking the remainder of the ashes out. It did not have to be perfect but the enough as needed to be cleaned out to reach the rocks that lined the pit. As she handed the logs that were partially burned to Kaunai, she looked around as saw that her mother had not had time to place burning stones near the pit. Getting out of the shallow pit, Dosalia went to a storage area that held the fire stones and was surprised that most had been used. Taking what she needed she place them in the pit layering the bottom of the pit with them and then placing the partially used burning stones on top.

Kaunai handed Dosalia the unburned wood and then went to where she directed and returned with large pieces to place then them then returned with an arm load of smaller pieces that would be used to catch the pile on fire. Because of the location of the pit, very little wind would affect it and so it would not burn to hot and therefore burn out rapidly. Having done this task at Second Spring he knew what she needed as he went to the small storage area and returned with Burning stone chips, cattail fuzz and fireweed along with dried cattail stalks and placed it on top. Dosalia smiled at him and his chest hurt glad that she was pleased.

Looking about at the women at the nearest hearth, he noticed that there were few people around considering there were two caves living in the same area. "Where is everyone?" Dosalia looked at him and then around the immediate hearth and concerned went to her mother.

"Mother where is everyone?"

"Laduni and Netdi decided that since the firestone were so low and there were plenty of people that they would take several and get some. A few from Second Spring also went with them and I promised them stew for when they return."

"The pit is ready all I have to do is light it."

"Wonderful. You light it and we are almost done getting everything ready to put in it." It was only then that Dosalia saw that the other women were working on preparing vegetables and grains.

Chapter 29

Netdi listened to Jinlio as he explained the reasons people were against his brother. "You have to understand Netdi that many of us only made Hilmoi leader because your mother was blessed and there was a good chance that you were created by the Mother using Nonloi's spirit. That belief was reinforced when you grew so much taller than Hilmoi and you do not have his dark hair. You also have Nonloi's eyes. There are enough of us that remember Nonloi and how good a leader he was, and they gave Hilmoi a chance to be a good leader but he has failed. Do not misunderstand me Netdi, everyone in the Second Spring like and respect your brother and we know what he has suffered, but there is not only his age but the fact that he has difficulty making a decision quickly and that can be deadly. He is you and has not had any but Hilmoi to teach him and that has been lacking so what he has learned it was on his own during summer meetings."

"How would the second act if I return to lead?"

"There is no one who wants to leave their home Netdi, but if you take the leadership of the second, the relief of everyone would be tremendous."

"I want to know why no one interfered with Hilmoi's abuse of Kaunai?"

“Kaunai put himself in position for the abuse trying to protect others. We finally had enough and told him that if he struck the boy again we would remove him from his care. Kaunai came to each of us and told us that we needed to stay out of the situation since we did not know what was going on.”

“What does that mean?”

“You will have to ask him.”

As they collected burning stones, Netdi heard the same story over and over, some more embellished some barely facts but all told him they had planned leaving Second Spring Cave during the Spring meeting. He needed to talk once again with Madenia to make sure she understood just what they were agreeing to and he needed to talk with his brother.

As they approached Hot Springs Cave Jinlio approached him with a warning. “I do not know what is going on between Retchen and Hilmoi but it is not healthy since Hilmoi ignores the son of his hearth for this trouble maker and believe me he is a trouble maker.”

“This I know. I have never trusted him and I do not know how he came to be at Second Spring or why he is important to Hilmoi but I will watch him.”

When they entered the cave all who had traveled to get burning stones felt the immediate warmth of the cave but more enticing was the smell of the mammoth stew that was bubbling in a stretch hide pot over the hot coals of the pit at the front entrance. They all moved quickly to store the stones and returned to their assigned areas so that they could clean the stone dust off and be ready when the stew was complete. Netdi by passed the hearth he shared with Madenia and went to where he knew his brother was staying and was surprised to see him in the small room alone asleep, shaking him awake he sat next to him on his bedspace.

“What?” Kaunai’s sleepy response went unanswered and he turned to look at Netdi and saw that his brother was very angry. “What happened?” He sat up and rubbed his face to wake himself.

“I have spent the day with many from Second Spring Cave while we were out gathering burning stones and heard much of what happened at the Second Spring since I left. Why Kaunai? Why would you allow such abuse and not tell me or come to me for help?” Netdi stood again and began to pace the small area.

Kaunai watched his brother’s pacing and swung his legs over the edge of the sleeping area. “Netdi, I have never in my life ever seen you happier than when you were finally able to convince Madenia to mate with you. I remember the years of sorrow that she would not ever let you near and who could blame her after what she suffered. I watched when your happiness about her agreeing to join in the First Rites only to be shattered when she could still not stand to be alone with any man comfortably even the Losaduna of Hot Springs. Remember I was there when they called for the council when the Mamutoi man returned Charoli to Hot Springs and I cheered that you were staying with Hot Springs and the Madenia seemed comfortable with you

at last. When the daughter of your hearth was born I knew that there was nothing that anyone could do to reduce the joy I felt for you. Hilmoi has never injured me. He strikes out for no reason and did so even before he was injured because he knows that he is usurping your place. The leadership of Second Spring is and always has been yours and though he may not be the best leader he has been a competent leader until recently. I know he never wanted to be the leader and only did so for that time when you would have the competence enough to take the leadership from him. When you can and stayed with Hot Springs something in him changed. Every time I was successful he degraded me as if he did not want me to be successful. He does not want me to follow him as leader of the Second Spring and when he was injured so severely he feared he would die and I would become leader that is why he allowed Retchen in.”

“That makes no sense to punish you for succeeding and then bring in a failure. Doesn’t he realize that the people of the Second Spring are ready to leave because of all this?”

“I truly do not think he cares. I was not going to ever tell you if they did not have enough courage to replace him if they felt threatened. You have a wonderful life here with a loving mate and a beautiful daughter.”

“But it is my responsibility Kaunai. I am the oldest and I only thought of myself while you have suffered because of me.”

“I did not suffer all that much for every time I saw you at the summer meetings it was as if you have found a new reason to be joyful and shared it with me.”

“I am going to talk with Madenia but she has already said she was willing to go to the Second Spring and I am sure her mother will go as well.”

“Netdi, are you sure you want to do that. I can try harder and make them accept me a the leader.”

Netdi smiled and was thankful that his brother was willing to do something that he did not want so that he would be free of that responsibility. “It is something that I have to do.”

Chapter 30

“Why have you been avoiding me?” Trilon’s voice startled Dosalia as she placed soft furs near the hot spring entrance for those who needed them. Usually her mother did this for Losaduna but as they had so many visitors, Solandia was busy enough and Dosalia knew this would ease her mind a little. She had already taken furs that were wet and hung them to dry in the small alcove used for a sweat bath to dry and now that she was almost finished with the task of cleaning the area, she had to face the fact that perhaps she had been avoiding Trilon.

Turning she looked into his face and felt that wrenching need once again and wondered if perhaps she had thought she meant more to him than she really did. “I have not been hiding Trilon, there are many tasks I need to do especially since there are so many who came to the cave.”

Trilon closed on her and pressed her against the wall of the entrance to the inner area and could feel the small tremors running through her body. "I have missed you." He bent his head and captured her lips and with a sob, Dosalia put her arms around his neck and pulled him tighter against her opening her mouth to his invasion. Even as her body ignited with wanting him, her mind rejected that he would choose someone else for a Mother Ceremony of the Spring Festival that should have been their time to affirm how they felt towards each other yet he had chosen someone else. Yet here she was melting in his arms without so much as a fight and while her mind cried out her body wanted his.

Never stopping the kiss Trilon lifted her into his arms and carried her into the steaming chamber of the hot pool. He did not want her to think, only to feel what he felt for her. He wanted to feel his sorrow that he was too used to sharing with many during Mother Ceremonies he had not thought to reject the invitations from the other women. He had thought of nothing but her since he woke and now he was nearly exploding with want of her, but he wanted more than her body. He almost smiled as he removed her clothing to find her wet and ready for him. Knowing he barely was holding onto his control and he wanted, needed to be in her body. He removed her leggings and then his own releasing himself which eased the ache somewhat. As he pressed into her, her muscles tightened around him as he seated himself deep and sighed with relief.

Capturing her lips again he removed her tunic and then his own moving his lip to her neck then slowly to her breast then he captured her nipples, each in its turn, feeling her liquid bath him as she tried to get him to move. Even as he felt her body tighten around him, his own relaxed for he felt her first pleasures spiral through her body as she pulled him to her lips trying to devour him. Even as he feasted on her mouth his hands explored her body as he fitted himself tighter against her opening. When she wrapped her legs around him and he slipped into her even more.

The Losaduna of Second Spring Cave entered the small area where the brothers talked. Kaunai had shown him the area shortly after moving into it, knowing he could relax without being in the constant view of Hilmoi he had kept the knowledge to himself. Now listening to the brothers talking, he wondered if he should have interfered long ago and try and convince Netdi to bring his new mate to the Second Spring Cave. It was Kaunai who noticed him first and stopped talking midsentence which brought his brother's attention as he turned and saw the Losaduna of the Second Spring.

"I heard your words Netdi and I will support you as I am sure the rest of the Losaduni will."

"Madenia has already said she would go with me but I want to be sure she understands what that might mean. I am sure that her mother will want to stay with her as well especially since she has been blessed again."

"Which hearth will you use? You know that the hearth of your mother was not large and was never expanded, and for a growing family and your mate's mother who currently resided in one of the largest hearths in the Hot Spring Cave. She and her daughter are used to having their space and with the little alcove within the hearth they privacy as well."

“Lenai and her mate and children moved back to North Cave to be with her mother so I will take her hearth for my own and allow Hilmoi and Kaunai to remain where they are.”

“Hilmoi gave that hearth to Retchen when he came to the Second Spring.”

“Has Retchen been accepted by the cave then?” Netdi knew that had the members of the Second Cave accepted Retchen he would not be able to move his family into the largest hearth of Second Spring.

“There was never a vote. Hilmoi said he was a member of Second Spring and no one disputed it.”

“Then he is not a member and I will take Lenai’s hearth. There are going to be many changes coming to Second Spring and I doubt that they will be enjoyed by all.”

“Let us wait a few days and allow everyone to recover from the Spring Celebration then we can ask for a meeting of the Second Spring Cave and have the members of the Hot Spring Cave there as witnesses.”

“You think we will need witnesses?”

“Absolutely.”

Dosalia rose and dressed with tears in her eyes as she looked at the man sleeping so deeply on the furs they had placed next to the pool. He had asked her to mate with him at the first summer matrimonial but thoughts of Kaunai had filled her mind for just that moment of time and the confusion was evident on her face. “I need time Trilon, I do not know how to answer you.” He had taken her in anger then but even in his anger he made sure she received pleasure. Now sore and confused she left him sleeping to return to her own hearth.

Chapter 31

Behind her close hide covering the entrance to her hearth, Dosalia worked on the special knife her mother had described days before. Putting all her concentration on the knife allowed her to put off thinking about her feelings for both men. It had been very early when she left Trilon and she went to the rear pools and washed her body and her hair trying to calm her mind but her feelings and her body remained confused as she reacted whenever she thought of either man. After failing to fall asleep again she had risen and left the cave to the spot where she buried the higher quality flint for her own special needs. Not wanting to waste the flint she worked the chalk cortex off the flint then started making blanks taking two thick wedges for the knife first and then taking as many blacks as she could from the rest of the flint nodule. Now that they had a better idea of the size of the small flint heads needed for the smaller spear shafts, she was able to take blanks down until the flint was almost gone and there would be very little waste.

Wrapping the other blanks in an oiled hide she put them away to use later and returned to the two blanks she left on the protective hide she used when she worked flint. Grabbing the tine of a red deer antler she worked carefully to remove small chips of flint until the back of the blank remained thick and then tapered to a thinner edge on the opposite side. Rolling her shoulders to relax them she slowly removed chips from the center of the blade edge until a semicircle was removed and she was pleased that she had not broken the piece. Taking a smaller piece of bone she pressed off even smaller pieces until the blade around the semicircle was as thin as the edge. Wrapping the sharpened edge in the hide covering she rubbed the thickened edge across a flattened rock to take away any sharp edges. She put the piece aside to await a handle knowing that when her mother used the knife to remove tendons and ligaments attached to the long bones of animals to be used for sewing and other uses.

Standing and walking around her hearth to make some teas allowing her muscles to relax she was shocked to see Kaunai standing inside her hearth watching her. She had never heard him enter but one look at his face she could see admiration in them and she relaxed. "I have seen many people work flint but never have I seen anyone working it like I have seen you work flint and this was extraordinary. What did you make? It seems to be a very strange knife."

The sound of his rich voice made her melt inside and then thoughts of their time together caused the opposite directions. She shook her head wondering what was the matter with her. She had left Trilon just hours before and now wanted Kaunai's arms around her and to have his lips on hers. "Thank you. It is a knife for my mother to remove tendons from the long bones after the meat is removed so that we can use them for other things and the carvers will have the bones with less on them so they will clean easier."

"I missed you at the evening meal yesterday and you have not seem to eaten since this morning so I came to see if you were well."

"This morning?"

"The sun is nearly down." He pulled a basket from behind him and she smelled the stew she had missed the previous evening. "Losaduna gave this to me and said that it was a habit that you missed meals. Your mother added some grain cakes with honey and pine nuts as well."

At the mention of food Dosalia could feel her hunger grow as he talked of the food he brought and went to the basket and took it from him. Using her fingers she put some of the reheated stew in her mouth and moaned with pleasure and Kaunai laughed quietly at her reaction pleased to see that she was not ill just involved in her craft. He watched her finish her meal then clean her hands of all the dirt and grease so that she would not transfer it to the flint. He watched as she put the chips of flint into a basket and cleaned her area, placing the knife and black into a leather and placing it in with other items in a basket at the end of her bedspace.

"Hilmoi is talking in the main hearth and demanding everyone's attention, would you like to stay here and talk? Perhaps you can think of a new tool to help me make the notches at the end the spears and spear thrower that will allow it to lock but release easier."

Dosalia smiled thinking that such a discussion would be a perfect way to ease her mind and body. “I made a tool for Larogi for just that purpose. He thought that the spear was not stable enough on the spear thrower the way Jondalar made it when he first came through but when I told him of the changes Jondalar made he has been trying to make something similar and since I learned to make the tool Jondalar used I made one for him.”

“Could you tell me?”

Dosalia smiled and proceeded to show him the spear thrower and spears that Jondalar made just before she left the Zelandonii and how they stayed together better until the spear thrower was used hard enough to separate the two. “It takes a little getting used to but it works well.”

“I saw you use the two piece spear during the first summer’s hunt after your return and since and I have tried something else than the hook to keep them together. My spears and spear throwers are in my area I will go get them.”

“I will go with you, I am tired now of being in my hearth and need to stretch my legs.” Before following him she took a basket from the carved shelf above her bedspace.

Chapter 32

Kaunai pulled his quiver that held his long spear ends and his spear thrower and around the base were several of the shorted spear points that attached to the longer spears but separated on impact. When he pulled his spear thrower out Dosalia saw the carvings on the back of such intricate detail she was surprised that she had not noticed it sooner as they had been on several summer hunts together. When he pulled one of the long shafts out, she noticed that once side of the shaft was dyed so that the wood was darker. Watching as he attached the smaller spear point with a twist so unlike she had learned to attach the smaller spear but she remained quiet then she noticed that the small shaft was also dyed but when the two were attached the darker side was opposite to the longer shaft.

“Why are the shafts different?”

“When I was learning to use the spear thrower I thought I noticed that the spear point entered the animal different than how it was thrown as if it twisted in the air. At first I only put the shaft in a mixture of urine and coal and ashes and after it dried and I used it I saw the flash of the darker then lighter color of the long shaft and I was able to track it better. I also thought that if it spun maybe if the small shaft was twisted on somehow that it would disengage before striking the target. I did not know if it would need the weight of the longer shaft so I made the smaller spear point shafts with oak which is heavier. I am still working with it but instead of the hook I carved shallow curved cuts into the small spear point and matching bumps on the long shaft. I think depending on who is throwing the spear determines if the tip comes off, but it took several tries to get it to work. The long shaft does not spin off all the time but will still bounce off when the spear strikes. It does not seem to matter with most animals but I have not tried it on Megasorus or mammoths yet.”

Dosalia examined the strange marks within the shaft of the smaller spear point and on the shaft of the larger spear when he separated them and handed her the pieces. She had never seen anything like it and wanted to see how it worked but he mind kept reliving the short time they had shared together and she could feel her body's response to him though he had made no advancement toward her in that manner. Hesitantly she looked at him and looked away quickly almost groaning at the sight that was surely his excitement. Unable to keep her mind from reliving his invasion of her body with his she had to stifle a groan that threatened to escape.

Kaunai nearly groaned aloud watching her caress the spear shaft as she examined it. He knew that he could not approach her unless she made the first move. This had to be a friendship first and she needed to be able to trust him enough to make it more, but he was already in pain with wanting her. Now that he had lain in her arms there was no call to fantasize how it would be between them and he knew that it was harder now that he knew how well they fit together than when he had no knowledge. "I was thinking of adding more turns but I think it would prevent the long shaft from separating when it stuck so I may try with less when I make more." He wanted to try and turn his mind from his thoughts of their time together but he was failing miserably.

"We have to try this with the mammoth spear points." Dosalia said as she gave the spear pieces back to Kaunai, her fingers touching his hand and lingering just for a moment to feel his warmth as she slowly pulled away until he caught her finger tips and pulled her to him, capturing her lips with the warmth of his. Slowly he explored her mouth as if he needed to taste her and savor that taste. This time she could not stop the groan as his hand moved beneath her tunic to tease her nipples with the pads of his fingers.

"Kauani." She gasped when he released her mouth to pull the tunic from her body and quickly shed his own wanting to feel her against his chest as he continued to explore her mouth. The pain he was feeling as his need increased did not matter only the fact that she was in his arms. He pulled her to the bed space so that he could lay her down and explore her body at will.

"No Verdegia, I do not want to separate you from your daughter. You are vital to us in your help with Lonia and with the new child coming we will need you even more. As much as I have love my time her, I have to return to the Second Spring cave."

Verdegia looked around her at all her belongings that she collected over the years of her life that she thought to give to her daughter one day but she knew that this move might mean that many of her things would be lost. "What of Madenia's legacy? She raised her arms to encompass the contents of her hearth.

Netdi took and hugged his mate's mother gently knowing she was more scared that against the move. "We will take all that belongs to you and Madenia. If the hearth I want is not available then I will join other hearths to give you both the room you want. This is my promise to you."

Verdegia knew how lucky she was that this man was mated to her daughter and did not want to put a wedge between them especially since Lonia's arrival. "I just want us to be comfortable."

“I know and I appreciate all you have done to make me feel welcome. I lost my mother at an early age and have looked on you as her replacement and I am not willing to give you up in my life. I have a feeling I will need your council in the future on how to control your daughter.”

Returning his smile, Verdegia slapped his shoulder and saw the happiness on Madenia’s face and relaxed.

“I’m telling you old man that they are planning something.”

“Retchen, who are you talking about?”

“Those two whelps of your hearth. Both of them have more friends here than either of us realized. Now your youngest is messing with the flint woman and if he gets control of that mine he will have enough power to change the structure of the Second Spring Cave almost at will. Why don’t you approach her mother and suggest a mating between her and I that way the mine will be in our control. Last night I heard the old man whose hearth is near the entrance told his mate that they were staying with Second Spring for now. He was sure things would be better shortly. What do you think he meant by that?”

“How would I know Retchen, I already have Laduni in my corner and he will help with the Losaduni and the other leaders. Your manners are atrocious that you would listen on others’ conversations.”

“It is how I have survived since that fool Charoli got himself caught. It brought up too many things that people blame on me that I had nothing to do with.”

“You cannot lie to me boy. Everyone knows you gave them supplies so that they would allow you to join them if they were going after women. Only fear kept the girl from North cave from naming you and we both know it. She is still not right. You are lucky you were not involved in Madenia’s attack she recovered and would have identified you in a minute just as she identified the others.”

“There was never any proof.”

“Get out of here Retchen and be useful and find me some food.”

“One day ol’ man.”

“One day what? You are too much of a coward to do anything Retchen now get me some food.”

Chapter 33

He could not stop and she did not want him to as he seated himself deep in her body and pressed to go deeper. Feeling her relax he completely sheathed himself in her hot folds that contracted and released around him and even though they had both found released just moments before they

both wanted more. As he began to move she lifted her legs and locked them behind his back and he pressed his body tightly against hers reveling that she could complete him so well. With short strokes he felt her contractions tighten against him as she once again soared with pleasure. Capturing her nipple he bit slightly only to bring it into his mouth and sooth the slight pain with the heat of his mouth. Her body continued to welcome his with her moist heat until her body stiffened and she locked around him bringing him with her in the rush of pleasure that he could no longer contain.

When his body finally relaxed he bent his head to capture her lips once again even as she continued to milk the essence from him he rested his forehead on hers, kissing her lips occasionally until the tension on her body relaxed and she was once again able to breathe. Reluctantly he disengaged from her body and smiled at her groan of regret, surprised to see that her leggings were still attached to one of her legs while his remained around his ankle. Then he did laugh and kissed her hard.

Looking at their feet Dosalia joined him in his laughter and held him to her unable to do anything else. "You take my breath away Dosalia." He kissed her again and pulled the furs over them and pulled her tightly against his body.

She rested her head on his shoulder as she ran her hands over his sculptured chest and felt the ripples of the muscles as he responded to her exploration. "Trilon ask me to mate with him during the first matrimonial of the summer meeting." She felt his stiffen and then relax as he held her tighter.

"It is my fault. I should have come to you sooner for I have loved you since we were children but I had nothing to offer until now. I will not be the next leader of the Second Spring cave the people there do not trust me because of my youth and the fact that my decisions did not come fast enough to suit them. Netdi is returning to Second Spring Cave to lead no matter what Hilmoi says or thinks. I am a good carver Dosalia and a very good hunter and tracker. There are things I have carved at Second Spring Cave that would more than satisfy the greediest of Cave for a bride price. I have seen that you have deep feelings for the Zelandonii man but I love you as well. Would you consider me as a co-mate?"

Dosalia lifted herself up and looked into his eyes and saw that he was very serious. He was willing to share her with another as long as he had part of her and she could not stop the tears from forming at the two different reactions from the two men. "I don't know Kaunai, I am so confused."

He kissed her gently and looked into her tear filled eyes. "I would never pressure you Dosalia but know that I am here even if you do not want me as a co-mate should you ever have need of me. I want you with every part of me but this has to be your decision." He held her against him damning the pressure both he and the Zelandonii man had placed on her but he did not want to be excluded from her life.

When Trilon left the hot pool area he immediately went to Dosalia's hearth but saw that she had closed the hide covering the opening. He wanted to kick himself for all he had done but the

woman was driving him crazy. Never had he meant to hurt her but he knew he had taken her too roughly, so much so that even he was painful from his actions. That she needed time to think about her future was not horrible and it took him years and he still did not know what he wanted until he had seen her once again. Returning to the front of the cave to Losaduna's hearth he went to his bedspace and closed the hide the cover the area wanting to think himself. If she rejected him, as she should for his treatment of her, he could not blame her. Perhaps the Losadunai were planning another trade mission and he could join them. He only knew he could not stay and not have Dosalia for his own.

Laying down still tired from the previous evening he closed his eyes hoping that the Mother would give him some insight of what he should do to get Dosalia to see that he did love her but a fear he could not describe ate at him. He could not tell her because he was unsure himself if it was because he was a stranger among her people, that he might want to return to the Zelandonii and lose her, or did he fear committing to her. In his pack were so many things that would be welcome as a bride price and he knew when North Cave arrived they would be bringing the rest of the items he had made or traded for wanting an appropriate bride price in case he could convince Dosalia of his need for her. Then he thought only of returning to the Zelandonii but now he knew that was never going to happen. The flint mine was too important to all the Losadunai.

Chapter 34

Losaduna looked at the two men and knew that they had a plan and if it was going to work they had need of him. Word had been spreading in whispers among the members of both caves and he was surprised that Retchen and Hilmoi had not heard them. They at least should have noticed that the members of Second Spring cave seemed calmer and not looking in every corner of their path for some type of attack even in this cave where those who lived here would know immediately if something was wrong.

“Losaduna of Second Spring and Netdi what can I do for you?” He was almost surprised that Netdi took the lead.

“Losaduna, I have decided to return to Second Spring Cave, but I am returning to take the leadership.”

“That is not a secret except maybe to Retchen and Hilmoi. If this is what you planned than it worked because most of Second Spring seem imminently calmer today.”

“It really would not matter at this point if Hilmoi or Retchen know for it is the people of the Second Spring that have the power now that they are here with Hot Spring Cave but they may not realize it. I want to have a meeting with the Second Spring Cave but I want the members of Hot Spring included. I think the people of Second Spring would appreciate it if as many as possible attend.”

Losaduna looked at Solandia who nodded and left the hearth. The Two men watched her leave and Netdi shook his head for he had not seen her when they entered the hearth. If he was going

to be the leader of Second Spring he needed to become more aware of his surroundings again. It was only then that he realized that he had been on edge the entire time he had been at Second Spring growing up but that watchfulness had disappeared in the comfort and safety of Hot Spring Cave.

When Solandia returned she was not alone. Laduni arched an eye brow at the three men but quietly took a seat and waited for them to tell him what they wanted. “Netdi and Losaduna of the Second Spring Cave have come to me to discuss having a meeting for the Second Spring but they would like the members of the Hot Spring Cave to also be in attendance.”

“So you are going to take the leadership?” Laduni looked at Netdi and was glad that he had provided a solution to the problem of the Second Spring Cave. He did not want to have to go the leaders and Losaduna to denounce Hilmoi when for years he had been a good leader, but the stories he was hearing of what went on bothered him tremendously.

“I am. I can no longer allow my brother or the people of the Second Spring to be injured and abused further. By having those of Hot Springs at the meeting then none can deny what occurred and the people of the Second Spring Cave may feel bold enough to take back their lives and their cave.”

“I will announce a general meeting in two days and request that the members of Second Spring attend then I will hand it to you to speak as you wish.”

“I appreciate this Laduni, I have had a home here at Hot Springs and will always consider the members here as family. Verdegia has also agreed to travel with us to help with the children.”

Laduni nodded and left the Losaduna’s hearth to begin to pass the word of the meeting and the invitation to the Second Spring by going first to Hilmoi.

It was not long after the men left that Dosalia came to stand in front of him and he could see she had been crying and the thought of her sadness puzzled him. He knew she had spent the Mother’s Ceremony with Kaunai and had been missing the previous evening as was the Zelandonii man when they gathered to eat Solandia’s wonderful mammoth stew. Looking across the hearth at the closed hide where Trilon slept and looking back at Dosalia he became concerned that one or both of these men had injured her. As he thought, he knew it was not in Kaunai to injure a woman, but what did they know of the Zelandonii man. “Come and walk with me Dosalia.” He stood and took her hand walking her out of the cave into the late afternoon. Although it was still cold they would not be out in it long as he took them to the cave containing the pool. “Tell me what has you so sad.”

“I think there is something wrong with me Losaduna. I am in love with two men and both of them want me to be their mates.”

“The Zelandonii?”, she nodded, “and...”

“Kaunai.” She saw Losaduna’s smile and she shook her head. “It is not funny Losaduna.”

“Child, there is nothing wrong with you other than you have a great capacity to love, something you mother and I, as well as the rest of Hot Spring Cave already know. It does not matter what they want Dosalia, it matters what you want, what is in your heart.” I am sure Kaunai can make a good bride price but could the Zelandonii man have an appropriate bride price for your value to the Hot Spring Cave and all the Losadunai is very high. We will ask who will negotiate for him, perhaps Keylo or Filonia. I am sure your mother’s sister Serinia will love the chance to negotiate for Kaunai and you know you mother will be in her glory at the news.”

“But Losaduna, I want both men.”

She saw the thoughtful look come over his face at her words. “Both?” Seeing her nod his smile returned. “Then you want to co-mate.”

“I don’t think Trilon would want that or accept it.”

“It does not matter Dosalia. I he does not love you enough to do this then it is better to know now.”

Sighing Dosalia nodded. “Not yet. I will tell him when I am ready.”

Chapter 35

Laduni was not surprised but those of the Hot Spring Cave that decided to attend and all of Second Spring Cave was present as if they knew this was the start and finish of what had been occurring at their cave. Hilmoi and Retchen sat in the front not because it was what Hilmoi wanted but because of Retchen who forced others to move back to give them room. Only Kaunai and Netdi refused to move for the pair which earned them a heated look from Retchen who received smiles in return from the brothers. Next to Netdi sat the Losaduna of the Second Spring cave who ignored all the by play.

“This meeting was called for the Losaduna of Second Spring Cave but I think that I will give the Mother’s Staff to Netdi.”

Netdi stood and took the staff from Laduni and faced the crowd. “I have listened to many from Second Spring Cave since their arrival about what has been occurring at their home cave. I am disturbed that no one thought to get aid not only for themselves but my brother as well. You all know that a cave lives only by the people who live within its boundaries. My mother was mated to the previous leader of Second Spring Cave and I have been told all my life that it was his spirit the Mother used to create me. Also as the oldest of Hilmoi’s recognized hearth son it is my duty to take over leadership if I feel the man of my hearth can no longer care for the people in his charge, and that time has come now. As of this moment I am assuming leadership of the Second Spring Cave. Is there any among the members of Second Spring Cave that feel they can do a better job of leading the I can now is the time to speak, but they like I will require the approval of the all the members of the Second Spring Cave.”

“I do not approve.” Retchen stood glaring at Netdi.

“You are not a member of Second Spring Cave Retchen.” Netdi’s voice was calm as if nothing Retchen said mattered as he turned to the rest of the crowd. He could see the vein in his forehead begin to pound as his color deepened at the words but Netdi was not going to give him an inch.

“Hilmoi made me a member of the Second Spring Cave.”

Sighing, Netdi turned to look at Retchen again. “Retchen, you know that there must be approval from the people of the Second Spring Cave for you to be a member, which did not happen. Hilmoi’s announcement is not good enough you have to be accepted by the members of Second Spring Cave.” Turning away once again Netdi lifted his hands. “Members of the Second Spring Cave of the Losadunai, who among you accepts Retchen as a member of Second Spring Cave?” No one spoke as they looked around the area watching to see if anyone would allow Retchen entry, not even Hilmoi lifted his hand to make the claim that Retchen was a member. Turning back to Retchen Netdi saw the anger in the man’s face as he looked at each member of the cave and saw relief and from those of the Hot Spring Cave he saw that they agreed with those of Second Spring. “Retchen you have not been accepted as a member of Second Spring Cave and therefore your words do not carry weight at this meeting. Turning from Retchen, Netdi once again addressed the members of his cave. “Who among the Second Spring Cave accepts me as the leader of Second Spring Cave?” The roar after the quiet was tremendous. When all was quiet once again and before Netdi could speak only one voice could be heard.

“It is about time you came to your senses.” Everyone looked at Hilmoi as he began to get up and followed his movements until he stood beside Netdi. Staring into the man’s eyes he raised he could not be prouder but changing leaders was a big thing among the Losadunai and he had hoped that Netdi would have returned when he was injured but in convincing the Losaduni and leaders that he was able to continue he apparently convinced Netdi as well. “I gave you what time I could so that you would know a life without the pressures of leadership but I am too tired to continue and it is about time you realized that you have a duty. The leadership of the Second Spring Cave was always yours to have and I promised your mother that I would raise you and make it so.” Hilmoi turned and looked at the son of his mate that was so like he was as a young man. “Kaunai, in front of all who is here I apologize for my treatment of you, but you were becoming too good at leading Second Spring cave and that was never what I wanted for you. It was not your task to lead but your brothers. Being a leader can suck the life out of you and I wanted you to be free of that, it is the only excuse I can give you.”

“I was supposed to be the leader of Second Spring. You told me I would be.” Retchen yelled as he stood.

Hilmoi turned on Retchen with a face none had seen on him before. “You fool. You approached me wanting to help me you said. You tried to use me as I used you to get the son of my hearth to return to his duty. Do you honestly think that anyone in the Second Spring Cave is so stupid to want a lazy overbearing man who tries to command them to do thing he is unwilling to do

himself. I thought they would have sent for Netdi long before and you were just an instrument nothing more. You are not even a decent hunter and other and intimidating others and giving orders, I find you have little to recommend you.”

Retchen lunged at Hilmoi but Kaunai and Trilon were too fast for Retchen and caught him before he got within arm distance of the previous leader. Kaunai’s voice was low but carried so all heard. “You will keep your hands to yourself or I will make sure that the same punishment that happened to Reggdi and Slindi is visited on you Retchen.” The anger and hate was obvious in his feature but he said nothing more and turned and went to his bedspace pulling the covering over the area.

Chapter 36

Dosalia watch Trilon and Kaunai as the stopped Retchen’s attack on Hilmoi and after Retchen left, they congratulated each other and Netdi soon joined them. They seemed to get along well and Losaduna’s words to her finally made sense. She watched them until the meeting ended and people once again disbursed and she saw the three men leave the cave for whatever reason. She stayed with her mother to clean up the hearth and help her start the evening meal, but nervous about what was happening with the men, she returned to her own hearth and Began to make a small roast and started heating some grains she had soaking that she had thought to have the next day but started to heat them and added some of the last pine nuts and a few wild carrots. She wished she had found some of the honey but she knew her mother added honey in her stew and there was not a lot left to begin with. She could not wait until they could collect fresh greens and roots.

When the roast was near to being ready she pulled it to the side of one of the forks that kept it over the fire so that it would continue to cook at a slower pace. Looking out her hearth she saw that Trilon, Kaunai and Netdi were talking around the fire at her mother’s hearth probably waiting for food. Inhaling deeply she closed her eyes then went out into the passage and walked to the men who immediately noticed her. “Trilon, Kaunai I would like you invite you to my hearth.” Kaunai immediately smiled and rose and he turned to help Trilon up but the look on Trilon’s face was questioning as he looked at the younger man. Turning she walked back to her hearth and hoped both men followed her for she did not know if she could wait any longer to see their reactions. She thought she knew how Kaunai would react and she hoped how she thought Trilon would react was wrong.

Dosalia served both men and her on scapular plates and stayed quiet and listened to the two men discuss the change of events at the Second Spring Cave and was pleased that both seemed truly interested in each other’s opinions. When they had finished eating Dosalia brought out some grain cakes made with bits of a few of the remaining apples, mixed grains, and ground berries that were often found during the early spring even under the snow. They were a little tart this time of year but when boiled down they produced thick sweet syrup. “I asked you both here because I have made a decision.” She looked at Trilon knowing that she wanted him to understand. “Kaunai also asked me to mate with him Trilon and I have decided that I want both

of you for my mates. If you are agreeable to a co-mating then I will tell my mother and she will need to talk to you about who will negotiate for you.”

Their eyes melded but Dosalia could not tell what he was thinking for his features were blank then color began to rise in his face as he stood quickly and left her hearth. When she would have followed him, Kaunai stopped her. “Allow him to come to term with it on his own Dosalia. He is a man with strong opinions of right and wrong and though I do not know him well I know this is something he had not thought of. If you go to him now he will be embarrassed and not make a thoughtful decision. Come let’s talk about something we need to discuss that we can include Trilon when he calms and returns.”

“Like?”

“How we are going to share you. I only know of one woman who co-mated with two men but I know many men who co-mated with two or more women and it seems that they share they time in the furs separately but occasionally all three may spend the time together. I am not sure it will be easy for any of us for I find I want you all the time and I am sure Trilon feels the same.”

“I never thought of that aspect of it, only that I wanted you both in my life.”

“It is something we will have to work out but I know that it will be hard on all of us until it is worked out.”

Losaduna saw Trilon march from the cave without even grabbing his parka and although it was spring it was still cold and there was still snow on the ground. By the look on his face Losaduna guessed that Dosalia told him of her decision and it was not setting right with him at the moment. Grabbing an extra parka after donning one himself he followed the younger man out into the cold.

The sky was brilliant with reds, orange and various shades of blue as the sun began to set but the man pacing next to the river seemed unaware of the Mother’s display as he wore a path as he moved. Losaduna could see that he was talking to himself and it was obvious that what he was feeling uppermost was anger. AS he approached he feel in step with Trilon and allowed him to continue without interference. The muttering continued but even as close as he was Losaduna could not make out the words. He remained calm waiting until Trilon’s thoughts calmed enough to talk. Knowing what he was thinking as he thought back to when he had first ask Solandia to mate with him. She had always cared for him since they were children and knew in her heart he would one day serve the Mother, but she had been honest when she told him she needed more stability. That time it was he that introduced her to his brother and as hard as it was, he had walked away so that they could get to know each other. He had to suppress a chuckle for as it turned out, Glion had been present at the hearth less than he had, volunteering for every hunt and even hunting on his own a few times until he had wounded a bison and the animal had gotten its own revenge. How Glion had managed to drag part of the animal back to the cave no one knew for they found him a short distance away crawling and dragging the result of his hunt back to the cave. The rescuers were unable to save him and he was already dead by the time they arrived

back at the cave. Both he and Solandia had been devastated but they had Larogi who they were sure the Mother used Glion's spirit to create him.

This young man needed to make the same decision, but Losaduna thought that Kaunai was more like he was in his youth and Trilon more like Glion, still the three of them would make a formidable family should they join. Remaining patient he was surprised how long it took before Trilon finally stopped and faced him. "She wants to co-mate with another man."

"As is her right." Losaduna answered him calmly seeing that his response was not the one Trilon expected. "I will only say this. If you feel you do not love Dosalia enough to do this for and with her then perhaps you should return to your people."

"Just as Dosalia needed time to think, I need the same because I do not know how I feel other than anger right now."

Chapter 37

The following morning, Netdi moved Hilmoi into the hearth with the rest of his family and Kaunai also joined them making up bed spaces in the common area for himself and Hilmoi. Too many had come to him telling them that they had overheard Retchen mumbling about revenge and he was determined that Retchen know that Hilmoi was protected. As they visited in Losaduna's hearth with several others from Second Spring, everyone became alert when Retchen advanced on Hilmoi. Netdi and Kaunai were ready to do whatever necessary but since Retchen carried no weapon they remained seated near Hilmoi and watched.

Anger was evident in Retchen's face as he approached but he looked to the two sons of Hilmoi's hearth and knew that he would have to bide his time to get his revenge but he wanted the old man to always be looking behind him. "You will not always be so well guarded old man and I will get my chance."

Kaunai smiled then chuckled at the man standing in front of them. "I have watched you Retchen and if there is any chance that you might be discomfited you will never take the chance. You are lazy and a coward. I hope you brought all your belonging because Netdi will be taking the hearth you have fouled with your presence." His smile grew as Retchen's features paled then became mottled as his anger grew. "The Plains Cave will surely want such a hunter as you back among them and even if they do not your mother is counted among them and they will not be able to deny you a space." Retchen turned quickly and walked away to the bed space he had been given.

"That perhaps was not wise." Losaduna of Second Spring reprimanded Kaunai. "That one can keep a grudge and even if he may not do something himself does not mean he will not have others to fall back on. He can be persuasive if he chooses."

"I want him to know that we are once again a family and that he is an outsider, Losaduna. The sooner he accepts that fact the safer Hilmoi will be."

Trilon watched the by play between those of the Second Spring Cave and he had to agree with the one that served the Mother that perhaps Kaunai could have brought trouble on himself. It still stung that Dosalia would want someone else besides him but he could see what she would like in this younger man. He was closer to her age, well built and for the most part very calm and accepting of what life dealt him. He was a good hunter despite the complaints that he was slow to make a decision he had not from what Trilon heard ever returned without meat. He had also heard some of Second Spring talk about his carving but he had seen no evidence of this talent yet. Kaunai was also someone Dosalia had known since childhood and had learned him over the years while he was someone she had shared her time with during summer meetings. As much as he hated the idea of sharing Dosalia, he hated the idea of living his life without her in it more. Watching as Kaunai left the hearth he followed him and did not see, the Losaduna of Second Spring put a restraining hand on Netdi's arm to keep him from following.

Seeing him enter the last chamber on the main passage, Trilon was stumped when he entered and saw no one present. He remembered Dosalia had disappeared the same way the morning after the Mother Ceremony so he entered the chamber and walked the edges wondering why such a large chamber was empty when the cave was more than over filled with people. He noticed there was a smoke hole near the ceiling of the chamber that now had sunlight streaming in and a hearth area just below. There were enough bed spaces that it could have been used by the Losaduna and family with little problems and left room for visitors. Unlike some of the other chambers that shared a wall near the pools, especially the heated pool, the walls of this chamber was cool and dry. As he neared the rear of the chamber he saw the only flaw in the smooth walls of the chamber as a rock shelf jetted out extending the side wall as if lava had found a crack in the wall and spewed forth and froze when it entered the chamber.

Stepping around the wall extension and noticed a small hall and flickering light coming from within another area when he stepped through the short passage he saw a small chamber with just a single bed space. Kaunai was bent over the fire working on what appeared to be a spear thrower. Although the fire was small it warmed the area nicely and Trilon knew that this is where Dosalia had spent the Mother Ceremony. Closing his eyes he knew that he had pushed Dosalia away with his choice of another woman, but he had not wanted to offend the Losadunai, instead he had offended Dosalia enough to share pleasures with the man before him. He looked down wondering if after her return to the Losadunai had Dosalia spent her time with this man and his appearance interfered with their plans to mate and he was actually being added to the mating? When he looked up again Kaunai was looking at him and it was not a pleased look on his face.

"I followed you to talk." Now faced with the younger man he was not sure what he wanted to say.

"Come in then and have some tea." Although his manner was courteous, his face told Trilon that he wished to be anywhere else that in his presence.

Trilon watched the efficient way Kaunai made the tea for them both and handed him a horn cup when it was ready. "I came to talk to you about Dosalia and her decision to co mate with both of us."

“I do not like it any more than you do, but I can see that Dosalia is torn between us and this would make her happy no matter the discomfort to myself. I was surprised that you thought first of yourself when you left her hearth after she made her decision. You are a very selfish man Trilon thinking only of yourself. When I arrived at Hot Spring Cave I was sure I did not have a chance to capture Dosalia heart since I know that when we were young she thought of me more as one of her brothers that she often had to care for while her mother was busy. I know you thought to try and convince her to leave the Losadunai and return to the Zelandonii but you do not understand how important Dosalia is to her people and how much her people mean to her. The mine is a wonderful find but there is varying quality of flint throughout the Losadunai area but there is only Dosalia, who to her people is a Master Flint Knapper. Just as with the Zelandonii there are those who can make a spear point but there are very few people that can make so much out of a single stone. Right after she arrived back we went on a hunt for the matrimonial. Not many of the Losadunai use spear throwers so when we corralled a mixed herd of deer, bison and antelope in a narrow canyon, many spear points were broken, but Dosalia had thought ahead and was able to put new points on the spears after the shafts were retrieved at the end of the hunt. She thought of what might be needed and brought the points needed with her. Those points were the best many had ever had on the end of their spear.”

“If you manage to convince Dosalia to return to the Zelandonii she would never be happy for Dosalia needs her family and her people as much as we need her. She would regret leaving and eventually being good in the furs will not stop that regret from eating at her. That I would never do to her for I have loved her for a very long time. As I said I do not want to co-mate with you but Dosalia loves you deeply and it would hurt her should you shun her. You have to decide for yourself if you can do this for her or are your wants and needs more important. I have already made that decision and I will be honest with you I do not think it was any easier for me.”

“How do you envision sharing her?” Trilon could remember sharing women in his youth but not in a long time.

“I will not share Dosalia at the same time, I cannot do that. Depending on where Dosalia is more comfortable living I think that either of us can find some place to spend the night depending on who she chooses for the night. I am sure there will be times that we spend alone time and I think we can give each other that room to allow each other the time outside our hearth to continue to court Dosalia.”

“I am glad you feel that way, for I do not want to share her but I know she also has strong feelings for you and not because she spent a single night in the furs with you. You think that she thought of you as a brother but sometime she began to feel differently.”

Chapter 38

Trilon watched Dosalia, her brother, Laduni and Kaunai testing the changes that Kaunai had made to the spears for the spear thrower and he felt left out. Knowing it was his own fault did not sit well with him. He had talked with Kaunai twice more since the first time he found the small alcove, knowing he had moved in with Netdi, Trilon had waited until he had seen the younger man move toward the rear of the cave before approaching him again. Knowing that he

needed to talk with Dosalia as well he did not want to approach her until he had made his decision for it was unfair and he feared if he got anywhere near her he would make a decision base on his physical need for her not on what was right for them both. The weather had warmed significantly and Laduni wanted to have one more hunt before the other caves arrived for the summer meeting. Both Losaduni had performed a search and told both leaders that a large herd of reindeer were headed north and would be available the next day. Even though the reindeer were smaller than a mammoth, Dosalia wanted at least two of those hunting with spear throwers to try the mammoth spears. Some argued that it would cause too much damage, but Laduni knew if the caves arrived soon enough there was a chance to hunt mammoth to the north. They would know more when North Cave arrived.

Wanting to be part of the group, Trilon stepped forward. "I will use one of the mammoth spears. Even if it does some additional damage it will not ruin the meat as long as we stay away from the abdomen." He saw the tentative smile on Dosalia's face and noticed that she was no longer comfortable around him and he knew why. She was uncertain she had made the right choice and that he had not talked to her since that night she made her announcement had not eased her fears.

"I will also use one of the mammoth spears, but I will take others just in case." Kaunai's smiled at everyone and Trilon saw that Dosalia was more comfortable returning his smile.

When the others turned away, Trilon lightly touched Dosalia's shoulder until she turned and looked at him. "After the hunt we need to talk." He saw that sadness appear on her face and wished he could ease it more.

With the skies just starting to grey, a group made up of both caves left the Hot Spring Cave headed South with light traveling packs and several carried pieces of the tent they would all use once the hunt was over. Based on Losaduna's description, Laduni thought he knew a perfect spot for the hunt. The shallow canyon had been used before by the Hot Spring Cave as a surround, this time however they would chase the animals through the area and take what they could get. Knowing that additional meat would come to the hosting cave from the various hunts during the summer, Laduni wanted enough meat stored so that at the end of the summer meeting the chamber would be filled enough that they would not have to hunt during the fall because very little game, except for those animals migrating would be left nearby.

The group, still fresh had not problems climbing the steep grade behind Hot Springs Cave and were pleased that once on top the rest of the trip was a slow decline to where the hunting area would be. Once everyone was accounted for Laduni sent runners ahead to make sure the animals' position was where the Losaduni said they would be while the rest of the hunters moved slower to the area. Trilon stayed close to Kaunai and Dosalia but it took a few hours for all three to be comfortable in each other's company and Trilon took the blame for that. When the sun rose the hunters stopped and checked their weapons and supplies while Laduni looked South for any sign of his runners. Once everyone and taken out traveling food to eat as they walked and drank water from a small stream, Laduni once again started the group.

By midmorning Laduni was worried because they were closing on the sight he wanted to use for the hunt and the runners had not returned and he wondered if they had changed direction or even existed. There were plenty of scrub trees, though still void of leaves were thick enough to block some of the wind and since the wind was coming from the south it was perceptibly warmer. Seeing something moving in the distance Laduni stopped everyone as he recognized Fronki of Second Spring running toward them. Laduni took a small bag that Kaunai handed him and gave it to the panting man when he stopped before him.

“Too many.” Fronki panted as he took another drink of water. He took a deep breath and bent over before straightening up again. “The herd is huge it took us two hours of running to find the end. There is no way to move that many.”

“Where are they and where are they headed?”

“They are headed in the direction Daraldi said you would want to hunt but they are not moving fast still they should start moving through the area by mid-afternoon. Daraldi is collection deadfall and other items to make blinds to hide behind and sent me ahead to tell you he will be between the narrows and the pond.”

“Excellent, they will want to get through to the water and we will be able to get however many we want.”

They started off again but this time at a trot leaving Fronki to rest until he could join them. Trilon had hunted several times with the Losadunai and this was the first time he realized how quietly they moved when on a hunt and started to look down so that he would not step on twigs and other objects that might make noise. When Kaunai came up next to him Trilon did not look up.

“Look forward Trilon and see that which will make noise before you come to it and you can avoid it without slowing down and stay on your toes.” Kaunai pulled Trilon out of the group so that he could see further ahead and also to watch the others as they ran. Although to him, Trilon thought he was making so much more noise than the rest of the group but Kaunai told him that by the time they stopped he had made a great improvement. Trilon, Dosalia and Kaunai stood on the edge of the cliff at the start of the canyon and looked east. There in the background was what looked like a dark brown cloud undulating in several directions at once but for the most part moving North West toward their direction.

Chapter 39

The first of the reindeer to reach the opening of the canyon stopped and looked ahead as if they sensed danger but after a few minutes began the trek into the short canyon that led to a small lake where the animals could get water enough to continue their trip. The scouts had already told Laduni that it was the only sizable water source in the area and there was no doubt that the animals would do everything they could to get to it. As with most herbivores when it is time to have their young the more animals within the herd the safer their offspring would be. In this herd there were a large number of animals with young at their side for being so early in the

season yet there were many more that still had not given birth which the hunters knew meant that there were succulent calves which would be a treat for all. Many could already taste the evening meal as they watched the first animals move through the canyon.

It had been determined that they would not kill more than one animal per hunter except those testing the new spears and they would be the first to throw when nearly all animals had entered the canyon. Trilon, Kaunai and Dosalia were waiting as were the rest for sight of the end of the procession. There were several younger hunters who were losing patience but a hand on the shoulder by an older more experienced hunter quickly calmed them. If it were done right the animals would be a while before they got to the river basin where the Hot Spring Cave was and would be an excellent choice for the Matrimonial hunt. As the animals were taken from the rear of the herd the hunters would remain hidden until all the animals passed the area.

Kaunai saw the end of the herd and nodded to Trilon to look at several pregnant females entering the canyon the animals that followed looked to be male or females who would not produce a young this year. Trilon nodded glad that he could add something to the hunt as he told of how a pack of wolves he had been watching had hunted. Though the pack had taken two animals it was unusual for a pack to take more than one and they would have been lucky to get that one. Laduni had thought about it and had listened to the other hunters and then told them the entire hunt plan. Kaunai pushed back from the edge and placed a stick in the ground that held a yellow piece of hide and he crawled back to his place and looked toward the direction the animals were moving. When the red leather was placed he and Trilon lifted up and threw the two large mammoth spears followed quickly by two additional spears they had waiting. Dosalia watched as the mammoth spears slammed into the two females so hard that both animals went down without a sound and neither moved. Seeing the next two animals struck by smaller spears with similar results, she chose an animal and threw her spear pleased to see the pregnant female fall.

By the time the panicked animals from the rear had any effect on the rest of the herd the hunt was over and the hunters went over the side only after all the animals were out of the canyon. While Trilon and Kaunai skinned their animals and Dosalia's, Dosalia and her brother carefully butchered the two pregnant female struck by the larger spears. Seeing there was little additional damage because the shaft of the spears released from the head of the spear, Dosalia was well pleased with the results since neither man had any problem throwing the heavier spears. Now all she needed was the searchers to see mammoth so that they could be tested.

As the hides were marked and rolled, the meat separated and the internal organs destined to be taken were gathered the night had fallen and the hunters fought off scavengers bent on taking their portion of the feast. The large tent was constructed and the travois made to hold the results of the hunt while a haunch of one of the animals roasting over the fire made everyone realize how hungry they all were. It became awkward when Trilon, Kaunai and Dosalia entered the tent and both men wanted to be next to Dosalia but seeing the problem, Laduni sent Trilon out for the first watch then he was to wake Kaunai to take his place. He did not tell them that he would be waking Dosalia to join him during the last watch.

The following morning it took very little effort to bring down and pack the tent and start back to Hot Spring Cave with the results of the hunt. Those that were sent to watch the herd reported

that the animals had settled down and were no longer moving but staying in the lush plains around the water. Dosalia smiled as Kaunai and Trilon came out of the tent and looked around for her. They had not been happy when Laduni had come to take her with him for the last shift to guard the meat but there was little that they could say. She had enjoyed lying in each of their arms as she slept waking only when they switched. Know that there was going to be a lot of adjustments they needed to make she finally felt that perhaps Trilon was becoming used to the fact that she wanted both men. As they worked together she knew that it was harder on Trilon than on Kaunai but she also knew that Kaunai was no more happy about her decision than Trilon was though she knew she could count on him to support her and she still had questions about Trilon though she wished she did not.

As the group started out they felt proud that they had done just as they had planned and those from Second Spring seemed light hearted as they joined the Hot Spring hunter in their traveling songs until they became comfortable enough to add their own. Those pulling the travois switched often so that no one was over burden and when it came time to stop, the runners had found a clear stream to rest near with enough brush to block the constant wind. Not wanting to take the time to start a fire, Laduni made sure everyone had traveling food to eat and everyone drank from the stream, some refilled their water bags. It was late afternoon by the time they reached the top of the steep hill that led to Hot Spring but the hunters were met by those who had remained behind and were relieved of the travois by those who were fresher.

When they entered the cave Kaunai and Laduni knew there was something different, people smiled readily and there seemed to be less tension, but the need to store the results of the hunt was of more importance. It was Losaduna who sat next to Laduni while Solandia served food to the hunter who told them what had happened. "Sometime after you and the rest of the hunters left, Retchen left the cave and we have not seen him. We thought he had gone to join the hunters but when he did not return with you, I guess we were wrong."

"More than likely he went to solidify his place in the Plains Cave." Kaunai offered.

"Perhaps, but if he is around he might be thinking of causing trouble." Laduni said as he looked around. "I will make sure there will be more than just one person guarding the entrance until the rest of the caves arrives. No need to worry anyone right now."

Although Kaunai was not sure he agreed, he would tell Netdi what was discussed and see what his views are.

Chapter 40

Trilon found Dosalia alone in her hearth working on a tool for the Losaduna of Second Spring. Even with dust and sweat on her face as she concentrated on making the next press of the antler on the piece of flint she was working on, to him she was still beautiful. Since the hunt he had thought long and hard about his feeling and he knew that had it been him who was responsible for the mine, no one could have made him leave such a treasure to another especially since from what he saw the stone Dosalia got from the mine, even that she considered poorer quality was better than what he had seen come from the mine of the Lanzadonii Dalanar. Still it was not the

mine that was important it was the woman herself. He had given the leadership of the twenty-first to his brother not because of the pressures but because he had wanted to follow Dosalia and bring her back as his mate. She was too important to her people for that to happen and he knew that and it took him all this time to realize that it really no longer mattered, where she lived would be home for him. It had not taken long after talking with Kaunai to know that his rejection of the co-mating was selfish and self serving. As he had his entire life he put himself first and as leader of the twenty first he occasionally put the cave first as long as it did not discomfort him. His brother will be a much better leader than he ever was. Even if he convinced Dosalia to return there was really nothing there for him since being a former leader gave him status he had no skill other than hunting and sharing pleasures.

He had come with a clear idea of what he wanted and how he was going to accomplish his goals but the years he had used to train his brother to lead the Twenty-First Cave, Dosalia had used it to improve not only the life of those in her own cave but all her people. Her plans to accept apprentices at the summer meeting made him ashamed of his first reaction when he heard that news as he passed one of the hearths, he had felt it was one more thing that would take her attention away from him. Could he have been any more selfish?

Looking at her as she concentrated his heart contracted and his body tightened. There were so many that needed her skill and so much she could teach to others and he had no right to take that from her. Looking at the status he offered her, he wondered if perhaps even with he and Kaunai together they could come up with enough of a bride price to be worthy of her. Almost turning to leave he was stopped when she looked up and saw him. Her features when from pleasure to suspicion to something near fear and that made him sick that he had caused her to fear him. Going to her he pulled her from her knees and held her against him until he felt her relax.

“I never thought I would ever see fear in your eyes when you looked at me and it is a sight I know I deserve but one I find I am not comfortable with. I came to tell you that I cannot find it in myself to let you go and will take whatever time I can have with you. If that means a lifetime of sharing you with another I will do that but you have to answer me honestly that you truly want me in your life.”

She was quiet for a long time and Trilon chest tightened wondering if he had lost her with his actions. “I am only afraid that you can hurt me so much and I thought you had come to tell me you were returning to the Zelandonii, but I do not fear that you would injure me.”

Sighing with relief, Trilon knew that he had a chance to remove all the shadows he had seen in her features lately whenever she looked at him with longing and trepidation. “Dosalia, I want you in my life and I accept the co-mating with Kaunai. I have little to offer more than my hunting skills but I will make sure you will never be hungry for I will learn more about collecting whatever foods are available and I will make sure that you have hides for clothing and cover as you need them. I will love you until I die and I will try not to abuse Kaunai too much.” This last statement caused her to look up and she saw the teasing light in his eyes as he smiled. Placing her arms around his neck, she pulled him down and captured his lips unable to stop the tears in her eyes.

Kaunai smiled as he dropped the cover to Dosalia's hearth knowing that finally the Zelandonii had made the only decision he could have made if he wanted Dosalia. Knowing that Dosalia would have been miserable knowing that Trilon had rejected her was not something Kaunai wanted to contemplate. She did so much for others and this was such a small thing that he and Trilon could do for her. He knew eventually they would be able to work together to make sure Dosalia was happy and secure.

"Looks like the visitor must have made his decision."

Kaunai looked at the Losaduna of Hot Springs Cave and nodded. "He is staying and willing to co-mate with me and Dosalia. It will make her happy and that is what I have always wanted."

"I would think that Laduni would be more than willing to give the three of you the end hearth and it would allow a little more privacy between you. I will call for a promise ceremony as soon as Dosalia tells me that you all agree."

"I think Trilon will need more time. I believe that most of his supplies are with North Cave since he had planned to be here only a short time before going with the next trade group."

"North Cave was not planning a trip and I believe the rest of the caves are content this year as well."

"I know, Keylo told us when they passed through but I am not sure Trilon understood this. He probably thought that another would take Keylo's place."

"Then his decision to stay is better than he thought."

Chapter 41

It wasn't long before the caves began to arrive. The North Cave arrived first and as the second largest cave they were assigned the field next to the Hot Spring Cave so that they would be near the center. Losaduna of North Cave would set up the healing tent next to and attached to the Losaduna tent that Laduni already had the men of Hot Spring Cave to set up. Losaduna already decided to have the promise ceremony as soon as North Cave arrive so that Trilon had all he had brought with him to negotiate the bride price.

When Losaduna approached Keylo as to who could negotiate for the Zelandonii man, Filonia quickly volunteered to negotiate the bride price for Trilon for she knew intimately what was contained in the packages that Keylo had stored in their hearth since he arrived back from his trade mission. It had not taken long to convince him that they ought to do an inventory of the packages. She had been planning on doing the negotiations since Keylo told her that Trilon had planned to use what was in the packages as a bride price for Dosalia. Now was her chance as she pulled Trilon to the rear pool waiting as Keylo brought the packages she told him all she and Keylo had seen in them.

"That's right. Why do you want to do this?"

“Because I am a good negotiator and I would like one of the cave lion hide for my daughter’s new son.”

Trilon smiled in understanding knowing that bartering when family was not available was often paid for and that she wanted what he considered the least of the hides he brought with him pleased him. “I would enjoy having you negotiate the bride price for me, but understand that you may make it as long or short as you want but everything I brought, not including one of the lion hides is for Dosalia even if it is not part of her bride price.”

“Wonderful, then choose three items that mean the most to you. One will be your promise gift to her, the second will be your matrimonial gift to her and the third will be a matrimonial gift for Kaunai.”

Hilmoi looked at everything Kaunai laid out before him and Netdi that he had been making and saving for years in case he was ever lucky enough to mate with Dosalia and was stunned. There were various furs, antlers, amber, salt, bowls carved from knots of trees, figurines he had carved, a new spear thrower, carved handles for knives and spears, and many other items that Hilmoi had not realized he had been carrying in the travois he had been pulling. “I had not realized that you had been collecting this, it must have taken you years Kaunai.”

“I have been making and collecting things for Dosalia since the first time I met her as a child. I knew then that I wanted her for my mate but I felt for a long time that I was not worthy of her especially when she returned as a master flint knapper. It wasn’t until we arrived and the man from the Zelandonii was here that I decided to do what I could to have her look at me as man and potential mate. I had not planned on co-mating with Trilon, but she cares deeply for him and is willing that I join them.”

“Well now that I know what you have to offer I can go with Netdi and see what bride price we can bargain for. Chose the gift you want to give her, Trilon and her mother, also chose a gift for her for the promise ceremony.”

“You seem confident that Dosalia’s Mother will accept this as a bride price.”

“Kaunai, what you have collected over the years is a fortune and your bride price alone would be enough, who knows what the Zelandonii will bring as his portion of the bride price. There is also the status that has to be addressed. You are the son of the former leader, Trilon was a former leader and Dosalia is the only master flint knapper and the flint mine was given to her since she found it. I think between the two of you I am hoping that it will match the worth of the mine including what you will both bring to the mating.”

Kaunai paled at the thought that what he and Trilon must come up with needs to match what the mine is worth. He looked at what he had brought and wished now he had brought the wooden Mother figures and the rest of the bone and wood beads he carved over the years.

While Solandia and those representing the men were isolated in the rear chamber negotiating the bride price for the two men, Dosalia having learned how to feed an entire cave from her mother,

and with the help of Madenia and several other women, kept food for the people from the three caves available to supplement what they cooked. Several times they heard raised voices but more often than not all was quiet from the rear of Hot Spring Cave. Since Dosalia was not allowed near the chamber, Laduni and several men took food and drink to the chamber several times during the day.

When Solandia finally returned to her hearth she leaned down and kissed her daughter but said nothing, but Dosalia breathed a sigh of relief. Not knowing what was in her mother's mind she had no idea what had been agreed upon but there had been an agreement and all her worry drained from her and she turned her smile on the two men who had been as anxious as she was.

Chapter 42

The sun felt wonderful as everyone gathered mid-afternoon, knowing that they would be part of the promise ceremony between Dosalia the Zelandonii trained Master Flint Knapper, Trilon a previous Zelandonii leader, and Kaunai the hearth son of the previous leader of Second Spring Cave. It had not taken long after North Cave's arrival for all to learn why Second Spring Cave was already present when they arrived. The three leaders had gathered shortly after North Cave's arrival as had the Losaduni but the news had not been confined to those meeting and everyone was congratulating Netdi as he moved through the crowded area since the people of North Cave arrived. Now with the odor of the calves cooking over the fire pit just outside the gathering area quickly erected for the ceremony, people had left their food offerings with those women Solandia trusted enough for her daughter promise feast.

Laduni looked at the people gathered and knew that Hot Springs Cave was responsible for this feast and though Solandia had a fit of temper when he had check to assure there was plenty for all, he knew that this was only the first feast that they would be responsible for. He wondered now of his decision to only take those few animals when they had hunted the reindeer, but he knew that there was more than enough in storage to keep them through the winter plus what they would get during the summer. Solandia had already had a large collection of early fruits drying in the fields above the cave along with roots that could be dug at any time but was best when collected early spring. There were several small canyons with fruit and nut trees that they would not share the location with the gathering caves but there was no denying that some were surely find them during the months that the caves were conjoined for the summer.

Hilmoi looked the Losaduna from North Cave and though he had been expecting it, hearing her diagnosis was hard but he knew that he would have to act as he always had in the past for he did not want Kaunai or Netdi to know and worry. "The blood in your stools will get worse over time and there is a possibility that your gut may strangle. If that happens it will kill you and it will be very painful. I wish I could tell you that it was the injury to cause this and that you will be well one day Hilmoi but I cannot. I have not seen anyone with these symptoms get better only worse. I will give your Losaduna datura and the directions but there are other things that can help with the pain as it increases." She handed him a package that contained a yellow powder. "Make this with a mint tea. It will not hide all of the taste but it will at least be drinkable. I have also added it to honey which works well. It will not make you senseless as datura can but you will probably

see things that may not be true. Since you do not want to tell the sons of your hearth, I think you need to tell at least one other person so that when it is time they will understand.”

“I will think on it.” Hilmoi looked around after shaking his head to clear the memory of his earlier conversation with the healer. Knowing what was coming was not the best but at least he could plan to enjoy what he could of the summer meeting but he needed to find a way to protect his mates sons from any blame. Sitting close to the fire since he had a role in the promise ceremony, he smiled and knew that he had done as his mate had wanted. She had not wanted to mate with him but eventually he had won her over, but he had loved her dearly and knew that when he joined the Mother he would be able to hold his head high. Her sons were strong, good men that people respected and now both would be mated and settled. Her oldest would be leader and her youngest would be the mate of one who controlled the richest resource in their world.

The crowd quieted when Solandia, Keylo and his mate Filonia, Netdi and Madenia who were followed by Dosalia, Trilon and Kaunai stepped to the front of the crowd and sat next to Hilmoi. They were followed quickly by the three Losaduni each standing behind one of the three that would be promised this day. Losaduna of North Cave touched Keylo’s shoulder and he stood and went out of the circle just to return pulling a travois that looked filled but no one could see anything because it was all covered with a white Auroch hide.

“I am the keeper of that which the man Trilon, previous leader of the twenty-first cave of the Zelandonii brought from his homeland as gifts and bride price for his chosen.” The first thing removed was the white hide which was laid in front of Dosalia. “These are his offerings as a bride price. While hunting with his brother, they came upon an auroch cow that was white as snow and it reminded him of the skin of his heart’s dream.” Going back to the travois which was now covered with a fur from a cave lion that still had the head attached. “To the person who aided me in winning his hearts dream, Trilon would ask that Filonia would accept this trifle.” Keylo folded the lion fur and handed it to his mate. The expected gasp turned to a grown when the people saw that the rest of the items were still covered by still another fur which this time Keylo reached under but did not remove it instead he pulled a basket from beneath it and placed it before Dosalia.

“To prove that he can provide for a mate, Trilon wishes to present to his future mate with first meat from his own hand.” Keylo uncovered the basket to reveal dried meat and a smaller basket with in the main basket of intestine filled with purified fat. Bringing another basket also covered, he set it before Dosalia. To prove that he will spend his life being worthy of you he give you firestones that will give you heat and light no matter where you go.” Uncovering the small basket were five large firestones more than belonged to all the Losadunai it was truly a treasure. Basket after basket was brought out containing furs, hides, a basket of leather pouches filled with teas of varying taste, bone spear points, a parka with the entire hood made of wolverine fur, gloves to go with it made of reindeer hide in which was doubled so that the fur was outside and inside the gloves with matching boots. Since she had all the flint she would ever need, she was given a basket with sections of antlers and ivory cut into handles with little adornments. Finally a basket was removed and a thin unusually colored hide that those near could detect a fishy smell. This was handed to Solandia. “To the mother of his heart’s desire, he give this hide of the water cow that those living on the west sea calls seals. It is water proof and

thought to take messages directly to the Mother. May the Mother of all give you comfort as you have given me.” Solandia’s eyes were shocked as she felt the ultra soft hide that seemed so thin but after placing it on her legs she had to remove it as it got so warm. Keylo sat next to Trilon and smiled as people craned their neck to get a closer look at all the items.

Losaduna of North Cave stood in front of Solandia and spread her arms. “Solandia, mother of the woman Dosalia, do you accept this bride price for your daughter?”

Solandia, was stunned for this seal hide had never been mentioned. Lifting her head she looked at Trilon and smiled. “I accept all that Trilon has offered.” There was shouts of joy and approval from the collected crowd. The Losaduna of North Cave returned to her position behind Trilon while Solandia stood and pulled the hide holding the bride price from Trilon behind Dosalia.

Chapter 43

The Losaduna of Second Spring Cave touched Netdi’s shoulder and he stood and like Keylo left the circle of witnesses and returned with a travois equally as full as the one Keylo returned with. This time many baskets could be seen but all were covered with furs or hides. Netdi smiled as he stood in front of Dosalia and opened his arms. “My brother has been collecting what he thought should be an appropriate bride price for the woman Dosalia since he was a child for he knew that one day he would want her for his mate. Taking all he learned from our Losaduni Kaunai has to offer Dosalia items in numbers that represent the Mother.” Taking the first basket, which was small and looked more like a woven cup than a basket, Netdi poured three large stones of amber into his palm.

“Amber is a gift from the Mother and we have been told that occasionally the Mother tells her children her wishes through these stones. These three stones collected through the years contain several messengers of the Mother.” Hold each in its turn Netdi described them to the audience. “The first and lightest colored stone contains a perfect bee, the Mother’s representative of Mother’s richness in food so that her children know they will never hunger and that they can always have children. The second is a fly so that you can send messages directly to the Mother and lastly an ant who represents the fiercest fighters in nature so that you know you will always be protected.” He placed the amber back in the cup and handed it to Dosalia who held it close to her. Netdi then pulled a dark grey hide with thick red hair and placed it before Dosalia and when she touched the tough hide she knew the animal it came from. “Dosalia, so you know the strength of the hunter you are mating this wooly rhino hide is given to you, taken when as a young and foolish hunter was with others that baited a wooly rhino but it was his spear that made the kill.” Netdi took a tall basket and all were surprised that the basket broke into three separate baskets. “This first basket contains the grain the symbol of life, the second the fur of a snow leopard to know the strength and protection your promise gives you, and the third three wolverine skins to protect you from the winter cold.” There were oohs and ahhs as each of the items were shown to the collective crowd. On the rhino hide were sets of baskets, three small baskets held beads of wood, ivory and horns, baskets carrying various furs and hides were surrounded by furniture of low carved tables, wooden shelving, wooden bowls that were smooth

and gleaming all large enough to store whatever was needed. There were utensils for cooking and for working hides including a frame for stretching the hides for working.

When only two packages remained, Netdi selecting the first, unwrapped the hide of an antelope the fur attached so that all knew what animal it came from and within the hide was a second hide of a young antelope. "As this mother fought to protect her young so did Solandia protect her daughter teaching her to be the woman she is today." Netdi handed the two hides to Solandia who took them as her due but Netdi was not finished as he unwrapped the last and looked at the Losaduna of Hot Springs Cave. "For the father of her hearth who gave the daughter of his hearth the wisdom she has needed, may he accept these tokens of a mammoth knot and the feet of the same mammoth so that he has the strength to separate from the daughter he helped raise."

Losaduna took the articles and smiled slightly as he placed them away then waited until the Losaduna of Second Spring Cave stood before him and Solandia. Spreading his arms he said so that all could hear, "Solandia, mother of the woman Dosalia, do you accept this bride price for your daughter?" Solandia could only nod her head for they both had agreed to so much less than what both men placed before her daughter and none of the extras had even been mentioned.

All the people were shocked but the amount of the bride price for it was enough to guarantee each of the men two women if that was what they wanted. Many of the women could not believe that these two men had offered so much since they only required half as much since they were co-mating with Dosalia.

"How could Dosalia accept a half blind man as a mate?" The question tumbled in her mind even as images and feeling of their shared pleasures at the Mother Spring Ceremony replayed over and over. Never had a man paid so much attention to her pleasure as he had and even knowing he had taken a woman before and after her had not made any difference but now this was too final. She had not been able to convince him to share pleasure with her again since that time and now she knew why. The rumors about Dosalia and Netdi's brother she understood for they were of an age and as the daughter of the hearth of a Losaduna and he the son of the leaders mate it was a good mating, but why had they brought Trilon into it? Knowing that she would have no chance to luring him again until he tired of sharing Dosalia with another, she sighed and walked away from the ceremony.

Hate seethed as he watched the various items the two men presented to Dosalia. She had never even given him a chance and had ignored his own request to mate with her, not she has accepted a man crippled with blindness and the second son who had no options for a future leadership. Then there was the mine, that wonderful mine that could be used to gather riches so that he and his mate could even set up their own camp and all the other camps would have to come to them to get the good flint and perhaps he would have allowed her to make items for others. Now looking as the three circle the fire promising to mate at the first matrimonial, there had to be something that he could do to stop this. She belonged to him and if she wanted two men then he and Marcum can comate with her. Thinking of Derlio he thought that perhaps it would be a stronger alliance if there were three of them and since Dosalia did not know how to pleasure a man they would share that duty and would not have to be with her often.

Chapter 44

The caves arrived as if they had planned a mass entrance into the area of the Hot Spring Cave. There was plenty of help from the caves that had already arrived as they became reacquainted with friends and relatives. As the days progressed the fires from the various camps sprang up across the river including one for Second Spring Cave as Netdi moved the cave from being housed within the Hot Spring Cave to its own camp to ease the crowding that having all the members of Second Spring Cave caused the host cave. On the field directly adjacent to Hot Spring Cave was a double walled tent for the Losaduni and one for the leaders. There was an attachment to the Losaduni tent that would be for treating the sick and injured. Already the Losaduna of North Cave along with her son Kirloni who would become a full Losaduna this meeting and three acolytes were treating those who did not have a healer in their home camps. As the camps arrived other acolytes of the Losaduna of North Cave who had been training with other Losaduna arrived at the healing tent to give aide as well.

No one noticed as three men left their camps to move to the shadow of the western hills that surrounded the west end of the field that lead to Hot Springs Cave. The shallow indentation of the hills was not deep enough to hide a fire and all three men shivered as the temperature dropped. "Get in here." The gruff voice startled the men as the edged closer to what they had thought to be a scar in the hill face only to discover a good size cave with a fire blazing within."

Dosalia looked about the large hearth that Laduni had given to her and saw that someone had brought not only her belongings but those of Kaunai and Trilon which were placed on separated bed spaces. In the first curve of the chamber was a larger than normal bedspace she knew had been carved out to house a lot of children or in the cases it chamber had been used for meetings, it was a place her mother had place the food so that those who wanted to take what they wanted. Knowing she had time since Trilon was helping North cave and Kaunai was with Second Cave she pulled all the old baskets and plates that were broken and little use and piled them next to the fire she had set in the hearth at the center of the chambers. Removing the hangings she placed them to the side so that she could clean them and see if they could be used for anything.

Leaving the hearth she went to where her mother stored sweet grasses, hay and other fragrant plants that she like to use got bedding then returned to the hearth and placed the plant material over the area until it was several inches thick. On top of the hay she placed the folded rhino skin then several soft furs that would keep in body heat. Taking the carved stone Duna that Kaunai had given her she placed oil in the small depression and added a single twist of lichen wick but did not light it that would be for later. Going through the furs she had she folded and placed several on the bed and smiled. There was plenty of room for more than three so they should all be comfortable in the single bedspace.

In the smaller chamber which Kaunai had cleaned out earlier she repeated the process for that bedspace for times when she wanted to be alone with one of them or they wanted to be alone. She put new stones around the area Kaunai had a fire and placed wood and burning stones nearby to start it if it was needed. Going back to the main area she placed the tables and other furniture that she had collected in places she thought she would need them. In one rear corner she placed all her flint knapping tools and in the other she placed what she thought were

Kaunai's carving tools. Both areas had thick mats to sit on. In another area near the smallest of the bed spaces she placed Trilon's spears and spear throwers including the two he seemed to be working on. Here to she placed a thick mat to that he could sit comfortably on the floor while he worked on any project he might have. Pleased with the area, she still felt guilty for having the second largest chamber when there was only three of them but then Verdegia had the largest for at the time she had the most children but for many years it was only her and Madenia who lived in it.

"You could say here with the Second if you wanted to Kaunai." Netdi looked at the worried frown on his brother's face as he paced the tent area.

"No, I can't. We have to decide how we are going to live together."

"Go talk with Dinoa and Noonia. They shared men plenty of times. Perhaps they will have some ideas."

Trilon looked out over the sea of tents and like those of the Zelandonii summer meeting, the camps were probably arranged by rank and by how their individual camps were arranged. Some camps had extremely large tents as the main dwelling and several smaller tents set up around them, still others were collection of smaller tents that were attached in some manner. These were not his people but as he volunteered to help those who had need he found that they were warm, people that showed they lived with humor and love in their lives. Since the promise ceremony neither he nor Kaunai had stayed with Dosalia who told them that she wanted to arrange her hearth first before they spent time together. Now that he watched the child join others of his age, his words beat at Trilon's mind.

"Dosalia said that you and Kaunai should come to your home tonight."

Home. Could he really make this place his home? Surprised since he had thought he would one day return to the Zelandonii there was no pull for him to return. His cave was in good hands with his brother and the Zelandoni that the First had assigned to his cave and both he and his brother worked well with her. The area around the Hot Spring Cave of the Losadunai was as rich if not more so that the area of the Twenty-First. The Zelandonii lacked one thing the Losadunai had and that was Dosalia.

His eyes focused when he saw Kaunai walking purposely toward him and saw that a very serious look which matured the features of his face which most time looked so young he appeared to be a youth except for his size. A sly smile played on his mouth when he saw that Trilon was looking at him that turned to a smile and once again the youth appeared. "I have an idea. Actually Netdi had the idea but I arranged us to meet someone that may be able to help us."

Chapter 45

Dosalia waited for hours but when neither of the men arrived she was sure that Werdoli had either not found the men or had gotten involved with others his age. When she exited the cave she noticed that it was nearly night and as with most summer meetings everyone was visiting except for perhaps the Losaduni who would be healing or making plans for the First Rights and

the matrimonial. Stepping out into the night she could smell the different foods being cooked, the smell of the tents and the collection of bodies that had traveled with little water. She could hear the laughter and the yelling as people interacted, and above that she could hear splashing in the river. There was no telling where the men were but she knew that both had gone to help the other camps to set up. Seeing the Losaduna from North Cave coming towards her she smiled in welcome.

“Well how is the new hearth?”

“I just finished putting everything like I want it. I was looking for Kaunai and Trelon so that I could show them but cannot find them.”

“Kaunai was with Netdi who wanted to have a meeting of the cave so that he could hear what each had to say and he wanted Kaunai there to make sure they did not try and tell him things that were not true. Trilon was helping Keylo earlier since Dredoi brought some bird to trade and Trilon was very interested in them.

“You are trading some of your quail this year? Usually you only bring eggs.”

“It was a good year for them last year and there are too many so Dredoi thought to bring some. There are not many but he wants to get some hides for a new tent portion since he is planning on asking a woman from the Plains Cave to mate with him next summer meeting.”

“Isn't he years younger than I am?”

The Losaduna of North Cave laughed at Dosalia shocked expression. “Yes but he is a good hunter and the birds and eggs are sought by many caves who have introduced women to him in hopes of finding someone that he was attracted to. As it happened he fell in love with a girl from the Plains Cave when he opened her last summer but as he could have nothing to do with her after the opening he has stayed away. As soon as he arrived he went to her and found she had a child of his spirit and had not agreed to mate with anyone since they were separated. Apparently Dredoi made an impression on her as well and refused all the men of her cave who wanted to mate with her after they found out she was blessed.”

“Well I better go see if my mother needs any help.”

“She at the North Cave site, her and Gulloni are siblings as you know and he was sick at the end of that summer's meeting and she apparently did not trust me enough to make sure he got well.” Dosalia laughed for she knew her mother had mentioned Gulloni's illness several times during the winter and knew that she had been worried about her brother. “Why don't you come with me, perhaps Trilon is still with Keylo? I know that there are many who would love an invitation to see the chamber Laduni gave to you will all the items of your bride price displayed.”

“I was hoping to show the men first.”

Losaduna could hear the concern in Dosalia's voice and smiled. "Men like Trilon and Kaunai are not like many of the men who co-mate with a single woman. It is difficult for them to share when they care so deeply. I think right now they are trying to come to terms with sharing a woman they both feel deeply for. Give them some time and they will make it work between them. Why don't you come with me and we will see what your mother is planning."

Dosalia was immediately pulled into the games the younger women were engaged in around the North Cave camp. Most were unmated but there were a few who were and some were blessed but the talk was mainly about men and their attributes and proficiencies at sharing pleasures. One woman immediately got Dosalia's attention when she talked about twin men sharing pleasures with her. "I envy you Dosalia to have that kind of attention whenever you want it, oh my it wonderful experience." Dosalia was glad when one of the other women asked her why it had been so wonderful and as she explained, Dosalia was glad for the darkening skies for she could feel her face heat.

Chapter 46

Trilon and Kaunai both lay back exhausted and panting the twins had left the small tent a short time after the men, exhausted by the women's attention, lay back on the fur trying to catch their breath. The twins had taken turns playing the part of a woman who had two mates and had explained the different positions and actions that could be taken by the men. At first both men who had thought the twins were just going to talk with them were happy for a demonstration but between the two of them they had exhausted both men and had left the tent complaining that the men had become exhausted too quickly and that Dosalia might sadly feel the lack.

"I think we would have been better off talking to the men who shared those two." Kaunai gasped trying to recover.

"Yea, probably but at least I think we can do this together without killing each other." Trilon smiled as he looked at Kaunai. "We need to get to the river and wash. I do not want to go to Dosalia smelling as we do now."

Kaunai groaned as he sat up and looked around the tent for his clothes and decided to just put on his leggings if they were going to get wet. I hope Dosalia is not expecting much from us tonight."

We'll eat and rest and I do not think Dosalia will find us lacking despite what the twins said." Trilon laughed as he too dressed only in his leggings.

The men emerged from the water feeling refreshed especially since they were able to borrow from soap root from a woman from the Plains Cave. Both agreed that the cleaning foam that Dosalia and her mother made worked much better and the smell was not so flowery as with the soap root. Each of the men returned to where their belongs were stored to find that everything had been removed from both places. Trilon went back to Losaduna's hearth to find Trilon looking in other bed spaces to see if someone had moved them. "I think they have been moved to the rear chamber."

Looking down the passage Trilon raised an eyebrow and started toward the rear chamber remembering now that Laduni had given it to Dosalia for her hearth. He could hear that Kaunai was following him and he was surprised when he marched through the new hide covering the entrance to see a small fire burning in the hearth and next to the large bed space that now held many of the furs that Dosalia was given during the promise ceremony and at one end was baskets with personal items. On one side of the chamber were his tools and the spear throwers he was working on and several other projects including the spears he had been working on with Dosalia's brother. The mat in the area appeared to have wavy lines that denoted water and the blue green of the cat tail leaves enhanced that perception. Thick and soft feeling which was highly unusual for mats made him smile for he knew that Dosalia had made it since she used weaving of mats to strengthen her fingers and hands. In another area he saw an area for carving that he assumed was for Kaunai and a flint working area nearby. The tables that Kaunai gave as part of his bride price were placed around the chambers some having items that must have been special meaning for Dosalia.

Kaunai peered into the alcove of the chamber and saw that it also had been remade with new furs on the bedspace and new rocks around the area he had his fire. There was a new hide that could be pulled across the opening for time when someone wanted privacy. Looking back around the main room he whistled. "She went to a lot of trouble for us."

Trilon nodded for he remembered that her previous hearth had minimal of what she needed to live and nothing else. "Yes she did."

"I am glad you like it." Both men spun around to see Dosalia in the entrance way smiling at them.

Each of the men saw that though she was smiling Dosalia was worried about their reaction to what had taken place. Trilon was the first to enclose her in his arms. "I am sorry if I made you think that you had to worry about my reaction."

Kaunai put his arm around them both and pressed a kiss to Dosalia's forehead and then pressed his to hers. "We should have been here to help you."

"No, I wanted to do it myself so that you both would feel comfortable here. I wanted this to feel like a home to you."

"Oh Dosalia, where ever you are, is home to both of us." Trilon captured her mouth with his and when he had released her, Kaunai kissed her as well. "Come let's go to the pool."

Dosalia looked at the large bedspace and wondered if they would ever use it but the thought that she would have both these men sent a shiver through her that warmed her. Grabbing a basket, Dosalia left the chamber but instead of going to the hot pool she turn and went deeper into the cave to the cooler pool hoping that the cool waters

The leaders were looking at the man who had demanded that he be heard before the matrimonial hunt was arranged. Most could still hear the celebration occurring throughout the camp area as various cave were celebration, promises, with girls that tomorrow would go into isolation for First Rites, and just general celebrations to start the summer meeting. The last thing they wanted was to hear complaints so soon in the summer meeting but since it involved a promised couple or in this case trio, the leaders had agreed to hear the man's complaint now and be done with it.

“If we allow the mating to occur at the first matrimonial, there is a good possibility that the man of the Zelandonii could convince Dosalia to leave the Losadunai even before she trains others on flint knapping. None outside the Hot Springs Cave know the location of the flint mine that should be a asset that is available to all Losadunai.”

As he listened to Stelo of the North Cave, Netdi was wishing that the three men who had been following Dosalia since her return would give up their quest to control the mine. It was not a secret that Stelo wanted to start a new cave based around the mine like the Lanzadonii had, but he wanted to be in control of the mine. How he convinced Marcum and Derlio to join him was interesting because both men had been publically refused by Dosalia last summer when they had gotten heavy handed in their quest for her to mate with one of them. Now that Dosalia was promised to two men Netdi wondered if perhaps the three had decided to pool their resources to try and convince the leaders to interfere with a personal decision.

“Please.” Said Netdi at last. “I do not wish to hear any more. The promise ceremony is completed Stelo and you were there and had every option to reject the mating but you said nothing. The mating is a private matter that no one here can or should interfere with. You and your two friends were rejected as mates by Dosalia last year and they publically. They have no option but to accept Dosalia's decision. As for the mine, we also will not respond to that since the Losaduni has assured us that they will give us their decision this summer. Until we receive that decision, I for one will not go against what the Mother may want for that source of Flint. Dosalia has never not given flint to any who wanted it including you Stelo. I say we adjourn this little meeting and rejoin our camps and enjoy ourselves.”

Laduni hid his smile for he was proud of Netdi who being new to the council of leaders could have remained quiet but then that was not his way. Seeing the rest of the leaders nodding, including Tomasi who had arranged for the leaders to hear his son's friend, Gulloni stood and faced the other leaders who had voted him as senior leader for the summer meeting. “Stelo you should have come to me or Losaduna with these accusation but since you brought them up we will officially not address them since they are a personal matter as Netdi has said but we will give your concerns to the Losaduni before they meet again tomorrow.” With that all the leaders stood and left the tent leaving the three men alone.

“It did not quite work out like he thought it would.” Stelo said as he looked at the opening of the tent where the leaders left.

“We may still be able to talk with the Losaduni tomorrow.”

“You are a fool Derlio if you think they will make any changes. Perhaps we just need to take things into our own hands.”

Chapter 47

Dosalia could not stop the groan of pleasure the suffused her entire body as Kaunai entered her slowly even as she pleased Trilon with her mouth using her teeth and tongue relishing the groans she made him release as his body moved his short thrust of his hips no longer able to control himself. It had been awkward at first as the men tried to get her attention until Kaunai released her lips to Trilon while he lowered his head to capture one of her breast even as his hand slipped lower. When Trilon lowered his head to capture her other breast she felt her entire body clinch as each man suckled at a different rhythm.

She had almost groaned when Kaunai jumped out of the pool to sit on its side but he quickly grabbed behind her neck and brought her mouth to his manhood. While she turned slightly to accommodate him, Trilon had turned her to fully face Kaunai while he entered her female channel and began teasing her back with light kisses even as his hands teased her nipples. The sensation of having both men in her body filled her entire body with pleasure and as she gained confidence she allowed her mind was not able to concentrate on either man as the feeling of pleasure they were giving her filled her until her body no longer belonged to her but to them even as she swallowed the jets pouring from Kaunai then her whole body contracted as spasms of pleasure took all thoughts and she had blissfully sank into darkness.

Now as Kaunai stretched and filled her, pressing even deeper, her body once again was suffused with pleasure even while she gave pleasure back. Never had she thought that she would ever experience this intense pleasure thinking that she would have shared pleasures with each of these men individually and had not thought beyond that point. When Trilon pulled himself from her mouth, Kaunai removed himself and turned her towards him as he laid down and then lifted her over him so that she sheathed him slowly. Allowing her to set the pace he lifted himself and captured her nipple with his mount and pulled her forward and he lay back down never releasing her breast.

Dosalia gasped when Trilon rubbed her back and she arched it for while she had been with the Zelandoni Trilon had introduced her to all forms of the Mother’s gift of pleasure and although it was not one she favored the thought of both men in her body that way nearly made her crest without him even entering her. AS he entered her body and reached around to fondle her breast, Kaunai captured her mouth and caught her screams of pleasure as it became too much and her entire body spasmed and she remembered nothing else.

Dosalia opened her eyes to Kaunai’s soft words as he held her tightly against his warm body. She felt him sigh when she kissed his chest for she was so exhausted she could do nothing else but she wanted him to know. “Thank the Mother. We are so sorry Dosalia to have used you so much. You scared us for you would not awaken.” He pulled her tighter into his embrace and he could feel her lips form a smile against his chest.

“Worth it.” She whispered so softly that he had to strain to hear her. “Trilon?”

“He went to get some food he will be right back.” He continued to hold her tightly as they lay next to the fire Trilon had set wrapped in several furs. She had been so cold when they had come to their senses that fear had gripped them both as they moved to get her warm.

“I am alright Kaunai, really I am. I feel wonderful in fact.” His only response was to hold her tighter and rub his hands along her back. Dosalia knew she felt like she had never felt before and it was wonderful although she was slightly sore it was still a good feeling. Closing her eyes she kissed Kaunai’s chest again and felt his body stir against her hip and she giggled softly.

“You’re a bad woman Dosalia, a very bad woman.” Kaunai felt her relax into normal sleep and could feel that her body was warmer and relaxed his own tight muscles. He had never had a woman who had become unconscious after sharing pleasure and apparently Trilon had but not to the depth that Dosalia had fallen into. She had been so cold he had feared for her life and now that he was relaxing he felt his body finally disengage from hers.

Trilon looked at the sight of Kaunai holding Dosalia and though jealousy flared, he was glad that the younger man had been present allowing him to remain calm in the face of his fear. Dosalia had done this before when they had been together but not to this extreme and fear had eaten at him as well as Kaunai. Placing the food on the floor he saw that Dosalia’s color was better but the fear, while less, was still etched on Kaunai’s face. “It is called the Mother’s little death and I have seen it before and with Dosalia but she was never like this. Let’s take her back to the hearth and we will lie on either side of her to keep her warm.”

Kaunai looked around and saw the food that Trilon had brought sitting nearby. “What about the food? She might wake and be hungry.”

“I will come and get it after we get her in bed.” Kaunai nodded and pulled the furs off of them and lifted Dosalia into Trilon’s arms. While he carried her to the chamber they would now share, Kaunai wrapped the furs over his shoulders and grabbed the food so that Trilon would not have to return and followed behind them.

Chapter 48

The three of them stopped when they exited the cave the next morning for there was no hiding the shouts from the tents that were erected outside of the Hot Spring Cave. Dosalia’s mind was brought to the present as she had been thinking of waking in their chamber wedged between the two men. Remembering that Kaunai had said Trilon had gone to get food she did not remember eating anything after she and Kaunai had talked. Now the yelling that was coming from the tent took all the wonderful feeling she had and they turned cold as she heard what was being said.

“This council has fail to keep a treasure for the Losadunai people safe by allowing Laduni to essentially give the care of the flint mine to a young woman who should have been more concerned about finding a mate that filling the needs of whoever ask a favor of her. She rejected my son and embarrassed him in front of many as she did to others. Now Laduni has allowed her

to mate with someone who could remove her from the Losadunai and we would lose this precious wealth for all. Not once did she seriously consider my son or the others who wanted her for a mate. I demand that the mine be given to someone else to administer since she might not be available with others who work flint come to get stone. She doles it out as if it is her property and I have seen the flint she uses which is far superior to what she has given to others to work with. It is time for this council to act.”

Neither of the men even attempted to stop Dosalia as she turned and headed for the entrance to the Losaduni tent. Kaunai had mentioned a man’s name and Trilon guessed that the name belonged to the owner of the voice they had heard. Anger burned in all three for different reason as the stood at the door and faced to acolytes. “Tell Losaduna that I wish to defend myself.” Dosalia almost returned the small smile that Dredoï gave her as he entered the tent.

The silence in the tent was immediate until they heard the Losaduna of North Cave say “Bring them in.”

Trilon held Dosalia’s arm quickly before they entered. “Remember, stay calm and allow no anger to show or they win. Kaunai and I are with you now and there is nothing any in this tent can do to harm you or change your decision.” He released her when Dosalia took a deep breath and nodded.

Kaunai saw that more than half of the leaders and Losaduni smiled when Dosalia entered with them and he knew that Dosalia had more than a few allies in the tent besides the two men that entered with her. He knew that Losaduna of Hot Spring, North and Second Spring as well as the leaders for those were with her and it looked as if several others did as well. The hate that appeared on Derlio’s and Stelo’s features were expected but not the hate on Tomasi’s face. The leader of the Plains Cave had weathered much during Charloi’s attacks and after when Charloi was punished. Much of the status of the cave had been lost in those years and Tomasi had worked hard to re-establish their standing with little success. What little increase there was in their standing was from the efforts of Reggdi and his trading with the flatheads in the area.

Dosalia walked directly to Losaduna of North cave and waited patiently to be addressed. The threesome did not know that with the men’s blank looks and hot eyes that surveyed the crowd, and Dosalia’s calm patient look it appeared to many that perhaps this was not something they wanted to get involved in for the men looked capable of causing damage should anyone try and harm or attack Dosalia in any way. Most were surprised that the usually calm Kaunai could look so ferocious.

Dosalia smiled when the Losaduna of North Cave looked at her and nodded. “Losaduna, it was difficult not to hear the complaints from Tomasi so I thought it would be better if I came and answered them myself.”

“I think that would be helpful Dosalia. Please continue.”

Dosalia turned and looked at Tomasi directly and ignored his son Derlio. “Tomasi the youngest son of your hearth is a toad who believes that women were put on Mother’s earth to do his

bidding. I did give your son a chance and even shared pleasures with him and found that he sought his own pleasure and any woman would have done and it is the same for the men he associates with. Their only concern is not to mate with me and have a home but to take control of the mine. You are right, the flint that I give to others from the mine is given based on their talent. There are no master flint knappers among the Losadunai except myself and yes I use the best the mine can produce because I have the skills to use it to its best advantage but I am also able to use the poorest of flint that most would throw away and make working tools and points. The mine is not secret for there are none in Hot Spring Cave that does not know where it is located. They do not work flint so its location is not of importance. I have recently received request from several to train them in working flint I will take two for acolytes to train and hopefully they will be good enough one day to be sent to the Zelandonii to learn even more. The more we have who know the correct and best method to use the flint and know the quality of flint available the better we all are. Those who want control of the mine, including your son want to charge those who want the flint without care for the mine itself. All mines are limited and this one is no different. They can last a few years to many years as has the mine of Dalanar of the Lanzadonii. Those who steal flint from the mine are no different from those who steal furs from your bed, it is stealing. I found the cave not Laduni. Laduni did not give me the mine, it was mine before I left for the Zelandonii and left it in his care. Other than covering the entrance he had no use for the mine until I returned and those outside of Hot Spring Cave decided they wanted to control something that belongs to Hot Spring.”

Dosalia placed her hand on Trilon’s arm and smiled up at him and was please to see him return it. “I agreed to mate with Trilon not because of the mine but because I love him, and I know he loves me because he gave up not only his people but the leadership of his cave for me. He is not a flint knapper and could care less about the mine recognizing that I know flint and I know the mine.” She smiled at him again and placed her hand on Kaunai’s arm and smiled at him turning pink when she saw his eyes twinkle and one corner of his mouth quirk. “I wanted to mate with Kaunai for the same reasons, I love him desperately and I have recently found out that he has loved me since we were children. Both men have given more than what would be given to the daughter of a leader for a bride price that satisfies my mother, the man of my hearth and the leader of my cave, most of all it pleased me. Unlike you I believe the Losaduni will make their decision concerning the mine in their time and when the Mother gives them the knowledge they need to make a wise decision and I will abide by that decision.”

Turning to the Losaduna of North Cave Dosalia bent at the waist and smiled. “That is all I have to say Losaduna.”

Chapter 49

It took all her will power to keep from smiling at the young woman in front of her and she was proud of her steady voice. “Thank you Dosalia for your words it will make it easier for us to come to a decision.” Turning to Tomasi he feature became firm and menacing. “Tomasi, we will make a decision on the mine when we make it. So that you and your son know our decision about Dosalia I ask the members of the Losaduni to stand if they accept the mating between Dosalia and her two chosen men.” All but on Losaduni stood and Dosalia was sure that was the

Losaduna of Plains Cave. “Leader, all that accept this mating please stand.” Dosalia smiled when all the leaders stood and she saw the anger mount in Tomasi’s red face.

Losaduna of North Cave turned to Dosalia and smiled warmly. The Losaduni will be arranging the mating soon and the leaders are planning the hunt as soon as we are done her. I think it would be wise for you three to go out and enjoy the summer meeting before you are swept up into the melee of the celebration.”

After they left Kaunai was the first to break as he barked with laughter that he tried hard to suppress until they were well away from the tent. “Did you see Derlio face? You would have thought that they had just cut off his arm. He was the son of the leader’s hearth how dare they tell him he cannot have what he wants. Tomasi should have disciplined him more when he was young and kept him away from Marcum and Stelo. That is a bad group there and I do not think this will be the last of it. Still it was funny to see his face.”

“I have told all three of them either publically or in private I will not have them. They are all selfish men and though Marcum is a good hunter he thinks too highly of himself. I feel sorry for Derlio for I do not think it is entirely his fault. He could not have been trained very well by the red skirts when it was his time for he is like a rabbit in out and done. Then he had the audacity to tell me it was my fault that I found no pleasure and his rod is small and I felt little.” Dosalia was not smiling and neither was Trilon. Trilon was not happy with what he had heard so far and knew that these men might be more dangerous to Dosalia than neither she nor Kaunai thought. Keeping an eye on the men was not going to be easy.

When they got to the river, Trilon picked up Dosalia in his arms ignoring her squeak of protest and carried her across the area filled with stones to that she would not get wet and set her down on the other side but he noticed that Kaunai was smiling especially when Dosalia hit Trilon’s chest. “Oh no the first fight.” Kaunai laughed and jumped away from Dosalia’s swinging arms as she went after him.

As they moved about the summer meeting, Dosalia and Kaunai introduced Trilon to many of the people that did not live with Hot Spring but were important contacts that would help them all in the future. Several areas for skilled people just like at the Zelandonii summer meeting and Trilon stopped several times to watch and either Dosalia or Kaunai would introduce him to those in the area. When they reached where many were working flint, Trilon immediate saw that Dosalia was so much better than those in the area. Both the men and women seemed to want Dosalia to stay and knowing that she freely gave advice and her time training those in the area what she was taught by her teacher with the Zelandonii. She was pleased to see the two who had asked her to train were not working flint but watching how those around them worked it. She wanted them to see this for she would teach them what was wrong with the techniques the various people used and why they would not be using them. The others who had asked her for training were also present. One man, who was older than many, tried to get those around him to work flint as he did, but she was pleased to see that many realized that his technique was awkward and did not produce anything better than what they produced. Perhaps tomorrow after the hunters had left for the matrimonial hunt she would begin talking with those who wanted training.

When they reached the hide working area Dosalia saw that her mother was working on the reindeer hide she and the men had gotten in the hunt and felt she should have cared for the hides herself. “Mother you did not have to do this.” Dosalia said as she approached.

Solandia turned and smiled at her daughter and the two men who stood protectively next to her. “I wanted to work them before we stored them so that we have room for the hides we will get from the matrimonial hunt. I wish you, Kaunai and Trilon were going since it would get us more hides and there is such a need this year. Everyone is looking to make new clothing this year and with the children growing so fast they will all need new clothing. Laduni said that there actually may be two hunt groups going out, but Losaduna did not mention that to me so we will see.”

“Where is the hunt meeting, Mother?”

“They are going to start midday by the Second Spring Cave tents since there is a large area that is flat next to it and more people will be able to fit. Losaduna did not return last night from the search and he had a meeting this morning so I have not talked with him.”

“We saw him at the meeting.”

“You were at the meeting?”

“Tomasi was complaining that I did not give the son of his hearth a fair hearing about mating with me. He was also complaining about the mine and I expected more leaders may have agreed with him privately but in a group most of the Losaduni and all the leaders said my mating was a private decision. Losaduna of North Cave who is apparently leading this year told Tomasi that the Losaduni would make their decision on the mine when they made it. I do not think him or his son were very happy.”

“They are both spoiled men. Tomasi’s mother spoiled him as a child since he was her only son and he would follow the man of his hearth, lucky for him the man of his hearth was harder on him and he learned to be a decent hunter and administrator. Unfortunately he did not do the same for this son of his hearth.”

Chapter 50

The three walked past the tents of Second Spring Cave all three were welcome by the members as they walked through and many who were waiting for the hunt leader as to the directions they would be taking for the matrimonial hunts. There was an excitement among the hunters that was not usually there for the hunt and they soon heard why. The North Cave had seen Mammoth on their trek to the Hot Spring Cave. A hush started at the front of the crowd and spread to the rear as Netdi, Keylo and Gulloni stood on a platform that was made by the wood benders. The crowd moved toward the platform slowly eliminating spaces so that they could hear what was being said.

“The Losaduni have completed their search and they recommend that we send two hunt teams and two travel teams out. The first team will be headed by Netdi of the Second Spring Cave and

they will travel north towards North Spring Cave but stay close to the northern river to hunt mammoth that the North cave saw signs of on their trip to Hot Springs Cave.” The crowd immediately began to talk and Gulloni waited until they settled down again. “This group has been chosen by the leaders and the Losaduna and they will not leave until the day after next. Netdi has been given the names of those that will make up the hunt members and will go to each of those chosen to inform them. Dosalia, are you here?” Trilon raised Dosalia to sit on his shoulders much to her embarrassment and the enjoyment of those around them. “Good, the leaders have asked if you can put your new mammoth spear points on as many of the spears that belong to those who have been chosen.”

“Trilon put me down.” She whispered between clinched teeth and when he had put her on the ground she started forward and the crowd separated to allow her though. When she reached Gulloni she turned exasperated to see the two men on her heels. Turning back to the now smiling Gulloni she sighed. “I have several blanks that I can make fairly quickly but it will take a while for the binding to set so they will need to bring their spear by this afternoon and I will do them as they arrive but I need to leave now to get everything ready. Have Netdi to send them to the flint working area and I will be there shortly.”

As Dosalia walked away she heard Gulloni continue with his talk. “The second will be traveling south with Laduni in the lead since he knows where the best place to hunt the reindeer the Losaduni saw...” Once past the first tents his voice was muffled and Dosalia could not hear what he was saying. Moving quickly followed by the two men to make sure none accosted her, Dosalia went to their new chamber and in the rear pulled two pieces of leather that were placed in a depression in the ground. Without a word she left and headed for the center of the summer meeting area where the different craft areas were located. Sitting down in a cleared area those who were working flint stopped all their work as they saw Dosalia unwrap the first leather covered object to display the tools of her trade all placed in neat pockets or loops that were attached to the leather except a smooth flattened shoulder bone of some large deer that only the center ridge remained untouched. “Trilon I will need you to attach the points with this.” She handed Trilon a length of fibrous ligament from a horse. “Kaunai, could you begin making pine sap? I have some sap in this jar but it needs to be reduced and thickened.”

The two men took what was given them and began to work to make it usable while Dosalia concentrated on the flint. Placing the scapula in front of her, Dosalia chose several tools to help her make the spear points Gulloni wanted made. There was an audible gasp from those around her when she gently unwrapped the second leather wrapped item that seemed to be oiled. Within the leather when laid out was a collection of spear point blanks that was different from any they had ever seen. All the blanks were darker and seemed to have a sheen on them as if the oil from the leather was transfer to them. When she took the first blank in her hand the crowd around her became quiet as they watched her work not wanting to be the cause of her making a mistake on the beautiful flint blanks.

When Dosalia finished working on one side and turned the first point over, there was a gasp from the flint workers. “You cannot work flint bi-facially.” She heard the whispers but kept the smile to herself as she turned her concentration to the point until it was completed and placed to the side. No one moved or talked as they watched Dosalia begin working on a second point until

she had five completed spear points. Knowing that both Trilon and Kaunai along with her had spears for the spear throwers with the larger points on them but since they were in the first matrimonial they would not be included in the hunts.

Chapter 51

The first hunter to arrive was Netdi who had spears for a spear thrower which would take the smaller of the mammoth tips and Dosalia handed three to Trilon who attached the flint points to the spears then wrapping the tip onto the shaft tightly with sinew and handing it to Kaunai who placed pine pitch that had been cooked down to a thick dark paste. When they were completed Kaunai handed them to Netdi with a smile. "By the way you three were chosen to come with us. You were all chosen by the Losaduni and some of the leaders."

"See I told you that she did not share the good flint with other and who is she to decide who is good enough to work flint." Tomasi came from nowhere and took one of the spear points and showed to the three leaders and Losadunai he had demanded follow him. "I have never seen flint this good that would allow someone to knap both sides. This needs to be given to all the Losadunai."

All of those surrounding them turned when they heard the laughter from Dosalia. As Kaunai nudged her to get her attention all she could do was nod and cover her mouth to try and stifle the noise she was making but it was becoming infectious as he was having trouble keeping his own smile from appearing and Trilon was looking intently at the spear points with his hand covering his face. "You are such a fool Tomasi." Dosalia gasped as she tried to control herself. Turning to Kaunai she kissed him lightly but he could still feel the laughter she was trying to control. "Kaunai, in our chamber by our tools is a darkened area move the soil aside and you will have to dig down my arm length to find another leather pouch. Could you bring it to me?" She kissed him again more control of her laughter as she turned to the new comers.

"Do you deny this is different from what you have given others from the mine?"

"No. It is different now. It was not different when I took it from the mine however."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"You will see when Kaunai returns." Dosalia knew that she could not continue to work on the blanks or she might start laughing again and ruin one so she stayed still not looking at Trilon who was having trouble controlling his own laughter for he knew what she had done to change the flint. Netdi was not laughing and she pulled him down to sit beside her. "Let it go and you will be laughing as well soon enough." She watched as Netdi relaxed and nod as he stood once again to face the rest.

Since Dosalia was not working the others that had stayed to watch her work were not happy with the interruption especially Racneli who was planning on asking Dosalia to train him over the winter. Waiting was not his strong point for he wanted to see Her make point for normal spears

not the little ones used by those with the thrower everyone was talking about. Jasloi sat next to Dosalia grateful for the interruption. He had talked with her earlier and asked if he might get training from her and now his mother had said she was thinking of taking acolytes to train and he wanted to be one of them. "Dosalia," he started when she finally noticed him. "I would still like to get some training from you."

Dosalia looked at the young man she knew had just started to visit the red skirts but he had good hands and listened whenever she was talking about flint. "After the matrimonial I will offer for some acolytes and you will know I am sure when I am talking with them. Come to me then and we will talk." Dosalia watched the boy smile as he got up and joined the crowd that was increasing.

Lesnia watched as Jasloi moved away from Dosalia and wondered what they had talked about. She knew that Jasloi had gone to her earlier and asked for training just as she had and Dosalia had given him the same advice, to watch other so that when she came to them they could see the different ways people worked flint. There were none in Half Spring Cave that could effectively work flint but their baskets and hides were so well thought of that they had always been able to trade for what they need but she wanted more. She had seen the wonderful tools that Dosalia had made her mother and she wanted to be able to do the same. Moving to the side when one of the men that Dosalia was to mate with came with a basket filled with dirty wet leather bundles, she moved to follow so that she would see what he had brought.

Dosalia took the basket from Kaunai and placed it before her but did not unwrap it. "This is a piece of a group of nodules that I removed from the mine in the winter so that those that wanted flint would have it. One of the pieces went to your son Tomasi, however I treated mine for I wanted to make large spear points to test and the best come when they can be worked on both sides like the one in your hand. It is a technique that I learned from Jondalar of the Zelandonii who learned it from a Master flint knapper that lived at the same camp as Danug of the Mamutoi." Slowly she unwrapped the leather and there were groans in the crowd at the sight of a nodule of flint that had obviously been burned which everyone knew damaged the flint and made it brittle and unable to be worked. Dosalia taking her hammer stone took off the cortex and began taking blanks from the flint nodule to the oohhs and ahhs of those watching. When she got all the blanks she could get from the core she placed it to one side to use for other items later. She handed one of the blanks to the Losaduna of North Spring Cave who smile at the feel of the piece and then took the spear point from Tomasi and compared them. Handing them both to Dosalia she turned and left the area without another word.

Chapter 52

There were only fifteen hunters going with the Northern group and another fifteen would leave the summer meeting area the following day to help retrieve the results of the hunt should they be successful. They left the summer meeting heading north east toward North Spring Camp but they would veer due north the second day and try to reach the river by the third day. It was not until mid-afternoon before the runners appeared with the news that the river was just ahead so Netdi decided not to stop for a midday break until they reached the river and set up camp for the night instead. When they finally stopped, Dosalia knowing the men would set up their tent, went

to each hunter and checked the security of the points for she wanted no failures on the hunt. She had checked each evening and only one the first day had needed additional pitch. Now all were well dried and solidly attached to the spears.

When she returned to the men she noticed that there was something wrong for the both seemed stiff around each other that had not been there the previous night. She knew they were all still getting used to living with each other but even when she shared pleasures with one she was able to give pleasure to the other but perhaps it was something else. Going to Trilon first because he was the one who had the most problem with the mating and as she neared she could see that he tensed even more. "Trilon, what happened?"

Trilon looked at her and she saw the anger in his eyes but as he saw the trepidation in her features he relaxed. "It is not what you think just that Kaunai are reacting to the same information differently." His smile was genuine but there was still something wrong. "Please Dosalia allow Kaunai to handle this. I promise there is no breach between us." She knew she had to accept this and that the men had to work out between them any problems they might have but she wished he would tell her what caused the problem.

The following day, for the first time since she returned to her people, Dosalia wished she had one of Ayla's horses. Whatever had happened after the stopped yesterday the men both seemed to need her and now she was exhausted but she was pleased to see that they were not in any better condition. She was still upset that they would not tell her what had happened and wondered if either Kaunai or Trilon had said something that the other disliked. Knowing both men it was highly probable but they seemed to have worked out what ever had happened between them.

They heard the muffled crash before they saw the cause and watched as the runner sent ahead to look for mammoth was running back nearly tripping on the uneven ground. Netdi called a halt to wait for the runners who were quickly offered water and allowed to catch their breath. "Mammoth ... over the ridge... all males small herd... ten no more." The man gasped as he took deep breaths." The moved slowly until they could see over the ridge that separated them from the valley were the two rivers merged where the grass in the summer was taller than most men and dangerous for it hid predators as easily as it hid men. Near one edge was a small group of males most looked young enough to have just been forced from their maternal groups and now were forming a bachelor herd they would stay in until they fully matured around twenty years of age. The coats in the sun were varying degrees of red from near black to very pale almost grey looking.

Dosalia saw the grey and knew this was the one she wanted. "Trilon?"

"Don't say it but I think all three of us are looking at the same animal." Dosalia look towards Kaunai and saw that he too was smiling. When Netdi backed away the hunters followed for now they had to decide how to hunt the herd since there were no natural barriers to use as a surround to trap the animals. When Netdi felt he was far enough away from the mammoth which had sensitive hearing. He waited for all to join him.

"I will take any suggestions."

“They are just starting on the area and there is plenty of feed, we could go down and collect enough grass to make blinds and send two to three hunters per animals. Those with spear throwers can throw from a larger distance which will confuse the herd and they are likely to run but there is no telling in which direction.” Trilon said.

“Most like,” Kaunai added, “They will run away from the kill. If those with spear throwers can get to the back of the herd and hit their targets then the animals will run in the opposite direction. If the rest of the hunters place themselves in that direction, and throw their spears not at the first animal but the later ones, then the rest will keep running.”

“That’s a dangerous idea.” All the hunters looked to Stelo but many discounted his words as soon as they saw who had spoken. Dosalia did not turn away and saw the hate in his eyes directed not only at her but at Trilon and Kaunai as well.

“Who have spear throwers?” Netdi asked of the group. Beside Dosalia, Trilon, and Kaunai two other hunters, Catroi of Second Spring Cave and Crelia of North Spring Cave each held up their spear throwers. “Good since you will be in the most dangerous area what do you plan to do and is Trilon’s idea have merit?”

Crelia spoke first as she had never hunted mammoth before she was unsure. How are we to get to the animals and not get trampled?”

“There is what looks like a ravine just east of the animals.”Kaunai started. “If we get two or three animals on that side of the herd they should move west. I do not think they will cross the water around here because since the two rivers meet here the water will be deeper. They are still young enough to be afraid of deep water. If the some of the hunters can begin a fire to the south then the animals would only be able to travel west.”

Olandi was the next to give her ideas. “If we made torches of grass, started them where we wanted the fire, light them and place them on a small stone to keep the fire from touching the grass for a while, the hunters could be in position by the time the grass started on fire. Those with spear throwers could wait until they saw smoke and them get their animals and if nothing else they will get the animals moving.”

“That’s a good idea Olandi.” Netdi smiled. “Then it is settled. We will move away from here and return just before dawn tomorrow to allow those with spear throwers a chance to get into position. Olandi, you and Gundoi will be in charge of the fires.” Netdi looked up at the graying sky and hoped the rain would hold off until at least the hunt was started. “Let’s go.”

Chapter 53

Trilon was glad that the full moon had risen late that they still had some light as they moved though what was little more than a water created crevice in the hill that overlooked the grassy plain but it was wide enough and with enough stones and rocks exposed that getting down although difficult was not too dangerous. Kaunai led while he help Dosalia and Catroi helped

Crelia much to the women's disgust thinking they could have climbed down as easily as the men but Trilon wanted no noise made so the shorter women were handed down in each place that was too high for them to touch with their feet if they sat on a ledge. As they moved down, occasionally Trilon would stop them to look out at the mammoths they were working their way toward. He had already informed both Catroi and Crelia that they planned to go after the grey animal. They were just pleased that they would be included in the hunt and Trilon wondered why they had been chosen since neither had ever hunted mammoth before. The last ten feet was not only the steepest it was also the area with the most loose stones and dirt requiring them to move much more slowly and carefully for the mammoth had acute hearing.

When they finally made it to the bottom the eastern edges of the sky were just beginning to show pink and Trilon knew that they would still have to wait until the sun was fully up before anyone would be starting the fires which would allow them time to move into position while it was still dark enough for although they could hear very well their sight was not good at all especially in this type of light. Looking around the edge of the crack he was not surprised to see a few of the animals already standing and eating. He was pleased to see that the grey was not one of these as he was still down on the ground near the rear which was perfect for what they wanted. Using the sign language of the clan would not work for he knew Kaunai nor the other Losadunai knew it. Once seeing how it worked well during hunts he had asked Dosalia to teach him during the summer meetings and now wished more people knew it. Not knowing how the Losadunai felt about flatheads now was not the time to experiment. Motioning them to follow him he started out of the protection of the crevice.

Staying next to the hill so that they could edge the grass without getting lost in it they moved slowly and quietly until they were close to their target. Next to the grey, which from this vantage point looked as if it was very small, was a male with tusk that had already started to turn up and in which meant he would soon leave the bachelor herd to try and mate with a female. The rest of the herd was much younger having nearly straight tusk with little curve in them. Dosalia touched his arm and Trilon looked to the rise and saw the whips of smoke starting. It was too early but if they did not move soon the animals would be up and begin to move perhaps in the wrong direction. The large mammoth stood and towered over the rest of the animals in the herd and immediately began to stomp his front foot which woke the rest of the animals. There was no longer an option. Trilon nodded and they all put their spears in their spear throwers and took aim. Throwing together, the grey with had three spears never made a sound but the large male with a spear through the abdomen and one in his chest thundered his call and all the animals began to move towards him until he fell and blood gushed from his mouth.

The herd turned as one and headed for the rise but by this time flames licked at the crest and the smell of smoke traveled down the hill to the panicked animals which turned again and they saw that they traveled in the direction that was hoped. When the next animal went down the five of them sighed for the hunters had been in place so that the hunt though successful with just two animals would now be an even greater success. Trilon and Kaunai turned toward the grey male and Dosalia went to help Catroi and Crelia with their animal. All were pleased that they would be doing their work in the cool nearly cold of the early morning.

Kaunai looked up at the sound of a splash as did the rest, at least one animal survived and apparently went into the water returned away from the other hunters and was now coming towards them. Dosalia jumped from the cavity of the mammoth she was working on and threw Trilon and Kaunai their spear throwers as she got her own.

Waiting until the animal was in range all three threw their spears at the same time but the animal was did not stop but kept charging at them now bellowing in rage increasing its speed as it rushed toward them. Dosalia threw a second spear while Trilon ducked into the cavity of the animal he was working on and Kaunai backed enough away to throw a fifth spear. Kaunai's spear entered the chest through the front and immediately there was a gush of blood that flowed out of the wound and finally the animal began to stumble and then fall between the two animals already being readied for transport. When the animal rolled over one large front leg collapsed the open now empty abdomen of the grey animal, Dosalia screamed as she rushed to the grey looking inside for some sign of Trilon. There tucked under the ribs nearly inside the chest was Trilon smiling up at her protected from injury by the large ribs of the animal.

"I think we got a little more than we bargained for." All of them laughed as Kaunai helped Trilon out of the animal and they looked at what they had to work with. Just then the skies opened and the rain that would make their job just that much harder would extinguish the fires making it safer.

Chapter 54

Eight mammoths were taken and even with travois and back packs carried by all much of the meat, though of lesser quality was left behind for the Mother's scavenger to clean. Already wolverines, lions, vultures and smaller fur mammals sought their part of the meal. The lions would get their share but depending on the number of hyenas who joined the melee would determine if they stayed in control of the carcasses. Thankfully Netdi had sent some from the second group, which had arrived that afternoon, to help them with the three animals they had and by night fall the poles the new comers had brought to make travois had mammoth hides attached as a whole which was then wrapped around the meat and other items that they would be taking with them. Each also carried a back frame filled with meat and two people per travois helped them pull the results to where the rest of the hunters waited. Now as they traveled south will the results of the hunt, there were enough people to trade the job of pulling the travois so that no one was overly burdened.

By the end of the first day everyone was exhausted for Netdi had set a blistering pace considering their load telling them only that he wanted to get as far away from the scavengers as possible. They were exhausted as they set up the evening camp and several worked to start mammoth meat cooking for all, while Dosalia and others collected greens and roots to add to the mean. Thinking surely Netdi would want to start early, Dosalia also collected some early grains to soak overnight and placed a piece of bone beneath the meat to capture the juices to add to the grains that could be heated quickly in smaller containers and chunks of meat could be added for a filling breakfast before they left. Two women and Dosalia agreed to meet with two of the men to cook the grains as soon as they woke since they had others with them that could help break down the camp.

Even though Dosalia could not remember falling asleep she woke even before the skies began to grey with morning and met those who would be helping and divided up the grains for them to cook and spread to the other hunters. As the camp was being disassembled those working on packing everything were glad for a quick break to eat the grains that Dosalia and the rest had cooked for them. As they started out again those not pulling a travois guarded the rest from scavengers that might follow and from any predators that might think of attacking even though it was a fairly large group of people.

Netdi, feeling more confident of their relative safety stopped midday to allow everyone a rest. Just as they began to get ready to leave one of those who were taking the role of runner for the day came into camp. "We found Reggdi and well you are not going to believe what is with him." Not happy about another delay, Netdi told those with travois to relax while they waited. He had hoped to get over this last ridge this morning because the rest of the trip would be down hill and once they were seen more help would arrive to get the meat and items back to the summer meeting.

When Reggdi came over the top of the ridge he was immediately recognizable if only because of his missing hand, but murmurs of shock echoed throughout the hunters as they saw the small boy walking at his side. Obvious a half clan child did not matter the age only that there was what many considered an abomination walking into their midst. Though the child tried to keep his face expressionless, Dosalia could see the fear and defiance on his unusual features. Wanting to use the knowledge that Ayla had given her on the clan language, Dosalia moved toward where Reggdi would meet Netdi. Before they met, Reggdi bent down and picked the child up as if to protect him from those that waited.

"Reggdi, welcome. We did not expect you this summer since Keylo told us you had traveled to the flatheads for the summer." Netdi could not stop himself from looking at the child who seemed to be interested in those behind him.

"That was the plan, but there were those in the camp of the clan that wanted this little one dead now that his mother had died. I could not leave him for he is the son of my hearth."

Dosalia heard the gasps to Reggdi's statement but she concentrated on the child who upon seeing her approach looked at first to her direct gaze and then to the sling that was hanging in her waste thong. "Hello." Dosalia signed to the child and saw the surprise in his eyes that she would know the language of the clan.

"You are a woman. You have a weapon."

"The women of the others hunt with the men for the women of the others also have these memories." Dosalia tried to remember all Ayla had told her of the clan and how the women did not know and could not learn to do tasks that men did any more than the men could do or learn what the women did. Men of the clan could not skin and reduce the animals they hunted and depended on the women of their clan to prepare the meat for storage and the other items that were used every day.

“You are a woman and do not lower eyes. Women of others rude.”

Though it would appear to most that the child’s statement was rude she knew that it was meant as a question. “Women of the others are equal to the men in some things and not in others, different from the clan, not rude.”

The child turned to Reggdi and then turned back to her and she smiled at him but did not show her teeth remembering that the clan would think it aggressive but her smile widened when the child attempted to smile and it was obvious that it was his attention. When she closed the distance and held her arms out to him he turned from Reggdi and bent toward her. That immediately caught Reggdi’s attention as he turned to the boy and saw that Dosalia was offering to take him which shocked him and those around her but neither the child nor Dosalia paid any attention as Reggdi relaxed his hold and allowed the child to go into Dosalia’s out stretched arms. “His name is Loug.”

Chapter 55

As soon as Loug was in her arms Dosalia walked away from the men and went to where their travois were and gave Loug something to drink and some traveling food which he ate quickly. She nearly cried at the sight of him for he looked so much like Crebin who she missed terribly. Knowing he would not ask for more, she offered him another piece and then taking a small leather pouch she put a piece of dried meat in it and then tied it around his small waist attaching a small water bag on the thong as well. His lopsided smile warmed her as she watched him inspect the items she had given him. She wished she had clothing for the small boy but he did not seem to be bothered by the chilly air so she did not place a fur around him.

When she looked up at the sound of noise behind her she saw that Reggdi had come with Kaunai and Trilon. Smiling she picked up Loug who immediately held his arms out to the man of his hearth and was lifted by Reggdi’s good arm onto his own hip. “Thank you. I was not expecting any one to accept him.”

“I spent three years with a half clan infant that was very much like Loug but that boy could talk. I know from Ayla that some cannot speak, can Loug?”

“I do not know yet. The clan is very quiet making no unneeded noise, but he does make sounds so I am hoping he can eventually speak.”

“Anytime during the summer meeting if you think you need someone to watch him I will be available.”

Reggdi smiled at her and for the first time Dosalia noticed that he was not a bad looking man despite the loss of his hand. It was only after Reggdi left did she see the anger on Kaunai’s face. She knew that Trilon had been exposed to Crebin for several years and although he did not look happy he was not angry, Kaunai she had never seen him in such a state. “Please tell me you are not one of those that hate the clan Kaunai.”

Dosalia's question just made him angrier as he turned away from her and left the camp. Turning questioningly to Trilon, Dosalia's own anger began to rise. "Tell me, and do not tell me you do not know. I want to know what has been going on for the past days between the two of you and why is he so angry?"

"What is between Kaunai and I is now about us against others. It seems Stelo has some very sick ideas and he meant us to over hear him talking. It was not pleasant and I prevented Kaunai from doing something we both wanted to do. I was not his favorite person for a few days but he understands now what Stelo was trying to do. As for the half flathead child I do not think he has any thoughts one way or the other but there were some opinions expressed after you took the boy and Kaunai took them to heart but did not react in front of everyone. I know you were helping with the one that Zelandoni of the Ninth was raising but most people still think they are half animal no matter her words and it is the same with the Losadunai."

"Surely they can see he is just a little boy?"

"A little boy that might bring the wrath of the flatheads down on the summer meeting or individual hunting parties because of what Reggdi did."

"Why? They avoid the others whenever possible."

"Reggdi took the child, even though the clan consider it...."

"Him, he is a him not an it."

"Fine Dosalia, him. The clan considers the boy bad luck and evil especially since his mother was sick ever since his birth. She was a woman with no status since her first mate was killed while hunting. The hunt leader demanded that the boy receive a death curse so that the clan would be protected and they were just about to do that when Reggdi acted. Reggdi had no voice in the decision which according to him and what I have heard from Zelandoni of the Ninth, this is normal. Reggdi took the boy from the mogur, in the processes knocking him to the ground and taking the boy to bring him here. I am not sure the child is any better off with the Losadunai than he was with the clan."

"I still do not understand why Kaunai is so upset."

"He think that Reggdi brought more danger to you and when you took the child, you brought danger to yourself from those who hate flatheads." Dosalia sighed still not understanding so turning away from Trilon she went in search of Kaunai.

Sitting in the well away from the rest of the group where Netdi was deciding on whether to continue again or stay for the evening, Dosalia finally found Kaunai looking down the slope as herds of animals crossed the river in the distance or moved toward the water from this side. With his body held rigidly she knew that he was still angry. Sitting beside him she waited for

him to speak first. His hand clinched and released as if he was fighting himself and was losing but she still she waited.

When she touched his arm gently it was as if all the anger drained from him and he pulled her into his arms holding her tightly against the fear he was beginning to feel for her. “Tell me Kaunai.”

Taking a deep breath he looked out over the landscape and closed his eyes. “There are already threats against you made in snide remarks to both Trilon and myself now with everyone seeing you take the flathead child, that many think of as half an animal, will only make the treats to you increase. I do not know how people will react to Reggdi’s arrival with the boy but it will not be good. I still do not know why he would even bring the child here.”

Dosalia sighed for he did not look at the child as a thing, an abomination but as a child. “You already said it Kaunai, it is a child. A child the clan was going to put out in the elements to die. Reggdi is the man of his hearth as much as we do not want to admit that the Mother would intentionally mix the spirit of a man with that of a clan woman. It proves that the clan, are people and we do not want to recognize that fact because then the atrocities that we have accepted not only from Charoli but others who just out right killed them for fun or some infraction. They are people and that fact came home to me when Ayla adopted a half clan child. Loug is a child, a child that has needs and if no one will accept him I will, even if it goes against what you want or like.

Chapter 56

It amazed Dosalia that the presence on one small child could make such a difference in the attitude of the entire group as they moved toward the summer meeting. Loug walked looking forward ignoring the people around him although most did not get close except for Dosalia and with her was always Trilon and Kaunai, but occasionally Dosalia caught him looking for her and she smiled each time their eyes locked. When they stopped for meals, Dosalia made sure that Reggdi and Loug had food and water and every morning she refilled the small water bag for Loug and made sure he had traveling food just as she gave to Reggdi, Kaunai and Trilon. At night she worked on the sounds he made as he tried hard to speak to her and Reggdi, but as if he knew the feelings of other, the sounds he made were soft as if hiding his abilities and this saddened Dosalia most of all.

Those that were obvious in their hatred was no surprise to Dosalia but those that refused to even acknowledge his presence surprised her for many she had grown up with and they knew of the attacks on the clan women by Losadunai men. She could have kissed Netdi when he chose Kaunai as a runner to go to the summer meeting for she knew he would do as she asked and go to the leaders and Losaduni and tell them of Loug and find out what kind of reception was likely for the pair. He however was not happy about leaving but Reggdi had promised to stay near and protect her should anyone threaten her.

Kaunai bent over panting as he entered the hearth of Solandia and the Losaduna of Hot Springs Cave. He knew if Dosalia had told anyone of the child the woman Ayla adopted while Dosalia

was in her care it would be her mother. Solandia rushed to his side and guided him over to a bedspace to sit as she got a water bag and poured some of the liquid into a horn cup. “Nothing has happened to Dosalia has it?” At the shake of his head she sighed with relief and waited until he could catch his breath.

“I went the long way around because I made need your help. The mammoth hunt was a success but on the way back we met up with Reggdi and the son of his hearth which is part flathead.” Hearing her gasp, Kaunai mistakenly knew she understood and nodded his head. “I know, he never should have brought him here but they are on their way now and Dosalia wants me to talk to the leaders and Losaduni. I know that they will reject him but I do not want her hurt, she needs to separate herself from the child or there will be trouble.”

Solandia looked at the man she had known since a child and never knew that he hated the people that Dosalia called the clan. “Why do you hate them Kaunai?”

“Hate? I don’t hate them. Solandia, Stelo went with us on the mammoth hunt and he has already made it known that he plans to cause some kind of trouble. The remarks Trilon and I overheard and ones he made directly to us made both of us worry about her safety. We do not know what he plans but already he is working on her reputation and her attraction to this child will only give him more fuel to work with.”

Solandia sighed as she sat next to Kaunai. “I have always taught my children that if they feel strongly about a subject to investigate it until you have enough information to make a wise decision. Dosalia has spent many years with Ayla and the child Crebin who is also half flathead. From his arrival with the Zelandonii until Dosalia left no children were born that were even closely similar in appearance including their Zelandoni who is first. The child became to mean a lot to Dosalia and as far as I can tell there is no one who will ever be able to convince her that they are animals or half animals. Do you feel strongly enough about Dosalia that if her acceptance of this child means you will have to leave the Losadunai would you?”

“I would follow Dosalia to the ends of Mother’s earth.”

“I don’t think you will have to go that far especially since I will be joining my daughter in her acceptance as I am sure Losaduna will as well. Now, since you have your breath back, tell me the rest of the story you have left out and then why don’t we complete what you were sent here to do?”

As the hunters began to ascend the final hill into the summer meeting area, people began to pour over the rise and talking excitedly began taking the travois and relieving the rest of the burden they had been pulling. Reggdi was not the only one who was surprised when several of the women stopped and placed a comforting hand on first Loug then Reggdi before going to help where they could. The excitement of having mammoth after so many years was had many contemplating how they were going to fix their portion once the meat was divided. The hunters were further shocked when they reached the top and were faced with not only the leaders but all the Losaduni as well. Not knowing what to do Netdi stepped forward glad to see that Laduni was present which meant the southern hunters were back as well.

Losaduna of North Cave stepped forward to meet the hunt leader but nothing showed on her face as they looked at each other but Netdi could see the hidden humor in her eyes. “Netdi, leader of Second Spring Cave, it has come to the attention of the combined council that you have a visitor.”

Reggdi did not wait for the summons for he wanted no one to suffer for his decisions. He knew that the Zelandoni of the Ninth cave had accepted a child like Loug and the camp of the Mamutoi that Danug came from also adopted a similar child. He was determined to find some place that would accept them for he was never going to be separated from the boy again. The clan woman that was his mate had never been strong and had been relegated to receiving scraps for many years. He knew that many of the hunters thought he deserved no better than a woman without status even though he had taught some of the clan to use the spear thrower. When he approached the Losadunai of North Spring Cave he watched as shock was etched on her face. “This is Loug, the son of my hearth.”

Chapter 57

The roars of rage and gasps of surprise was followed but incessant mutterings from all present except most of the hunters which had at least become used to the idea. Dosalia watched as Stelo detached himself and went to stand next to Tomasi and Derlio and immediately they moved out of hearing range from the rest of the crowd. “As you can hear Reggdi there has not been a decision made about Loug, but the Losadunai and leaders have agreed that you are Losadunai and therefore we welcome you back home. There will be meeting to determine how to proceed but we came out to let you know that if anyone injures this child they will receive the full punishment of the leaders and the Losaduni. We will guarantee his safety while he is among us.”

Reggdi knew that right now that was the best he could hope for but looking at Tomasi he knew he would not be welcomed at the Plain Caves camp. When he turned he was surprised to see Laduni standing in front of him. “Reggdi, I would welcome you to Hot Spring Camp and cave should there be a need.”

“Laduni, it is appreciated.”

“Well right now we need to get the results of this hunt stored.” The Losaduni from North Cave said in a loud voice that seemed to initiate movement of the people to take the travois burdened with the results of the Mammoth hunt and start back toward the summer meeting. The work to get the meat stored and the hide and other parts that belonged to the hunters separated was made easier as all those at the summer meeting helping. Those not involved with the hunt looked longingly at the grey pelt of the mammoth that went with those of the Hot Spring Cave. Although the overall look of the pelt was gray, the Losaduni had to admit that it was not a white animal nor even a fully grey animal for despite its youth the hair was actually a mixture of reds, blacks, white and grey hairs that near the skin were all black so they could not confiscate the hide for the Losaduni. Those of the Hot Spring Cave were also pleased that they received a second hide even though it was a normal dark red for this one would more than likely be available to others in the cave.

When all was stored those involved in the mammoth hearth heard that those that had gone for reindeer had returned with more meat than the mammoth provided especially since more people were assigned to that hunting group and there had been so many animals in the unusually large herd. Dosalia decided to take the grey hide and store it in the cave storage area instead of the pit that was dug for this use. She knew with all that would happen this summer she would not be able to get to it until the winter anyway and she wanted it to be perfect. Since it was so early in the season, much of the undercoating was still attached which would make the hide even warmer. There would be plenty to make boots for all of them, a bed covering and a lot more.

Pulling the travois by herself when she saw that her mother had both Trilon and Kaunai hard at work storing the meat for the Hot Spring cave but with the hunt leader's portion along with the cave's portion from the reindeer hearth, Solandia wanted the pit enlarged and deepened. Although the air was still cool, even at midday so early in the summer since it was still warm enough that the men were uncomfortable coming out of the pit dressed in the full winter gear needed to dig at the bottom of the pit where it was still frozen. Other men were constructing wood cross beams that the meat would sit on after water was thrown on the newly dug walls to encase them.

When Dosalia neared the water she knew even though they had placed stones to make the water shallow at the crossing area there was still a chance that the hind could get wet. Running across was not an option because even though the stones had been placed a short time ago they would still be slick and she did not want to get wet.

"Dosalia, wait and I will help you." Dosalia turned and had to stop herself from groaning as Marcum ran toward her. Although he had never been as pushy as the other two men, he was also as dull as a rock when she tried to talk to him. His knowledge seemed limited to hunting and nothing else. Even so he would not even try to use the spear thrower for he thought it was for men who were lazy. She had not seen him since he arrived and although he had also wanted her for the mine he seemed to accept her refusal to mate with him with better grace than the other two men. When he approached, he lifted the rear of the travois and as Dosalia began across the river he followed holding the travois up so that the hide would not get wet and the need to be worked immediately. When they reached the opposite shore, Marcum placed the end of the travois gently on the ground and smiled at Dosalia. "Sorry I haven't come by to see you, Eretia has agreed to be my mate at the second matrimonial."

"Marcum, that is wonderful news." She was truly happy for him as Eretia seldom had her own thoughts that did not come from someone else and she would believe everything Marcum told her thus stoking his pride which was very important to him. Since returning, Dosalia had Eretia follow her for hours asking questions sometimes the same question over and over. She had thought Dosalia should have given control of the mine up to a man whether they knew how to work flint or not then she would not have had to work so hard for everyone else. Eretia wanted to be cared for and make her beads, which was the one thing she did very well. She would work for hours on stone, ivory or any other material to make beads in various shapes.

Marcum came to the front of the travois and took one of the handles from Dosalia and began pulling toward the cave front. “Why are you waiting for the second matrimonial?”

“There are still some details of the bride price to be worked out. Her mother’s mate does not want her to mate at all because he will lose her and she takes care of the hearth which is actually hers but she allows him to stay. I think it may be that I will have to move to the Second Spring Cave in the end.”

“That might not be such a bad thing since Netdi is now leading the Second Spring Cave.”

“I heard that had happened but I wasn’t sure. I thought he was happy at Hot Spring Cave.”

“He was but, well just say he saw the need and decided to take the leadership that apparently should have been his.”

Marcum stopped when they reached the opening to the cave, “I will wait out here and walk you back to the summer meeting.”

“Thanks Marcum.”

Chapter 58

Dosalia struggled to get the travois into the storage area where the hides were kept and finally dropped the handles and began to roll the hide into the freezing area where it would keep until the winter when she could decide the best use of the unusual hide and her mother would be best to consult about that but with all that was going on Solandia had too much to do. When she had the hide placed as best as she could she closed the double hide covering to the inner chamber and that for the outer chamber that had given her just enough light to move within the chamber. The carved steps were slick with ice in some places but since her shoes had fur on the outer edges her footing was stable enough to pull the travois up with her.

Stepping into her mother’s hearth she smiled at seeing the outfit she had been working on since she learned of the mating and Dosalia loved the light tan coloring that went so well with the small amber beads and the orange colored shells she had received from Keylo. At the time Dosalia had not known why she had traded for the multisized shells of various types but now she knew. She was sure her mother was coming back to the cave to finish it out of site of others. From the look of it she was done. She had thought to wear the flint covered tunic her mother had made but this tunic with matching leggings was so beautiful in comparison. Leaving her mother’s hearth she decided to get additional clothing from her own hearth and turned down the passage that connected all the chambers of Hot Springs Cave.

There was no warning as a hand reached around her covering her mouth to prevent her screams from being heard. The hand was wet from sweat and the smell from the man’s foul breath as she was pulled against his chest made her gag. “Not so haughty now are we?” Stelo’s voice made her freeze all her movements. “That’s right little Dosalia, we are here to teach you how a woman

should act and when we are done you will willingly tell everyone you are not mating with those two buffoons.”

Shaking her head not only brought laughter from Stelo and a second man but in her fear she did not recognize the voice. Knowing she could not allow them to take her further into the cave she relaxed just slightly and when she felt him relax she reared her head backwards and felt the satisfying strike of the back of her head against his face and was immediately released and she turned and ran for the cave entrance only to be tackled from behind by the second man. “No you don’t you little tease. We have plans for you and whether you want to or not, you will cooperate with us.”

Derilo, she had never thought he had the bravery to do such a thing and knew from the odor coming from his that both he and Stelo had taken mushrooms that had given them the bravery they needed. When he stood he dragged her up with him but Dosalia began to kick and scratch any part of his body she could reach until she was spun around by Stelo and his fist hit her on her upper cheek and eye and she collapsed at his feet. She fought the darkness threatening her knowing that there was no hope of fighting them if she lost consciousness but the pain was excruciating and she could not open her left eye but she did not know if it was from the pain or swelling but it did not matter.

“Bind her.” Stelo said through his teeth which were red from the blood from his nose and the split on his lip as he looked at her with hatred. Dosalia screamed at the top of her lungs hoping that Marcum was not with these two men who he had once been friends with not seeing the fist that stopped her voice in an instant.

Trilon and Kaunai crossed the river with fear and anger eating at them that Dosalia would have gone off by herself when she knew that Stelo was planning something. As soon as they noticed she was missing they had begun asking everyone if they had seen her only to learn from Solandia that she had returned to the home cave to store the grey hide. Their fear came to the front when they arrived at the entrance to the cave to see Marcum on the ground and blood seeping into the dirt from a severe wound to his head. Bending to see if he was still alive they both froze at the sound of the scream suddenly cut off.

Dosalia shook her head and groaned in pain feeling herself being pulled into one of the chambers that made up the Hot Springs cave and immediately she was pulled to her feet and lifted off the ground. “Pull off her leggings, I do not feel like waiting.” With Stelo’s hand over her mouth, Dosalia could only kick out at Derlio who was attempting to remove her clothing even as Stelo tightened his hold around her ribs making it difficult to breath. “Hurry up.” He demanded and Dosalia wondered if perhaps the effects of the mushroom were beginning to wear off and fear began invading their minds for both men were cowards.

Derlio finally was able to remove her legging despite her fighting him and Stelo threw her to the ground and fell onto her, immediately covering her mouth as he pushed his manhood into her. “Even though you know nothing of how to pleasure a man, we will keep at you until you will do precisely what we tell you.” He began pumping into her but Dosalia refused to stop fighting

even when both men started to laugh. Derlio knelt at her head and pulled her head back so that she could see his erection.

“I will bite it off.” She gasped as he pulled her hair so that her head was twisted even further.

“You bite it and I will take a knife to that face of yours and we will see if your pretty boys want anything to do with you.”

Chapter 59

Dosalia spat at him and he retaliated with his fists. Anger at her embarrassment of him burned to the front as his fist struck again and again. He was confused for only a moment when he was thrown away from her and looked into the eyes of Kaunai whose eyes burned with hatred and anger. Kaunai's roar as he charged the man made Derlio fear that this man he had thought was too tender to have any anger thought no more as a limb from a nearby table was smashed across his face and he sank to the floor. Kaunai stopped his second swing when he heard Dosalia's moan and he instead knelt beside her ignoring Trilon who was now beating Stelo.

“Kaunai, Get me out of here, please.” Without a word Kaunai lifted her and took her out of the cave into the early even air. As soon as he laid her down she twisted away from him and vomited until she heaved without producing anything. A soft groan caught Kaunai's attention and he turned to see Marcum on his knees trying to stand. Going to the man he helped him to where Dosalia was and laid him down seeing that Dosalia had her eyes closed and was swallowing convulsively.

“Dosalia, I have to go back and help Trilon. Stay here and we will be right back.” When all he wanted to do was get Losaduna of North Cave, Kaunai rushed back into the cave to see that Trilon had the men bound and walking towards him. “Dosalia and Marcum are outside together, I am going to get Losaduna.” At Trilon's nod Kaunai rushed from the cave and crossed the river as quickly as he could first in the central area knowing that there was no one in the tents near the cave. Arriving at the North Cave camp he saw her and picking her up and started back the way he had come. Smiling as if it were a normal occurrence Kirloni gathered his mother's healing basket and motioned to his two acolytes to get the travois and followed the man carrying his mother to what the man thought was an emergency knowing that nine times out of ten it was minor but he wanted everything they might need just in case.

Kirloni's smile disappeared as soon as he saw Marcum and Dosalia's condition and sent the two acolytes back to the main area to gather as many of the Losaduni and leaders they could find. While his mother looked at Dosalia, he went to Marcum who was sitting with his face in his hands while blood covered his hands and face. His soft moans were barely audible and he knew that the pain he was experiencing must be excruciating. “Marcum, I am going to help you lay back down so I can see the wound.” Marcum made no movement or sound except to gasp and Kirloni helped him to lie on his stomach. Lighting several torches he took from the travois, Kirloni took a very thin small knife and began to cut the hair away from where the blood seemed to be coming from.

The wound was not deep and looked as if whatever had hit him had luckily glanced off his skull pulling the skin away and leaving a large wound but as he touched the bones that protected the brain did not appear to be broken. Going to the river he brought cold water and began cleaning the area and watched as the blood continued to well. Head wounds bleed excessively and this was not different except he could not put pressure on it to stop the bleeding. Placing a cold rabbit fur over the area he checked Marcum for other injuries and was glad he found none for they would have to wait until they finished treating his skull wound. Looking over at his mother he could see why she had thought Dosalia in worse condition but turning back to his own patient he pulled the cold fur and noticed that the skin came away from the skull. Even knowing he would cause more pain to Marcum, he slipped his finger into the wound and felt the bone of the skull and sighed relieved that he was correct and no bones were broken and there were no depressions. He felt Marcum relax and knew as much as he tried the pain had become too much for him and Kirloni covered him against the chill gathering.

Chapter 60

By the time Losaduna got to Dosalia both eyes were swollen shut and severely bruised and she worried that her jaw might be fractured since Dosalia refused to tell her what happened. It was not until Kirloni lit the torches that she saw the bruising around her throat and knew it was also probably painful for her to speak. Seeing that Kirloni was taking care of Marcum, Losaduna stood and went to look at the men Trilon had tied knowing that other than pain relief and cold hides over her face there was little she could do for Dosalia at the moment. Guessing what had happened she felt more like injuring the two men Trilon held than healing them but she could not go against all she had trained for just because of her personal feelings.

“They can wait until after Dosalia and Marcum are cared for.” Trilon’s words were spoken softly but the anger was more than evident.

“I need to get them to the tent and we will be better able to care for them, but I want to see the men Trilon so step aside.” Losaduna looked at each of the two men and noted the swollen faces and split lips but there seemed to be nothing that needed her immediate attention. Turning to Trilon she saw the hate in his eyes and she hoped the rest would arrive soon for she did not think the men would last long with Trilon’s care. When she touched his face to look at the wound on the side of his face he jerked his face away and she realized that she had touched the side of his face with the blind eye and he had not seen her hand. “I will look at you later as well.”

Going back to Dosalia who was now sitting up, Losaduna turned her face so that she could see her better. “Can you open your eyes at all Dosalia?”

“Yes, but the light hurts and they feel scratchy.”

“Can you stand?”

“Yes, Kaunai carried me out here then the swelling got so bad I just stayed.”

“I am going to help you stand and I want you to trust that I will not allow you to walk into anything and we will go to the Losaduni tent and we will have a little talk. As soon as Losaduna tried to help Dosalia stand, Kaunai was at her side and picked her up. “Kaunai she says she can walk.”

“Maybe, but she cannot see, this will be easier on her.” He said nothing else as he waited for Losaduna to lead the way. Not wanting to add to the stress he already had seeing his future mate in her current state, Losaduna walked across the field where the leader’s and Losaduni tents were located. She smiled at her remaining acolyte who had already had a fire in the hearth burning and several lamps as well.

“Kaunai go and help Kirloni bring Marcum here and it might be better if he were not carried but put on something solid.” At his nod she turned away from him and looked at Dosalia. “Other than the swelling and bruising I don’t see a whole lot wrong. What happened Dosalia?”

“I wanted to store the grey pelt for winter and Marcum was helping me take it to the cave because both Kaunai and Trilon were busy with my mother. I think he also wanted to talk to me since he is now promised to a woman from Second Spring Cave. Marcum wanted to wait outside the cave, why I don’t know other than he is to be mated and probably did not want to have to explain to his future mate why he was with me. After I stored the hide, Stelo grabbed me from behind and Derlio was with him. They pulled me into one of the chambers and forced me to share pleasures. I was not being cooperative and they did this, but I hope they are sore from more than just what Kaunai and Trilon did to them.”

“Well the matrimonial was to be tomorrow but we will hold off until we get this straighten out and we will use that time to try and get the swelling down but there is little I can do for the bruising.”

“As long as this headache goes away I will be fine.”

Losaduna chuckled and went to start a tea for Dosalia for even though she appeared not to have any effect of being forced sleep would be the best thing for her. Looking up when they carried Marcum in, Losaduna saw that they had stopped the bleeding but she could tell he was still awake. Unfortunately because of the head wound they would not be able to give him anything other than willow bark tea until they were sure there was no permanent damage it was going to be a pain filled few days for him at least.

“Kirloni, as soon as you are done with him, check the other two and then Kaunai and Trilon.”

“The leaders arrived and took Stelo and Derlio with them to the other tent. They do not want Dosalia to have to deal with them.”

“They probably don’t want me to injure them further.” Dosalia said much to Kirloni’s disbelief for he like the leaders though she would have been devastated by what had occurred and with the injuries she suffered he thought for sure she would not have wanted to face either of the men. “Dosalia.” The scream caused Losaduna to turn around and Dosalia to groan.

“Mother I am right here and I am fine.”

“Fine, oh Dosalia you cannot be fine looking like that.” Solandia wanted to take her daughter into her arms but did not want to cause any additional pain.”

“Solandia, you daughter is alright other than the swelling and bruising she is little hurt.”

“Little Hurt! Look at her!”

“I have already examined her and I was just making a tea for her that will help her sleep the night and”

“Well if she is going to sleep the night she can do so at our camp.”

“Not yet, Solandia.” Everyone turned when Laduni entered with several leaders and the rest of the Losaduni. Dosalia could feel her mother’s hand tightening on her shoulder and tried to keep from wincing for that would make her face and head hurt.

Laduni looked at Dosalia and closed his eyes to try and control the anger that this had happened again to a woman from his cave. He did not know how he would ever be able to keep this from Madenia, but then that would be Netdi’s problem now but he did not what to think of how she would suffer all over again.

Chapter 61

Dosalia felt a man’s hand replace her mother’s and knew from the soft feel that it was her father and felt as he sat next to her. “I am fine Losaduna, really. I did as much damage to them as they did to me and Trilon and Kaunai added to their injuries.”

“This never should have happened Dosalia and I should have done something when I first heard the roamers but thought it was just the men grumbling because you refused them.”

“They are to blame for their actions it is how you taught me. I did not make them lose control that is on them. They only hurt my body but not me and my body will heal.”

“Will you tell me what happened?”

Thinking that only the man of her hearth and Laduni had entered the healing tent, Dosalia repeated the same story she told Losaduna of North Cave. “I am surprised that Trilon acted with such restraint considering what happened to the Zelandonii when I first arrived.”

Losaduna and Laduni did not need to ask what had happened for Dosalia had told the entire cave the tragedy of the Zelandonii summer meeting. Solandia had been particularly upset for man of her hearth had been the one to do the trade missions had been in charge of organizing whatever

was going to the Zelandonii. She had accompanied her mother when they joined the trade journey and had become close friends with Marthona even though they had not seen each other for many years. If the leaders and the other Losaduni wanted that information he would tell them but there was no reason for Dosalia to tell it again now.

“I want you to rest Dosalia and we will talk with Trilon and Kaunai when we leave. I heard your mother say she wanted to take you to the camp and that might be best.” He knew they would have to allow the men to receive medical attention but he was not willing for them to be in the same tent as the daughter of his hearth and told the leaders so. Helping Dosalia stand with Solandia’s help he walked with the two women to the edge of the river and watched as they crossed and started for their tents. Turning he headed back to the healing tent trying to control the anger he had never known in his life. Not wanting to make the wrong decisions, he took his time returning to the tent which the leaders used for their meeting that did not include the Losaduni. He could hear Tomasi’s loud voice as he extolled the virtues of his son and how it was Stelo’s influence that had caused the situation. Sighing that the man had a blind spot just as he had for Charoli was the reason his son thought that nothing could affect him. Outside the tent both Kaunai and Trilon waited to be called in knowing that they would have to tell why they had beaten the two men. Neither were controlling their anger at all, entering the tent he hoped his control would last.

Gulloni looked around the room ignoring all that Tomasi was saying for it meant nothing in the face of what he and Stelo had done. He was glad that he had not been the one to find the two men so abusing a woman he was not sure he would have allowed the men to look as good as they did now. After seeing Dosalia’s injuries he had nearly ordered the men to receive the same punishment as Charoli but he forced himself to stay calm as he looked at Marcum as the son of his hearth worked on his horrible head wound.

“Tomasi this is getting us nowhere. We have heard Dosalia’s story and have seen her and Marcum’s wounds. It will be days before Marcum will be able to speak to us if then but I want to hear what these two have to say.”

“No!” Tomasi yelled pulling his son away from Stelo. “You will only twist what they have to say.”

“I will have you removed Tomasi if you are unwilling to control yourself. Netdi remove the ties from their mouths I want to hear their story.”

As soon as Netdi removed Derlio’s gag he immediately began to talk. “It was Stelo’s idea that we take her now before she was mated. She has never denied that we shared pleasures before it was not to be a big deal, we only wanted to teach her that she chose wrongly.”

“Shut up you fool.” Stelo snarled.

“Laduni, will you take Stelo to the healing tent where Losaduna can treat him and when she is done you can return him here.”

No one spoke before Stelo was pulled from the tent by Netdi and then Gulloni turned once again to Derlio. "Continue."

Derlio took a deep breath and started again. "Stelo said that if we could get Dosalia alone we would be able to convince her that she made the wrong decision when she chose the two men to mate with. We had seen her cross the river with Marcum and thought that she and Marcum were going to share pleasures and Stelo said we would just join them, but when we got to the front of the cave Marcum was standing outside and was not in with Dosalia. When I asked him why he said he wanted to escort Dosalia back to the summer meeting when she was done storing the grey mammoth pelt. I was about to ask him to join us when Stelo hit him with a rock. I thought he had killed him but when I saw he move I went with Stelo into the cave. Stelo grabbed her from behind and before we could explain anything she hit Stelo in the face with her head. Well that made Stelo mad and we took her to a chamber and Stelo ordered me to take off her legging and as I tried she kicked me in my face and my manhood but I showed her and finally got the leggings off. Stelo wanted to go first so I let him but when I tried to get her to pleasure me with her mouth she spat at me and I hit her once then Kaunai attacked me."

"Artloni, would you take Derlio to the healing tent and have Netdi return with Stelo?" The leaders of Dry Spring Cave pulled Derlio with him as he left the tent.

Chapter 62

There was little Losaduna of North Spring Cave could do for Stelo's broken nose but try and put it back in place and hope for the best but if took Netdi and Kirloni to hold him still so that she could realign the bone and when she was done he was quickly released. "Mother damn you woman." Stelo cried nasally as he held his hands over his face to stop the Losaduna from applying pressure to his nose that had started bleeding again mixing with the tears of pain running down his face. Breathing through his mouth he stood to leave but was stopped by Netdi.

"I do not think so Stelo, the Losaduni and leaders still want a word with you. You probably do not know what happened to the Zelandonii renegades that forced and beat women do you? Well since you are of my cave I am thinking of using some of their tactics, let me tell you what they did." In as much detail as Dosalia could give them of all of had happened that first summer she was with the Zelandonii, plus he added some details that had never been told to him but thought should have occurred to the renegades. Although Stelo acted as if he was not listening, Netdi could see the slight shaking of his hand when he reached for a rabbit hide to press against his face.

When Artloni entered with Derlio, Netdi pulled Stelo up and out of the tent smiling when Trilon and Kaunai joined him and stood on either side of Stelo as they had when they had left the leader's tent. Continuing his description of the Zelandonii punishments, Trilon chimed in with items that Dosalia had never told them she had recounted her time with Jondalar and Ayla. When he entered with Stelo he could feel the tension in the room and taking his ward to a seat near Gulloni, made him sit. "Stelo we have heard what Derlio has to say now we would like your version."

Stelo stood up wanting everyone to see his injuries, but he was not happy that his rich voice was softened with nasal tones because of those injuries. “You all know I have been trying for years to convince Dosalia to be my mate and I knew that Derlio also wanted her as his mate as I am sure you are aware. When she rejected him so publically, I decided that I was not of a mind to accept such humiliation. Since she became promised to two men I talked Derlio into going with me to talk to her again to get her to reconsider her opinion. When we got to the cave Marcum told us she was inside and then tried to prevent us from entering in the cave and brought up his spear and threatened Derlio so I grabbed a stone and struck him with it. We could not find Dosalia right away and then we heard something and investigated and found her in her mother’s hearth and waited outside until she came out.”

“We never intended to hurt Dosalia but when she attacked me, I admit that I got angry but we had gotten past that when she agreed to share pleasures with us.” He stopped when he heard a scuffle outside the tent and then resumed. “We had just started when something happened between Derlio and Dosalia, and he started to hit her before I could do anything Kaunai and his friend entered without warning and started hitting both of us.”

“Netdi would you bring your brother in and might as well bring Trilon as well.”

Netdi smiled as he moved aside the flap and allowed his furious brother and Trilon into the tent.

“Kaunai, please tell us what happened.”

“When Trilon and I ran to the cave since we were worried.”

“Why were you worried?”

“On the mammoth hunt Stelo said he had plans for Dosalia that would teach her who she was to mate with and wondered how we, meaning Trilon and I, could have such low standards since we were from lines of leaders. He made several innuendos that Dosalia could not produce a child and he knew what she was better used for. He made some ugly accusations that I will not repeat her but we both knew he was not to be trusted. When Dosalia took the half clan child from Reggdi, Stelo said that it proved she was more animal than woman. The leadership and Losaduni looked at Stelo who squirmed uncomfortably. “Any way we had asked Dosalia not to go anywhere alone and while we were busy helping Solandia she disappeared. We found out she went to the cave to store the grey hide and we ran to the cave. When we got there we found Marcum severely injured and were attending him when we heard Dosalia’s scream which was quickly cut off. When we finally found her Stelo was forcing himself on her and Derlio was hitting her face repeatedly. I went after Derlio and Trilon took care of Stelo. I had only hit Derlio once when he went down and then heard Dosalia groan and went to her. She said she wanted out of the cave so I quickly carried her out and as soon as I laid her down she started getting sick. I wanted to get Losaduna of North Spring Cave but I did not want to leave Trilon alone so I went into the cave but he had them tied and was coming out so I ran to find Losaduna.”

“Netdi can you see if Losaduna of North Spring cave is done treating Derlio and see if they both can join us?”

When Netdi entered the healing tent he was not gentle when he grabbed Derlio and stood him and then turned to Losaduna. “Gulloni would like a word with you Losaduna” his voice was polite and gentle, a sharp contrast to the shakes he gave to Derlio. She nodded and looked to see that Kirloni stood as well and nodded. When they entered the leaders’ tent again he saw that Stelo had been retied and as soon as they entered Derlio was taken from him and tied and both men were set before the combined leaders.

“Losaduna of North Spring cave, could you explain the injuries to both Dosalia and Marcum?”

“Dosalia was beaten severely, beaten on her face and she has terrible bruising around her neck which though she can talk now she may not be able to tomorrow. I do not think the bones of her chest are broken but there is enough bruising that they will cause her pain for a while. If you wish to speak to her further then I would suggest that you do so this night because she will not be able to answer you tomorrow and I do not know when she might be able to. Marcum has a large wound to his head but the bone is not broken. That does not mean he does not have internal injuries but he will also be in terrible pain for a while as long as we can keep his wounds clean he should recover.”

“Thank you Losaduna of North Spring Cave.” Turning to the two men Gulloni gave no indication what his word would be. “It is obvious from what we have heard from Dosalia and others that you purposely went to the cave to force Dosalia against her will not only to share pleasures but to force her to break the promise she had made to Trilon and Kaunai. Therefore until we have made a decision, you will both remain tied and it will be up to your cave to care for you but you are not to be released. Both the Plains and Second Spring camps will move to the outer edges of the summer camp and both of you will remain within your respective camp areas.

Chapter 63

Losaduna of North Spring cave looked at the man pacing her private tent that she came to for some relief from those that needed her. He had entered right behind her as if he had been waiting for her and had since not spoken a word but continued to pace which was disturbing. “Reggdi, why are you here in my private tent?” Reggdi stopped pacing and looked about the tent and then at the woman standing across from him. She was shocked to see the tears streaming down his face and his features twisted as if trying to control them. “Reggdi, what has happened?”

“I just heard about Stelo and Derlio, Losaduna. I know I deserved the punishment that was given to me and I am proud of myself for what I have accomplished in the long years since then.” He paused and took a deep breath to try and calm himself. “Losaduna, even though I accept the punishment I received as just, please, please convince the councils not to do it again. Do not destroy these men forever. What they did was horrendous, I know this, but to be mutilated for the rest of your life...” He shivered hard as he remembered the day they took his hand and could not continue for a moment. “Madenia forgave Slindi and myself after we showed that we could

make something of ourselves, or at least we were trying. I feel as if it is happening to me all over again. Those of my cave before it happened knew what was to happen and made sure that I knew all the things that would occur. I was less that a man for so long Losaduna, but there has to be a better answer.”

Losaduna sighed with relief and regret as she looked at the man who was now sitting on a stump she used for a chair. “There will be no removal of body parts Reggdi. I cannot do it again. You are right that the punishment you and Slindi received seemed the best and so much better than allowing Verdegia her blood payment and I know you would have died, for that was her intention. At the time she thought you had killed any chance for her daughter to have a normal life and that she would never have grandchildren so in her mind you murdered them as well. Taking your hands caused the life of two of the men, who could not live with that loss, but I watched you and Slindi work through all that had happened and I am very proud of both of you and so sad that we lost Slindi when he was finally learning something that would have risen his standing. No, I will not remove another person body part and this incident does not merit it for as bad as it was, Dosalia was not a girl who was not opened, she was a woman who had shared pleasures with these men before. The beating she received was a greater crime in that she was forced and beaten to make her change her choice of mate, or mates in this case.”

“Reggdi, I have been treating Dosalia for three days now and she has said the same thing. She wants them to be punished but not mutilated so the leaders and the Losaduna are going to have to make a decision on how to punish these men but since I will not remove any body parts they will have to decide what else they can do. I believe Dosalia has told Netdi and Laduni the same thing she told me.”

Dosalia looked at her reflection in the still pool that was fed from a small stream that flowed around the eastern side of the summer meeting area. She could not say Losaduna had not warned her for although the cold packs of the last few days had taken the swelling down and she could once again open her eyes, it looked like a Pryoc cat. The little thief that was more like a large rodent than any feline she had seen sported blackened eyes similar to the purple and green bruising that surrounded not only her eyes but continued down her cheeks and around her throat, but at least the pain was for the most part eased if not gone. The bruising in her arms and chest also spread and both Kaunai and Trilon feared touching her at all. The blood in her eyes made it look like they were bleeding and several times a day Losaduna of North Cave and her son examined her and she assured them each time that she was in no pain and could see perfectly well. It had not been difficult to hear the complaints from the others that were to mate in the first matrimonial and she felt fine and wanted to continue with the mating despite the thoughts of Those closer who wanted her to wait until the second matrimonial.

“Don’t you understand, if I wait then they win and I have to put up with more than if we do the mating now instead of waiting?”

“You make it sound like a chore.”

Trilon's words made her realize that it had become to feel that way and he just happened to be the one to mention waiting when she had enough of people not believing what she was saying. Going into his arms, she was grateful he did not push her away. "It has started to feel that way with everyone not believing that as bad as I look I feel well."

"You cannot blame them Dosalia it looks as if you should be lying down screaming in pain." He was glad to hear her chuckle for she had not laughed since that night. He had taken her from the healing tent when he saw her anger growing at the women's insistence that she was too injured to be mated.

Dosalia stood from the pond side and walked back to the summer meeting area and the meeting the Losaduni were having for the six men and six women who were to be mated at the matrimonial. She met her mother half way through the summer meeting camp as saw that something was bothering her. "Mother, what is wrong?"

"They got Marcum walking again and well I just think it is a shame that they are thinking of releasing him to his home cave with Tomasi and Derlio there and not pleased with him at all."

"Mother can we stop by and see Laduni before we go to the meeting?"

Solandia looked at the sun and knew that they were still early but she had wanted to get Dosalia settle before the others arrived including her promised. "I think we can take a few minutes."

Dosalia was very pleased to see Netdi also in the camp as Madenia was working with Bretia on some of the hides from the two hunts. Walking to the leaders, Dosalia waited for them to finish their conversation. Both men noticed her at the same time and stopped their discussion and looked at her.

"I did not mean to interrupt you but I think I need to tell both of you somethings about Marcum. There is a woman from the Second Spring that wants to mate with Marcum but since her mother died she has been caring for the man of her hearth and he is making it a difficult situation. With Stelo confined to Second Spring and Derlio confined to Plains there really isn't anywhere he can go comfortably but the man of the woman's hearth might make even more of a problem if you Laduni were to offer him a spot."

Laduni and Netdi both laughed knowing Dosalia thought she was being sly but was very obvious. "I know the man well Dosalia and he is older but still hunts and he is the one who taught the daughter of his hearth to make beautiful things with vines. I will find out where the negotiations are and then perhaps Laduni and I can become involved."

Dosalia kissed the cheeks of both men and left to go to the meeting. "He did try to protect her and has paid dearly for that. Losaduna of the North wants to send him to his home cave but that will be a problem." Laduni noted. "Karkan, is my age and still active but I knows he fears being old and alone. Go ahead and see where negotiations are and perhaps it might be better if I talked with him instead of you."

“He can be very stubborn Laduni but I will see what is going on and see if perhaps coming from you might not make the difference.”

Chapter 64

Dosalia looked at the tunic her mother brought to the Losaduni tent that was now finished. Aside from the amber beads and shells the collar and the bottom edge was now edged in a roll of dark fur from a marten. The contrasting colors would highlight the differing shade of her own hair that was now tied back with a leather thong, braided and folded several times to make a fan that rested on the back of her neck. In her ears were small amber beads which were hanging from a thin piece of tendon that looped around her ear and dangled below it. On her arms were several bracelets of shells, bone and ivory carved and scrubbed to appear white. On her feet were camp shoes made of the same leather as the tunic tied with leather that reached her upper ankle and fastened with ivory that matched her bracelets. Seeing the tears in her mother’s eyes Dosalia pulled her into her embrace and laughed.

“I’m the one that is supposed to be crying mother.”

“I never thought you would ever mate and I do like both of them so much and can see why it was so difficult to choose between them.”

Losaduna entered the tent of the Hot Spring Cave where Trilon and Kaunai were being prepared for the matrimonial. Across his arm was a light tan tunic with shells and amber beads that he had been entrusted to give to Trilon. Looking at the younger man who would be his daughter’s mate, he was surprised to see how nervous he was when he seemed so sure before. Sitting on a block of wood that many used as a table, he seemed deep in thought and still dressed in everyday clothing. “Are you planning to run?”

Trilon looked up startled for the voices of the other men had become a drone as he thought of Dosalia and her stubborn insistence to continue with the matrimonial as injured as she was. He was thinking of the trip they had all three planned to travel south but wondered if that was wise to be too far away from the healer in case something was to go wrong and his imagination could think of too many things that could go wrong on such a trip. “I was thinking since the daughter of your hearth will not act like someone so grievously injured that perhaps we should stay in the area in case she develops any problems.”

Losaduna could not help but to laugh at Trilon’s worries for he had talked with Dosalia every day since the attack and all he found was anger at the two men who attacked her. What little pain there was the willow bark or other teas Losaduna of North Spring Cave gave to Dosalia seemed to take care of it. The bruising was difficult to look at and many complained to him that he or the other Losaduni should stop her, he could see no reason to do so. “Shall I tell you what she told me?” He did not wait for Trilon’s acceptance but continued. “She said that they win if she does not continue on with her life.”

“She said the same to me after it happened.”

“She is right and you know this is true. Stelo and Derlio are betting that when it comes time that Dosalia will not be among those to be mated. Netdi has already gotten permission to bring Stelo to watch the ceremony but Derlio will be remaining at the Plain Cave’s site under as Tomasi puts it his protection. So we will continue.” He held out the tunic to Trilon who took the garment and looked at it carefully knowing that it was beautifully made and he could see it would fit him well. “Solandia made this for you knowing that you have been traveling and since you will be going through two ceremonies she wanted you to feel more Losadunai.”

Holding the garment out to see the entire effect he was stunned for he saw the symbol the Losadunai had for leaders made by tiny shells on the right shoulder and the marks the three of them used to mark hides during hunts intertwined so that it looked like the sun on his left shoulder. How she had complete such a garment when she also had one to make for Dosalia was astounding to him and he would wear it proudly.

Netdi helped Kaunai put on the tunic he brought and was pleased with the effect. While Dosalia’s and Trilon’s tunics were light colored leather with dark edging, Madenia had made the opposite for Kaunai. The dark color obtained by mixing charcoal with rubia fruit combined with fat from the reindeer the hide came from and the effect was striking with white ermine fur along the bottom and neck. The symbols were similar to those on Trilon’s except instead of the leader symbol, Madenia had put a line over the symbol to chose he was the son of a leader’s hearth. The ivory beads and white spiral shell was eye catching and seeing Kaunai’s smile Netdi knew he was pleased. “Thank Madenia for this gift Netdi.”

“I will tell her. She was so pleased I had asked her to help Solandia who had taken it upon herself to make the tunics for the three of you.”

“I wish Dosalia had agreed to the second matrimonial so that she could heal more. I understand why she is doing it but I am not sure the long trip we had planed is such a good thing anymore.”

“Take it one day at a time Kaunai. That is all any of us can do.”

“I know, but I would rather just go to the southern spring rather than all the way to the glacier.”

“The southern glacier? Why would you want to go there?”

“We wanted to be gone long enough to become comfortable with each other and if we went to the glacier it would take most of a moon cycle.”

“When you get to the southern springs talk to the others and if you can convince them to go south east toward where the southern river joins the Mother River. Just east of the start of the southern river is a set of caves with hot pools in them. Most of the ones Madenia and I visited were wonderful but some had a strong smell and we did not go near them. It took us a little more than a moon cycle to return be we spent many days at the caves.”

“I’ve never been out of Losadunai territory, in fact the furthest I have been is when we went with Laduni to hunt the reindeer.”

“Then you must go to the caves. You can see the hills they are located because the grass is yellow in color and there are many iris that are yellow as well not like the purple around the Mother River we normally see.”

“Thanks Netdi, I will tell them.”

Chapter 65

Trilon had expected it when they called his name, but he had not expected the tightening of his stomach as he walked down to join Losaduna of North Cave who was standing next to Laduni. Although Laduni had adopted him this was essentially the official ceremony for that adoption and his introduction into the Losadunai people. He heard the words and responded where he was supposed to respond but his eyes searched for Dosalia and Kaunai since he had been taken from the tent first. When Losaduna of North Cave turned to introduce him he was surprised that everyone seemed to be pleased and he smiled at the thigh slapping greeting by those surrounding the ceremonial area. When he moved to leave, Laduni held his arm to remain still and he looked around to see the other five men from the tent he had been in coming into the area and the six women who would also be mated this day. In front of both lines were those he was looking for. After seeing Kaunai smiling at him his eyes were for Dosalia alone. She was beautiful even with the bruising of her face, the small smile on her face made him believe her words more than anything else could have.

Dosalia ignored the whispers about her appearance as she looked at Trilon and Kaunai and realized what her mother had done. They were matched yet not a blending of all they brought to this mating and Dosalia knew there was something she had to thank her mother for. Because she was the daughter of the hearth of the Losaduna of the highest ranked cave and Kaunai was the son of a leader they would be the first to be joined. As she and Kaunai joined Trilon on the platform as they had been instructed, her thoughts were taken up by the two beautiful men who faced her. In the background she heard the Losaduna of North Cave tell the people all of their affiliations then who ever had done the negotiating for the bride price stepped forward and once again the bride price was told to the people but the gasps from the crowd went unheard by the three people waiting patiently for their turn to speak but only peripherally were they aware of the words spoken around them as they concentrated on each other since they had been separated for a full day without interactions between the men and Dosalia.

When she heard her name Dosalia turned to the Losaduna of North Cave which broke the spell for the men as well and they also turned to the holy woman. “Dosalia of Hot Springs Cave the people want to hear in your own words that this mating is what you desire.”

Dosalia had been practicing for many days what she wanted to say to these two men and for a moment of panic all words left her until she looked at the two faces she had come to love so deeply. “I want to tell all of the love I have for these two men. Trilon of the Zelandonii now

Losadunai has proved his heart and loyalty belong to me by traveling from his home and giving up his people and accepting mine for his own. He has proved his love by accepting me as I am and staying by my side even when my decisions caused him pain. This love has grown stronger everyday and it is a love that I cherish with all my heart. I know should there ever be need he would give his life for me even if it is not what I would want. Kaunai of the Second Spring Cave of the Losadunai has been a faithful friend defending me as a child and being my friend when I was lost. Now as a man he has proven his love by accepting me with all my faults, given me comfort in my darkest days and strength when I needed his for my own. These two men together have filled me with such love and confidence I cannot not see my life without both of them in it. My heart is filled to over flowing with the love I have for them both and I ask them humbly to spend their lives with me.”

The crowd roared their approval and it took a while before the Losaduni could quiet them and allow Trilon and Kaunai to speak. “Trilon, adopted son of Laduni leader of the Hot Spring Cave, the people want to hear in your own words that you accept the woman Dosalia of your own free will.”

With a strong voice so that all could hear, Trilon took Dosalia’s hand in his and smiled at her. “She was just a young woman who had come to me on a dare, but from the first moment she crawled into my heart and never left. She forgave me the grievous wounds I placed on her heart again and again, still I could feel the love she had for me. The sun does not exist without her in my life and nothing could take my love for her away. She is my air, the light in my life, and I would give all that I am even to my life to be with her.” He saw the tears gather in her eyes and knew that she felt the same.

“Kaunai, hearth son of Hilmoi previous leader of Second Spring Cave, the people want to hear in your own words that you accept the woman Dosalia of your own free will.”

“I saw a girl with big tears in her eyes not because she was injured but because I had lost my mother. She held me as I cried for there was no one else to see my pain.” Kaunai looked into her eyes which held his as he watched tears fall from their depths then he too took her hands into his. “There was not a summer meeting that we did not find each other and tell each other our secrets and I loved her even then. What we had learned was shared and what our plans were examined. Never had I ever had such a friend and there was no one to tell me that boys did not have girls for friends, but she was so much more. When she left to go to the Zelandonii before the summer meeting I spent many days searching for her until Netdi told me her fate. But she was returning and that was all I thought of for four years. When she returned she was a beautiful woman but the men treated her as if she were filth and more than once she cried in my arms. It was not until I gathered the courage at a Mother’s ceremony that I reached my heart’s desire. I poured all the love I had been holding for her into that night. I have loved her since we were children and I will love her on the day that I die.”

It took a moment for the Losaduna of North to gather her thought for she had never heard words as these three spoke. Rising her voice for all to hear she faced the crowd. “Losadunai do you accept this mating?” The roar of the crowd over whelmed the words of the Losaduna as she announced they were now mated, and it did not calm until they took their place off to the side of

the platform to await the rest of the couples. Dosalia saw Marcum, his head still wrapped with poultices to prevent infection and caused him to hold his head strangely but he returned her smile and pointed to the woman at his side that held onto him tightly.

The two men both held Dosalia between them effectively hiding her injuries from the curious. When the next two couples joined them they greeted them but otherwise remained quiet. When the last to be mated stepped onto the platform, Dosalia saw that while the man and one of the women looked extremely happy the younger of the women did not look as pleased. “She’s mating him because the men think she had something to do with her mate’s death even though everyone knows it’s was a hunting accident. Gonnlion is only mating her to get children since she is a proven mother of two and Frelia has never been blessed but he loves her to distraction but the Plains Cave would never agree to the mating until his mother died.” The woman told her new mate in standing in front of Dosalia. Looking back at the sad woman she saw what could have happened to her and she squeezed the men’s hands even tighter. Having heard the woman and guessing Dosalia thoughts, both squeezed her hands back.

Chapter 66

Dosalia looked at Kaunai stunned that he would want to change their plans now as they sat in their traveling tent on the outskirts of the summer meeting area planning on leaving at dawn for the glacier to the south. “Dosalia, wouldn’t you rather spend your time with us in the comfort Netdi describes instead of the bone chilling cold of the glacier?”

Looking at Trilon who seemed to be thinking of this revelation, Dosalia took a moment to think what he was asking. She did not think they had time to reach the glacier and though she knew it would be cold she doubted any of the others would make the trek in that direction. “What if there are others planning the same thing?”

It was Trilon who answered her. “Most couples will not want to be too far away from the summer meeting and if they do they will more likely go to their own home caves to spend their time together and I know that Gonnlion and his mates are not leaving the summer meeting at all. How did Netdi hear about this place, Kaunai?”

“Danug and Aklmor told of it they stayed in one of the caves and that is where Charoli tried to kill Danug or Aklmor cannot remember who it was. It is probably closer than the glacier to the south which means when we get there we can stay and not travel so much.”

Dosalia saw that Trilon had made his decision and wanted to go now as much as Kaunai. She knew this would be the hardest part of their mating and wanted them to be comfortable. Her only thoughts when she had suggested the glacier was that it would be far enough away that they would only have to worry about each other. “Then I guess we head east in the morning instead of south.” She returned the smile both men gave her then settled down between them. It had been a stressful few days and having the warmth of the two men made her feel safe and protected as she slipped into sleep.

The next day they woke early before most of the summer meeting camp was awake and the three of them went to where Hot Springs Camp was and slipped into the main tent where not only Laduni but the Losaduna slept with their families. Dosalia knelt next to her mother and touched her face and smiled when her mother opened her eyes. "I wanted you to know that we will be going west to the hot cave instead of the glacier. We may stay there a little longer and I did not want you to worry."

Solandia pressed her hand to her daughter's face and smiled. Losaduna took me there once before you were born and I know you will enjoy it. You have two fine men to depend on and I know you will be safe." She lifted up and kissed Dosalia's cheek and smiled as she laid down and watched her daughter and her mates leave not bothering to stop the tears that fell.

"It is good they decided to go there since the travel to the glacier is much more difficult and dangerous. Although there will be storms all they will need to do will be to find higher ground as they travel." Losaduna pulled Solandia into his arms and fell back to sleep. There were decisions that needed to be made that no one was looking forward to making.

Retchen watched as Derlio paced the tent as they waited for the call of the councils which might take many days according to Tomasi. "You were fools Derlio, both of you. I told you to wait until she was alone but Stelo had to have her now and look where it got you? Had you waited until she was completely alone and taken her to where no one could find her until she agreed to do what you wanted, there would have been no problems. Now I cannot even guess what they will do with the pair of you."

"Tomasi said that Losaduna of North Spring Cave has refused to remove our hands as they first wanted and now they are discussing other punishments."

"My advice to you Derlio is to tell Tomasi to allow you to talk with the council and tell them all that Stelo planned and is still planning no matter that the mating is complete."

"What will that get me?"

"They might put all the blame on Stelo and not on you. Right now Stelo just shared pleasures, they are blaming you for all her injuries."

"I slapped a few times is all."

Retchen laughed loudly at this statement and finally calming himself he looked at the younger man. "Derlio I saw Dosalia at the matrimonial. If she looked that bad so many days after your gentle treatment then you did more than slap her a few times."

"She spit at me. Me! I will be the next leader of Plains Spring Cave."

"Ah that will not be you especially depending on what they are planning on doing to the two of you. I cannot see you suffering Reggdi fate but then you might surprise me."

Netdi looked at Stelo as he sat on the log under the branching shade tree he was tied to. With his hands tied there was little he could do to release himself but Netdi was not taking the chance and each of the men in Second Spring cave had been given the duty of watching him knowing that Netdi would put them forward to receive Stelo's punishment should he escape while they were watching him. The leader's decision was even now being taken to the Losaduna and he knew they would discuss it and argue until they worried the problem to death. As easy as it would have been to give the two the same punishment as those that had been associated with Charoli had received, he had to agree with Losaduna of North Spring Cave that this was not in the same realm since Dosalia had not been a girl who had yet been unopened.

Chapter 67

Dosalia had never traveled this far to the east of Hot Springs Cave and the cool air off the swift flowing water gave them relief from the heat of the plains not that the sun was fully up. They had traveling food that they thought to need when they reached the ice since hunting would have been harder but now they could collect and hunt as they moved. They talked of things they had never talked of before. Trilon after giving the background information to Kaunai told Dosalia of the Zelandoni who is First decision to step down the summer meeting before he left. "She told all that she was not leaving the Zelandonia but rather would remain as an advisor to the next Zelandoni who was First. It put the Zelandonia in a fit of panic except for those closest to the First including Zelandoni of the Ninth, the Fourteenth and Eleventh. I think they all had prior knowledge of what was going to happen. No one was surprised that Zelandoni of the Ninth was chosen to be the First but she was so young compared to others."

"As much as Jondalar was not happy about it, she has been teaching her daughter healing plants and takes her when she is called to other caves. Jondalar has been working with the two boys and the boy Crebin is a very good knapper as young as he is. He still cannot wield the larger tools for his hands are too small but both boys are deadly against rodents with a sling. It seems Zelandoni of the Ninth has been training all her children to use the throwing stick and the sling and Jondalar made little ones for the two boys. The half flathead boy is small compared with the other boy but he is quick with the sling."

Dosalia picked up the thread explaining in more detail why she has started training the children so early. "Ayla had thought that if they learned together they would be even closer for, and this I heard from others, she feared a dream she had that her two sons would one day fight each other, but I do not think that is possible. I have never seen children as close as Crebin and Durconal are it is like they are sharing the same mind sometimes. Crebin was faster in walking but Durconal was first to talk but Crebin was using clan language even before he could walk. Durconal has picked it up quickly and the two will talk silently together for hours with no one the wiser."

"I did not know that a woman had a half flathead child among the Zelandonii." Kaunai said looking at the two of them shocked.

“The wolf rescued him. His mother was killed by a man named Ulian we all saw it when Ayla took us all on a spirit journey.”

“She took everyone on a spirit journey?” Kaunai could not believe the Zelandoni would expose everyone to the spirit world at one time. The power they had must be tremendous. “Did you tell the man of your hearth this?”

Dosalia laughed at Kaunai’s shocked expression because it matched Losaduna when he had heard the story. “Yes, he knows. He spent time with Ayla when she first was traveling to the Zelandonii and knew she was powerful then but never guessed she would become so powerful that she would be able to control so many souls in the spirit world. I never knew him to wish that he was younger but he did then because he had wanted to travel to see Ayla again and spend time with her. Maybe now that there is only Netadia at the hearth he and mother might think of traveling there.”

“I think I would be fearful of such a thing.”

“Many were.” Trilon added. “The man who had been Zelandoni of my cave had not been invited to join in the journey but even in the spirit world Zelandoni of the Ninth was able to prevent him from killing her and if fact killed his soul in the spirit world which caused him to die. None of us knew what happened until the leaders and Zelandonia met later.”

As they traveled they looked for anything they might want to eat, collecting grains, roots and known plants and fruits that they either ate as they moved or kept for a meal later in the day. With water immediately available and food as well there was no reason to stop in the middle of the day other than to rest which they felt no need for. When Trilon killed a young antelope they decided to stop for the night even though there were hours before the sun set. The men set off to look for burnable material after dressing the animal, and Dosalia got the fire going and placed the loin of the small animal to cook over the fire, then poured water in grains she had placed in a basket to soak to cook in the morning for a hearty meal. Crushing some herbs, she spread the paste of the cooking meat as well as the roast she had packed away that would absorb the taste of the herbs as they traveled. Pounding cat tail roots to get the starchy portions separated from the fibrous material, she add many of the same herbs and some of the small berries they had collected and cooked the small cakes on rocks she had smeared with fat from the cooking meat. When the men returned, Trilon put the tent up Kaunai piled the wood next to where Dosalia had placed the fire and then began to look through his pack.

Chapter 68

Dosalia leaned back against one of the logs Kaunai brought into camp looking at the fire, content as she had never been before. When Trilon sat next to her she leaned into him and smiled when he placed his arm around her and pulled her tighter against him but cautious of her injuries. That had been one of the reasons he had decided to stop early and Kaunai had agreed for they had both slowed their own pace to match hers as it slowed through the day. She had not noticed the liquid he had added to her tea that the Losaduna of North Spring Cave had given him to ease

her pain and smiling he felt her relax in sleep. Looking up when a shadow fell over him, he looked up at Kaunai's concerned face.

"Losaduna said every day would be better than the one before but I think the excitement is finally wearing off and she said the day after we notice her in pain again then we will know she will probably be more painful. Dosalia will probably want to continue and I was thinking that if we put her on a travois we can pull her or we can carry her. When I talked with Losaduna she said that when we reach the junction of the rivers go turn south and go over the hills it will be steep but faster and she thinks once Dosalia is at the pools she thinks most of the pain will ease."

"I didn't realize how bad she was until she joined us in the tent Trilon. I did not know about the bruising on her chest and the one breast looks like one of them crushed it."

"They probably did. I am not sure we are going to be able to touch her until she is completely healed and she is not going to like that at all. I'll keep slipping her the medicine Losaduna gave to me until we reach the caves then we will have to see."

"I am scared of touching her. All night last night she hitched every time she moved. I wanted to kill Derlio but she groaned and I went to her instead, but I wanted to kill him. I never felt that way before."

"Just as I wanted to kill Stelo, had he gotten up just one more time I don't think I could have stopped. You have the excuse of youth Kaunai but I had no excuse other than I saw red with my anger and after it was all over I felt sick." He saw Kaunai's shoulders relax and he knew it was the right thing to say. Never would he tell anyone about the knife he had pulled and almost used on both of the men.

"Solandia, Dosalia herself has already asked the Losaduna of North Spring Cave and your mate that their hands not be removed. The Losaduna of North Spring Cave and the others who know healing have refused to remove any body parts."

"Then how is my daughter to receive justice. You all saw her injuries and you know that she did not receive them because of light taps, and it was not just Derlio who struck her."

"We know this Solandia, but if you want you may give us another idea as to their punishment since she was your daughter knowing the restrictions you have been told."

"Then I want them to at least receive like injuries." She wanted them to have so much worse but the Mother would not want her to be greedy.

"Thank you Solandia, you can ask Netdi to come in." Solandia looked at all the men and women that made up the joint council but there was no telling what their thoughts were.

Gulloni could think of so many things he would rather be doing that this distasteful task but since he was voted to rule the councils this year it fell on his shoulders. He had kept Netdi out of the

decision since he was too close to the parties involved and he did not need to her again and again a recital of Dosalia injuries. Although Stelo now resided with the Second Spring Cave, his mother had belonged to The North Cave at the time of his birth. Netdi had inherited a mess when he had agreed to take on the responsibilities of Second Spring but he seemed to be handling it well. He looked up at the sound of the gasp and shook his head when he saw Madenia enter with Netdi.

“Netdi, I do not think this...”

“It is the perfect time for the councils to her from one that experience what had happened to the others.”

“Madenia, this is not something you have to do.”

“Yes Gulloni it is. I saw Dosalia’s injuries, all of them and I talked with her before the matrimonial for I thought since I had already lived through this kind of trauma I might be able to help. They went to my mother but not to me since I was not a woman, but I heard what they had planned when the men came back to their caves. I sneaked out of our tent and watched and became sick when I saw Reggdi’s hand removed and could not watch more so much so that I ignored the men until Charoli was brought back by Danug of the Mamutoi. Slindi and Reggdi became my friends that year and I still cherish Reggdi’s friendship dearly but the pain of knowing that his hand is gone because my mother wanted blood still hurts. I wanted you to know that as strong as Dosalia is acting now will change once the punishment is meted out for what you do to these men, if she believes it is too much then you do it to her as well. That is all I wanted to say.”

“Thank you Madenia we will consider your words.” They all watched as she left the tent and all were relieved that they would not have to discuss the problem with her present. “Netdi?”

“We all heard Dosalia’s opinion before the Matrimonial and I have nothing to add even though I know my brother would wish for their deaths, and I will tell you that I have an ax that Dosalia gave to me, made by her own hands.”

Chapter 69

Dosalia woke unable to move, even though she had slept well pain filled her body as it had not done since the injuries occurred. Every muscle refused to move as she tried to get out of the tent to relieve herself. Even moving her head caused her pain as she lay panting with tears streaming down her face. Trilon’s smiling face was not what she needed as he pressed his arm beneath her shoulder and lifted her in a sitting position then picked her up despite her grunt and groans of pain. Taking her out of the tent he set her on her feet but held her until she was steady enough to stand on her own. Kaunai looked at her with concern as he made tea at the rejuvenated fire. “Come I will walk with you until you can walk without so much pain.”

Dosalia looked at him as if he was crazy but trying to stand straight despite the pain in her chest she took a step and then another glad to have Trilon’s arm on her shoulder. As she walked the

pain lessened but did not go away. Reaching where she thought was far enough not to despoil their camp she had to stop and think of how she was going to crouch to be able to pass her water glad she was not wearing clothing which would have made it even more difficult. As if sensing her problem Trilon stepped in front of her and took both her hands and put the edges of his feet over her toes. "Allow me to take your weight and you just lower yourself using your legs." Not trusting her voice Dosalia could only nod as she relaxed her body and bent her legs to lower her body and pass her water. When she was done, Trilon pulled her arms gently and helped her to stand again worried that she was panting from the effort. "Come and I will get you back and make a bed for you to lay in the sun and see if that will help."

When they returned to the camp they saw that Kaunai had pulled the bedding from the tent and laid it near the fire where the morning sun struck but would be shady later in the day. Trilon picked her up and laid her down covering her against the morning chill. "I am so sorry to both of you. I did not expect this. I hurt worse now than I did when it first happened. Everything hurts."

"Losaduna said that anger then excitement about the matrimonial was probably keeping the pain at bay but now with nothing else except traveling your muscles are revolting against what was done to you. You pushed yourself too much after it happened Dosalia and this is what the cost is."

Kaunai remained silent as he handed Dosalia a cup after he placed a large log beneath the bedding so that she could sit comfortably. When she drank the tea she looked at the concern on both the men's faces as sighed. "Not a very exciting matrimonial trip." Kaunai smiled at her and returned to the fire and put some of the now cooked grains with some of the roast from the previous night in a small bowl and brought it to her to eat.

"I don't know, we have you at our mercy and that can only be a good thing." He back away as her hand shot out but smiled at her squeak of pain. "See none of that now. Just relax and we will take care of everything. We will say at least today and perhaps convince you to allow us to pull you on a travois."

"What?"

Trilon turned Dosalia to face him and smiled at her angry features. "Could you walk by yourself more than a few feet Dosalia?"

"Well maybe not right now but give me a few hours and I might."

"Or you might not. There is no one here to see you love and if you want to get to the caves and the heated pools than we will have to start traveling tomorrow. Just rest for right now and we will talk about it later."

By afternoon Dosalia, with Kaunai's help put on a tunic top and after three trips to pass water she told Trilon she wanted to stay up and walk a little bit. Walking caused some pain in her chest and face but it was much better than it had been in the morning when she woke and she

was able to sit on a stump without help when Trilon had finished cooking the last of the meat so that it would be easier to travel with. Dosalia worked on a basket surprised that just moving her hands seemed to pull on her chest muscles but the pain was not so bad that she had to stop. The tightly weaved cat tail leaves would be perfect to carry the cooked meat in and the triple layers would keep most of the juices with the plantain wrapped meat. When they entered the tent to sleep, Kaunai carried the now sleeping Dosalia who was free of pain from the medication. Laying on either side of her the men slept as well each wondering if they were going to be able to convince her to travel on the travois.

They did not need to worry for the pain kept at bay during the night by the medication was back again as bad as the previous morning but after walking a bit it seemed to ease. "I do not want to hold us up but what if I start out walking and then I will use the travois when I can go no further?" Both men smiled at her and Kaunai went into the woods and pulled out a newly constructed travois.

Chapter 70

Netdi looked at Tomasi expecting some kind of outburst but he remained silent even though the anger was apparent on his face. Derlio, in an effort to separate himself from Stelo was brought in front of the combined council the day before and told of all the plans Stelo had to force Dosalia to reject Trilon and Kaunai. What had not surprised him and Laduni was when he told of Retchen's involvement in the planning of the attack on Dosalia. The anger in the tent when he was removed was palpable and no one spoke for long minutes until Laduni stood and told the group about what had happened with the Second Spring Cave and the threats Retchen had made.

"I do not know why he would get involved in a plot against Dosalia for it makes no sense but if he is involved then he needs to be watched as well."

They had argued into the late afternoon before a decision was made that all could agree on. The men would be punished based on their actions. Retchen did nothing but talk and the two men had a choice not to attack Dosalia but made the conscious effort to attack and injure not only Dosalia but an unarmed innocent man who did nothing other than offer his support. The axe that Netdi offered would be wrapped well and used to fracture the hands that struck to injure Dosalia. Knowing of Losaduna's skills Tomasi felt this was a better punishment than having the hand removed and remained silent. Stelo who many felt had lead Derlio astray and would receive the same treatment and for forcing himself on a woman and nearly strangling her to death, Stelo would pay with his manhood. The men in the council had heard the arguments and though they agreed the punishment must be severe the thought of the heavy stone tool striking them made many shutter.

The Losaduni refused to apply the punishment they marked bones for the leader to draw telling them who ever shoes the unmarked bone would deliver the punishment. Artloni closed his eyes when he pulled the bone from the leather bag and groaned when he saw no marks on the bone. "I will not do it in public and I want their eyes cover." Looking around the room he saw everyone nod and he left the tent.

Laduni watched the two struggling men fight against those that brought them to the small cave he had chosen for Artloni . In the center was a large log that was set on its end that allowed Artloni a target and since it was waterlogged it would be soft enough that perhaps the injuries would not be as severe as they perhaps wanted. He was not sure Dosalia would think this any better a punishment but the leaders needed to make sure no others followed the lead of these two men. Many of the leaders and Losaduni wanted to tackle the problem of Reggdi so that they could enjoy the rest of the summer meeting but thankfully he had convinced them that they needed to wait to see the outcome of this action and perhaps wait until Dosalia and Trilon returned as they had vital information.

Although the cave was small there was plenty of room for the combined council as each member took a place except for Kirloni who waited outside to treat those being punished. The only thing he would not be able to do was to give either man datura for the pain unless the men became unconscious from the pain, otherwise he would be able to give any other medication he deemed appropriate. His mother, Losaduna of North Spring Cave was in the healing tent waiting to help him when both men had been punished.

Looking at the two men whose fear rolled off them most had no sympathy for the blind folded men. “Chose who you will do first Artloni and the other will be taken outside.”

Artloni looked at the two and knew that Stelo was the reason they were all here and hearing the results of Derlio’s punishment would cause more suffering than what Derlio would feel. “Keep Derlio here and take Stelo outside.” When Stelo was roughly pulled from the cave, Artloni, after the bindings and blindfold was removed, threw a spear at Derlio which he caught with his right hand. The spear was quickly taken and Derlio’s right hand was bound to his body then the blindfold was replaced. Forced to kneel in front of the stump and his left hand forced to the top by the two men holding him. Artloni did not wait but quickly swung flattened side of the leather covered axe until it struck Derlio’s hand. There was a moment of silence then the screams reverberated off the walls of the cave. A leather covering was placed over Derlio’s hand he was led crying from the cave. Stelo, who was fighting with more force, was brought in and placed where Derlio had stood and using the same method to find which hand Stelo favored, Netdi stepped forward and took the spear seeing the look in Stelo’s eyes that he planned to use it. Since he was from his cave, Netdi helped in placing Stelo in position and forcing his hand forward and like before, Artloni was thankfully quick. As Stelo rolled on the ground in pain, he leggings were removed and the stump laid on its side. Netdi put a thin length of leather around the tip of his manhood and it was pulled across the stump and watched as the axe came down on its side.

Chapter 71

Dosalia was not happy when she woke the next morning to find all the advances she had made the previous day gone and she was just as painful as the previous morning. This time it was Kaunai who was with her and he picked her up to carry her to the edge of the camp to eliminate. When she was finished he took her to the river and setting her down on her feet put some water in a bowl and came and was her so she felt refreshed. “Where’s Trilon?”

“He went to look around to see how hard it would be to walk ahead.”

He helped her dress and she looked at the travois she had traveled on for part of the morning until she convinced the two men to allow her to walk and loosen her muscles. She had been able to walk until it was time to stop for the , but she knew that they had stopped early on her account but she did not mind for she could feel her legs were tired and she could feel her ribs beginning to ache with each step. Although she had a headache, she still felt well enough to start another place one of the cooked roast on a spit and put it by the fire to warm.

Even before she was able to walk back to the camp, Trilon returned and kissed her as he walked by and helped Kaunai to pack the travois. It was only then that she noticed that the sun was well up and the men had probably been up for hours. Shaking her head she went to the fire and slowly lowered herself to a stump and reached for some hot tea, but Kaunai was there and handed her a cup of the steaming brew and then a bowl with vegetables from the previous evening and cold roast that he had cut into small pieces so that she did not have to chew very much. When Trilon joined them he took the cup of tea from Kaunai and sat next to the fire that was burning very low.

“I walked up the hill to see what I could and by tomorrow night we should reach the first small stream that enters the river but I think the larger river that joins from the north is still several days away. What I would like to do is since the hills are relatively easy to climb now I think it would be better if we climb as soon as Dosalia works out the stiffness and get to the top today. We can then stay atop the slope and figure how we want to proceed. There are bound to be pools and smaller streams but we have plenty of water for several days and if needed one of us would go to the river and fill our water bags again. I am thinking that if the caves are in a hill behind these then there is probably a valley between them. Up there we can gauge which is the better route to take.”

Dosalia looked at the hill they were camped against and groaned making the men laugh as she put down her cup and forced herself to stand. Immediately the men stopped laughing and went to help her but she put her hands out to stop them. “Please I need to move these muscles before the lock up on me. I will be better in a little while and then we can climb that mountain.” The two men looked up the small hill and started laughing again as they prepared to leave.

By midday Dosalia was feeling much better and told this to Trilon who immediately started up the hill that was even closer to the river than before. Although the men traded off pulling the Travois and it was now Kaunai’s turn, Trilon went to him and took the second handle and both men pulled their supplies. As they reached midway, Kaunai stopped for he had seen Dosalia holding her side. Looking east he saw the smaller stream Trilon had told them about and wondered how far the caves actually were. There was still more than half the height to climb and Dosalia did not wait for the men to start out again but started climbing on her own, not wanting to hold the men back.

It was nearing dusk when they finally reached the top and Dosalia knew if it had been any further she would not have made it. Already her head and side hurt especially when she was breathing deeply as she was now. Not trusting herself to be able to rise again she did not immediately sit

but looked around for wood that she could collect. In her haversack were pinecones and hickory nuts from a bush that struggles on a rocky crag jutting out of the hills. She also found a briar patch with sweet berries that she picked and placed in a bowl that she wrapped in leather and placed with the nuts. Just as she wished they had fresh meat so that she had fat to cook with the fruit and some grains, she looked up at the familiar whosh of a spear thrower and the thud of the spear striking a target. Looking around she watched as Kaunai smiled and went to collect a large bustard he had brought down.

Taking the fat from the bird's thighs, she mixed a small amount with crushed grains, nuts and fruits, she added water and cooking stones in the bowl to heat the mixture and soften the grains. Once the water started to boil, she removed the stones and covered the bowl with a hide and set it aside for morning when she would be able to gather the congealed mixture and cook it on hot rocks. Some of the fruit and nuts they ate with the meat and she wished there had been time to make a ground over and fill the cavity of the bird with the nut, fruit and grain mixture. Although she had just finished eating the thought of the mixture made her mouth water as if she was starving.

Chapter 72

Stelo began vomiting from pain as soon as he woke even before the Losaduna of North Spring Cave could give him any medication. Lying panting between scream with his pain he refused to move even the slightest to take anything that would ease the torture he must be feeling and all she could do was hope that he lost consciousness again so that she could replace the poultices that she had placed between his legs. His hand like Derlio's was splinted and as soon as the swelling receded she would wrap the individual fingers then his hand and wrist in birch bark until they healed. Derlio was already back at the Plain's Cave and Tomasi would come to tell her if he has any problems but by far Stelo had the worst punishment and she was not sure he would ever share pleasures with a woman again. The thought filled her mind with satisfaction even though she hated seeing the pain he was in.

Netdi entered the tent and saw that Stelo was awake and knew he was in tremendous pain for he could smell the vomit when he entered and heard the scream prior to that. Looking at Losaduna who shook her head he went to the bedspace where the injured man was lying curled in a tight ball. His eyes were closed, his face red with trying to keep from screaming and trying to settle his stomach for the retching alone made him hurt but the vomiting was torture. Netdi remembered getting too close to an auroch bull that he thought was dead and when he had grabbed a leg to start removing the hide, the animal had kicked out and into his groin. Falling to the ground he could not remember a pain that was worse and even now remembering it even though he had just see thirteen summers, he could feel the shadow of the pain. Still he knew that it was not, could not be nearly as bad as what Stelo suffered now.

“Stelo, listen to what I am going to say. Outside Karkan is breaking up ice we had in the cellars of Hot Spring Cave. Losaduna said this was needed to get the swelling down but you have to allow her to treat you or the pain will never go away. Believe me I know and I know you were on that hunting trip when the bull auroch kicked me. I am going to do for you want Hilmoi did for me and you will get through it.”

Netdi waited until Karkan entered the tent with the bowl of crushed ice and gave it to Losaduna. Even with the worry on her face, Netdi reached down and pulled Stelo into a standing position. The scream was horrendous and immediately he lost consciousness. Losaduna was there immediately placing ice on his lower abdomen and groin when Netdi laid him back on the bed space and on his back. “We have increased the number of bowls in the frozen storage of Hot Spring Cave and someone will be here every morning with fresh crushed ice for you Losaduna and will remain during the day to bring you more as you need it. If needed I will be here to try and get him on his feet, he needs to walk as soon as possible or the swelling will never go away.”

“I have treated injuries like you sustained Netdi but this is much worse, where you had little bruising and the swelling was gone in a few days, Stelo’s bruising has moved to his sack and down his legs and up his belly. We may not want to rush this too fast.”

“We will start with just standing Losaduna but most of the men agree that he needs to get up even if he cannot walk yet. Stelo is a good hunter and I plan on keeping an eye on him but I want him to be able to hunt. Losaduna of Hot Spring has already said we can look for a harsh winter and Second Spring is closer to the glacier to the west than the rest of the Losadunai.”

“Well if the ice you are bringing works and he can walk then I am sure he will recover to be able to hunt again.”

“Losaduna, I have been thinking of a plan for Stelo and I would have your opinion since you have no stake in the outcome.”

“Well at least you did not get the same treatment as Stelo, so going to the council saved you that pain. I heard he will never be able to share pleasures again. His manhood is as large as my arm now but it will probably be the size of my finger when he is finally healed. Too bad you two did not listen to me. Maybe there is still a chance that you can get your revenge, no matter how much they try they cannot watch her all the time.”

“Shut up Retchen, I am not as stupid as you think I am.” Derlio looked at the older man who had fed his dreams of having Dosalia as a mate and having control of the mine that many thought enriched Hot Springs cave so that no cave would ever have a greater status. Now looking at his hand that Losaduna of North Spring Cave said would not be fully healed until near winter, if then, he regretted that he ever thought of the mine and its ownership. Retchen like the man of his hearth had fed him that he was to be a leader and deserved what he desired, and that Dosalia should have been thrilled that she would have gained such status with mating to him. He should have learned from what happened to Reggdi and the others of Charoli’s group and now that he had talked with Reggdi his path was much clearer. “You are right I am very lucky that I did not suffer what Stelo did but I have finally decided that the control of the mine is not worth what I have already paid. You are trying to get back at Hilmoi and Kaunai for playing you for a fool and I am not going to be how you get your revenge. You want to make them suffer then do your own dirty work because I won’t. I have paid for what I did and as soon as Dosalia returns I will

ask her forgiveness and pray to the Mother that I will be able to use my hand again. Now get out of here, this is my tent and you are no longer welcome.”

Chapter 73

Stelo screamed again as he was pulled to his feet and made to stand, this time Losaduna of Second Spring had joined Netdi as they held him between them as they had for the last seven days. Pain exploded in his body as the men held him upright and did not allow him to curl into a fetal position as he so desperately wanted to do against the pain in his body. He did not want to look down but holding his head up was nearly impossible and he cried again as he looked at the black swollen mass that had been his manhood, enlarged beyond recognition matching the blackened tissue surrounding it. Losaduna of North Cave came near with her poultice and he whimpered not wanting to be punished with more pain. “Please.” He gasped and his body tightened as the cold compress was pressed to his groin. Even as gentle as she was, the pain rose again leaving him gasping and tears falling from his eyes. “Please, no more. Let me die.”

“You will not die Stelo and I am doing all I can to see that you recover. We know it hurts but the swelling is less and every day it will continue to be less. Everyone from Second Spring Cave is working to make sure you are healed as are others that do not belong to our cave.” Netdi told him as he readjusted his hold.

“Lay him down now.” Losaduna of North Spring Cave said to the two men. When they had done what she had told them to do, she lifted Stelo’s manhood and wrapped it in the cold cloth then placing a leather cloth on his legs and groin, she gently poured the crushed ice onto him. She knew he was still awake by his hitching breaths which meant he was truly beginning to heal for by this time he had lost consciousness before. Covering him to allow the ice to do its work she looked at the men who seemed to feel for the pain Stelo was suffering. “Did Dosalia know what the punishment would be?”

“No.” Netdi answered her as he looked at Stelo. “We did not want to distress her, she did not want them to receive what Reggdi suffered and that was why she came to the council. If she saw their suffering she would never have allowed us to punish them at all but we cannot have men beating and forcing women. Had these men gotten away with their crime then none of the women would be safe. As much as I feel for the suffering Stelo and Derlio suffer I have to but look at Marcum, who might never be able to hunt again for he cannot see clearly and still holds his head strangely, and I am at peace with what was done. I want no woman or man at risk Losaduna and as bad as this punishment is, and as much as I need to help Stelo to recover, I would have still put my voice forward as this being the best choice for punishment.”

Netdi entered his family tent tired for he could not allow Stelo to wallow when most men knew how they recovered from groin injuries, but Stelo’s injuries as so much worse than they thought it would be still he would stand by his words that the severe punishment was needed to protect other women and men who might be standing in protection of the woman. He had seen Marcum with Karkan and wondered since Karkan was more accepting of Marcum perhaps they both should stay with Second Spring since there was no telling how much Marcum would recover.

Shaking his head he went to where Stelo's mother was sitting with Madenia cleaning roots and slicing them for a stew he knew Madenia was planning.

Sitting between the women he watched them as they worked noticing Brancia's immediate stiffening wondering if it was a legacy of Hilmoi's time or her fear of him for his actions against her son. "Brancia, Stelo stood today and seemed to be in less pain and I think the Losaduna will release him soon. Before she does that I need to talk to you and to him, I am going to ask Karkan to accept Marcum into his daughter's hearth instead of the new couple moving to Hot Springs Cave." He held his hand up to stop her words and then continued. "I think it would be good for both men to see the result of the mess that Derlio and Stelo caused and I am hoping since once upon a time Marcum and Stelo had been good friends that they can be so again and help each other heal."

"How can you think of such a thing? Having Marcum here will only remind Stelo and he does not need that."

"But he does need that. You know that his actions in the last four years have been self serving and much of what he got from his kills were traded for things he wanted even though he stayed at your hearth. Brancia, if Stelo is to recover and be accepted there are going to have to be some changes in him and in you. He is no longer your little boy but a man that has done a horrendous thing. He nearly killed two people, forced a woman, beat a woman, and tried to take what did not belong to him but he received his punishment but when he returns you cannot treat him like a child. Everyone in the Second Spring Cave has been involved in some way with his healing and we do not want that wasted. They will all support you as long as you do not accept what he has done."

"He is all I have." Her tears tore at his heart but he knew he had to stay strong if he was going to manage Stelo when he returned.

"I know that Brancia, but if you want him to continue in this world then he must take responsibility for what he has done and take up his duties as a man. I am adopting him as my son and I am asking you to mate with me and Madenia at the second matrimonial so that we can help you. You will be part of our family and I will have the ability to support your discipline and give him my own. It is what he needs Brancia for once the pain is gone anger will replace it for a time and we need to control that anger and get to the bottom of why he has so changed from the boy I knew before leaving Second Spring Cave."

"I did not need the hides, I am one of the best basket weavers of the Losaduna and I had my status even if Tomasi refused to give me shelter in my home cave. Hilmoi saw the advantage of having me and asked that I join the second. Stelo and Marcum fast friends before we left the Plains Cave but it was only after Retchen came to Second Spring Cave that he changed. He was such a good boy and with no man of my hearth, he took to Retchen who spent time with him and seemed to really care for him and Marcum. At the summer meetings, he would make sure that they spent time hunting together with Derlio and Marcum and they always brought meat back. When Dosalia returned both Stelo, Derlio and Marcum made a pack that one of them would be her mate and at the next summer meeting they set their plans in action. They were young boys

playing at love and nothing more that first year and you know that Dosalia liked the attention. It changed that winter when Stelo told me that he would one day lead Hot Spring Cave. I did not know what he meant but that next summer, he and the others were constantly talking with Retchen and talking in whispers. Then Dosalia publically humiliated Derlio telling all who could hear that she would never mate him. I told Stelo that she would never appreciate him but he would not listen to me.”

With tears filling her eyes she looked at Netdi and sobbed. “I never heard them planning this horrible thing, never. I would have stopped him somehow had I know Netdi, I would have.”

Madenia gathered her into her arms and looked at Netdi hoping he was satisfied. “Brancia, I think between the three of us we can make a difference in Stelo’s life, but he will never again be allowed to act like he has in the past. You cannot make it better for him, it is something he has to do for himself, do you understand?”

At her nod Netdi left the women and went to the center of the summer meeting area. He needed to talk with Laduni.

Chapter 74

Dosalia had never felt so good in her life as she did at that moment lying in the heated pool that was not as hot as that sacred pool at Hot Spring cave but warm enough that she had to enter the water slowly. They had seen the yellowed grasses so different from the surrounding hills that they had rushed to reach the area and search for the perfect cave and Kaunai had surely found it. Tired and painful she had been glad to stay with the travois and their supplies while the men investigated the various caves. One cave Trilon had taken a large limb and caused the loose rock above it to collapse for the smell in the cave was nearly overpowering giving him an instant headache and he wanted no unsuspecting person to enter the cave. Although they had each found suitable cave they both agreed that they wanted something better and then Kaunai had returned excited as the sun was low in the sky.

When they entered the cave it was more cavern than cave with a tall ceiling and its roughly triangular shape pointed to a good size pool of clear hot water that though it had some odor as most of these types of pools had the odor was minimal. Beneath the surface they could see several ledges and boulders in the deep pool that they could sit or stand on. A small hot stream left the pool and emptied into a tube in the limestone rock that had been carved by the water over many years. There were several large flat stones next to the pool and the entire cave floor was soft yellow sand. The opening was large enough to allow sunlight and fresh breezes that push all odors through a small oblong opening in the upper reaches of the cavern.

Kaunai had immediately started to remove Dosalia’s clothing and lifting her, knelt next to the pool and lowered her slowly into the water. Now with her muscles relaxed, the pain she had been experiencing from the travel was melting away. The men had left her soaking to find burnable material and now with her eyes remaining closed she could hear them move about the cave. Knowing she would soon have to climb from the pool Dosalia lowered herself the leaning her head back rose again and opened her eyes. In the center of the chamber was their ground

cloth surrounded by their supplies and nearby was a fire that looked like it had fresh meat cooking on it. Trilon was placing cooking stones in a bowl and she wondered if it contained tea which would taste wonderful now. Next to the entrance, off to one side, was a sizable stack of wood, bones and other burnable material.

Not wanting to bother the men, Dosalia stood in the stone she had been sitting on and stepped from the pool onto a leather piece that had been placed on the sand. Seeing a thin leather cloth, Dosalia grabbed it and rubbed the water from her body, grimacing at the site of the bruises that were fading into multicolored stain. Her one breast was no longer black looking but shades of purple, green and yellow. Pressing the areas she was pleased to find although there was a small ache the areas were no longer painful. Touching her neck and face she was glad that she felt no pain when she pressed around her eyes and where her neck joined her chest. Stretching as she had not been able to do since the attack, Dosalia felt the pops within her body that seemed to remove even more tightness and she sighed with relief.

Opening her eyes she saw that the two men were looking at her hotly and she had thought to wrap the drying cloth around her but instead she dropped it to the leather and walked to each man and kissed each with as much passion as she could. Trilon grabbed her around the waist and pulled her against him but he quickly released her panting and he looked into her smiling eyes. "You are going to kill me." He pulled her tightly against him again, but his hands were gentle as he lifted one to capture the breast that was bruised. "How I would love to kill him for injuring you like this." He bent his head and kissed the swell of her breast and slowly ran her tongue over the nipple.

The shock of the need that filled her nearly made her swoon as he captured her lips again and lifted her into his arms and laid her on a pile of furs placed on the ground cloth for their bed. "I have waited for you to want me again not knowing if you would ever want to share pleasures again." He continued his assault on her lips then raised his hand and gently touched the areas still bruised on her face. "There was no need to hurt you like this." Kissing her eyelids sent shivers not of pain but of pleasure down her spine. Since the first night she could not remember falling asleep and by the time she woke both men were out of the tent and doing jobs she should have helped with. The fear that she might not want this again melted and disappeared as he captured her uninjured nipple and drew strongly on it inflaming her body even more.

"Trilon, love me now." Understanding her need, Trilon teased her entrance pleased to find her wet and hot and ready for him but as he lay between her legs he saw the sudden fear in her eyes and relaxed as he brushed his fingers gently over her face. Bending he nibbled on her lips waiting until she opened her mouth to capture her lips with his gently coaxing her back to having the need fill her mind and body. Kissing her face he moved down her body starting with her neck by kissing the bruises that discolored her creamy skin. He captured her nipple and pulled strongly even as his tongue flicked across the hardened tip and he continued lower kissing the evidence of each injury. When he got to the junction of her legs he had to fight to keep his body relaxed as rage filled him seeing the bruises shadowing the entrance to her core. Even swollen and moist with need the sight of the bruising almost made him pull away from her completely but he did not for he knew to do so would only hurt her more. Gently he kissed her pleasure button and gently teased it with the tip of his tongue, watching as her body wept even more with

need. Holding her hips still even as she tried to press against his marauding mouth, he continued to explore her folds finally slipping a single finger within her feeling her clamp down on him with her inner muscles.

“Trilon, please.” Slowly he worked his way up her body tasting her skin as he moved until he captured her lips again even as he lifted himself on his arms and began to press into her slowly, not wanting to cause her any further injury. When he was fully seated he nearly lost all control as her body clamped around his even as she began to move her hips. Gently he pressed in and out of her, sweat pouring from his body as his own need grew, wanting to be able to slam himself into her again and again, but he kept himself in control quickening his pace as he felt the tremors of her body as she clenched tightly around him. Loosing himself in the feeling of her organism clutching at him, milking him he finally lost control of his body as he pressed completely into her and allowed his body the release it sought.

Dosalia woke to the feeling of her body being filled and knew that Kaunai was with her and she smiled as she pressed back against him but gasped as she felt him press even more of himself into her. “I have missed to so much Kaunai.” She turned her head and he immediately captured her lips even as his fingers pinched her nipple sending a fresh wave of hot liquid over him and she could feel his groan causing her to smile.

“Oh Dosalia I have been so scared to even touch you for fear of causing you more pain. I did not mean this to happen but I needed to be inside you and feel you surrounding me.”

“I needed you as well for all you and Trilon have done for me and knowing when I needed you.” She pressed her lips to his and squeezed her muscles wanting him to move within her, needed him to make her forget everything but the two of them. As if knowing her thoughts he started to move slowly nearly pulling from her completely only to reseat himself to the hilt within her body and holding still for only a moment before repeating it again and again. Holding her hips to him, he sat up then stood and carried her to the pool and walked into the water from the sandy entrance withdrawing from her only long enough to turn her to face him and grabbing her legs and placing them around his waist even as he filled her again. Lying back and floating in the water, Dosalia reveled in the heat the surrounded her and the hard heat of his body and he pushed her away only to draw her back across the water to fill her once again. Bending over her floating body, he captured her nipple and suckled to the same rhythm as he filled her body. Feeling the contractions starting, he pulled her into his arms and captured her lips as he began to pound into her as her inner muscles relaxed and contracted around him, taking her scream of pleasure as his own as his essence shot into her core and she milked him dry. Separating their bodies, he gently washed her not wanting the soreness to return.

Chapter 75

Stelo bit down on the leather that Netdi gave to him to keep himself from screaming as he was helped to walk across the tent. By necessity he remained unclothed but still he would not allow

his mother to visit unless he was in the bed and his groin covered. He did not know when the hate for Netdi and his brother changed and was redirected but perhaps it was the talks that he and Netdi had late into the night now that Losaduna did not believe he needed the medication that had kept him sleeping most of the day and night. It was as if Netdi sensed his need to talk and appeared in the healing tent often in the middle of the night when his mind refused to sleep and his body seemed to be in the most pain. Then there was the visit from Derlio who Netdi would not allow to visit him alone worried that he might injure Stelo in payment for his own punishment. Stelo know that it was the visits from Madenia that hurt the most. His own mother complained constantly about the punishment he received but even she did not know the extent of that punishment but Madenia had for she had often helped Losaduna with the ice poultices and had sat with him until the pain eased at least enough to listen.

For hours she told him how she had felt when Charoli and his gang had forced her to share pleasures over and over again even before she had her first rights and the long years afterwards when she had taken first rights but the fear had never left her and she could not stand the touch of a man. Her tears became his own. For the first time he thought of how he had treated Dosalia all those years when they had shared pleasures. He knew she had never received pleasures but his only thoughts were to get control of the mine she had found when she was a child before leaving for the Zelandonii. His mother's harping and Retchen's words that a woman should not have control of the mine soon became his own. He should have known sooner that Retchen was filled with hyena dung but by then his mother's words of how Dosalia should have been delighted with the attention he gave her had gone to his head and anger at her rejection had not sat well.

"Netdi please allow me to rest." He panted and immediately Netdi pulled furs from a nearby bed space and placed them on one of the many logs placed around for the Losaduni to sit on. "Thank you."

"You went much further today than yesterday. I think Losaduna will allow you to go back to Second Spring Cave's camp tomorrow."

"I am not sure I want to go and live with my mother again."

Netdi pulled a stump so that he could sit facing Stelo and looked the younger man in the eyes. "Even before I took over leadership of Second Spring Cave I knew how your mother fulfilled your every wish and saw you arrogantly take what she gave with no thought of what it had cost her and now this. I want you to return to Second Spring Cave but as my adopted son, not the son of my hearth, but adopted. I have asked that your mother join with me at the second matrimonial and though she will live with me and my family, I will not enter her bed and share pleasures for it would hurt Madenia tremendously and that I will not do." Stelo was shocked speechless as he looked at the new leader of his cave. "You need a man's touch and discipline as well as a man's understanding. What you did was as bad as it gets without killing someone and thankfully that did not happen. There is much you have to pay for even though you were punished but I will not force you to make those reparations they have to be your decision and they must be given honestly and not by force. Marcum may never be right again and we do not know if Dosalia has any lasting effects for she is on her Matrimonial trip. You are now healing well but it will take time and when you are whole again we may revisit this conversation."

“I don’t know what to say. I am not sure I want you to be stuck with my mother, but if that is what you want I guess it is up to you. She can only cause trouble for Madenia and I don’t think I would like that.”

“Then it is up to both of us to make sure that it does not happen.”

“Why? Why are you doing this?”

“Actually it was Madenia who came to me with the idea and to be honest at first I rejected it. At the time I would just as soon as not have to take you out on the plains and let the Mother take care of you but she reminded me that Charoli’s mother acted very similar to yours and that you had been a good boy until recently and I could not remember you causing any trouble before Dosalia’s return. I do not know what happened and frankly I do not care, now is what is important. You will have to work as hard as Reggdi had to regain the trust of the people, especially my brother and his co-mate Trilon. I cannot honestly tell you what Dosalia is thinking since she went to the leaders and Losaduna and told them she did not want either of you severely punished. She feared we would remove your hands and that was not what she wanted.”

“That’s what I thought would happen and when Derlio came from the cave holding his arm and the leather wrapped around where his hand was that’s exactly what I thought.”

“There were some who thought it an appropriate punishment but she would not have it.”

“I owe her more than just my apology don’t I?”

“A lot more, now rest and I will see if we can get you moved tomorrow.”

“Netdi, I will try not to let you down.”

“And I will try not to be impatient.” Netdi Smiled and left the tent.

Stelo looked at where Netdi left and for the first time in too many years he had someone who was willing to give him a chance and someone he could count on. Thoughts of what he had done to Dosalia filled his mind and with them a sorrow he did not know he could feel filled him. If only he had seen sooner that Retchen had been leading him on for so long and he had stupidly listened and believed his words. He closed his eyes and wondered if he would be able to get close enough to Dosalia to apologize. There was no reason that either of her mates should trust him and he did not know what he would have to do to prove to them that he was so sorry for what he had done.

Chapter 76

Dosalia panted trying to catch her breath lying in Kaunai’s arms reveling in the feel of his strength. For some reason the men had decided that whoever was not going to share pleasures

with her that night would spend the night in a small cave that looked as if it had been part of the bigger chamber at one time but was now separated by what appeared to be a cave in of the roof. Dosalia, allowing them this separation for the past four nights she had thought that they would have come to their senses by now. Finding that even receiving great pleasure from whichever of the men were with her, her thoughts would stray to the man who was not with her she knew it was time that they all talked. Having made her decision she closed her eyes warm in Kaunai's arms and fell asleep.

“Wait, Trilon do not leave yet.” Both times she had been with Kaunai during the night, the following morning Trilon was distant and quiet often finding things to do to get away from the cave and it was the same for Kaunai when Trilon shared her furs. They had spent each part of the day away from the cave searching the surrounding areas and the travois which held very little except her and their supplies was now filled with flint they had found that was so different from what Dosalia had seen before that she wanted to work with it. There were also several branches that both Kaunai and Trilon wanted to carve and both men had worked hard to free several knots from fallen trees so that she could make some bowls during the winter. There were shells from fresh water mollusk and unusual stones. Trilon had happened on a tusk that was partially buried in one of the cave they had explored and when they had finally uncovered it the surrounding soil seemed to have imparted a green tint to the ivory and all three were excited to take it back with them. They had been happy times when they had worked together and teased one another but the first few hours when he had not been with her the night before the tension between the two men seen palpable.

“Please both of you, I want to talk, to the both of you, we cannot not continue this way anymore.” The men looked at each other and then went to where Dosalia was sitting next to the fire and sat down. “I love you both for trying to protect me but I am well and the bruising is fading but you both treat me as if I might break at any moment and I do not want that. I want you both, I love you both and I want us to be a family but now you are both fighting it again. I have allowed you to separate as one of you are with me but it is not working for I am not able to give my complete attention to the one I am with when I am worried about the one that is not here. I know it is uncomfortable to the both of you but unless we can get by that we will never be a family and I do not want my child to be born in a home where there is such a separation.”

The men looked at her stunned and then whooped as they both took turns kissing her. “How long have you known?” “When will it be born?” The questions continued as the men asked their questions on top of each other but their smiles never faded and silence filled the cave as they rushed and picked Dosalia up.

“Please stop.” Dosalia laughed and the men carried her to the heated pool and pulled her clothes from her even as they divested themselves of their own. When both men entered the pool and pulled her in with them they both suddenly stopped, fear appeared on their faces. “No, sharing pleasures will not hurt the child. Ayla and Jondalar shared pleasures until near the end of her pregnancy and I know you will both be careful with me.” She kissed each of them in turn and smiled at their guilty faces. “I told Losaduna of the North Spring Cave after the hunt and I was going to tell you but they attacked me before I got a chance. I was so worried that I might lose the child because of what they did and so did Losaduna that I could not tell you then. I begged

her not to tell you in case I could not keep the child within me, I did not want you to suffer the loss as well.” Dosalia’s voice caught and she revealed her fears to the two men. “I did not want to tell you until I was sure the baby would stay with me.”

“You should have told us Dosalia.” Trilon’s voice was gentle but she heard the edge to it. And both men’s features were stony as they looked anywhere but at her.

“If I had told you then we would not have come on this trip and we needed to come if we had any chance of becoming one with each other. Losaduna said it would not make a difference whether I stayed or went.”

“What if something had happened and you started to lose the child?” Kaunai’s voiced rose with his fear of losing her just when he had finally realized his dream.

“That bundle of rabbit furs is not a bundle of just furs but everything I might need if I began to lose the child, but the child is going nowhere until it is her time to be born.” Born men gently rubbed the slight mound of her belly that they had never thought would be a child. “I want us to live together, share pleasures together. I promise if I am too tired or do not want to share pleasures then I will tell you both, but I need you both as one, not separate as you have been doing. Please.”

Kaunai was the first to pull her into his arms and kiss her thoroughly but as soon as he released her Trilon pulled her to him. “We can only promise this if you promise never to leave us blind to anything that affects you. Women die in child birth all the time Dosalia, how could we have understood your loss if we had not known. You could have died had you lost the child and we would not have been safe around those who had abused you. Even now I am still filled with fear as I am sure Kaunai is as well.” He looked into her tear filled eyes and smiled at her. “We are here to protect you Dosalia and we feel as if we have failed you terribly and now you tell us you were in more danger than we knew. Oh Dosalia to be a family, to be one we have to tell each other when things like this occur.”

“I was so angry that they may have caused me to lose my first child I was not thinking straight and I am sorry I did not tell you but please no more separation.”

The men proceeded to show her how gently they could be with her and they shared pleasures in and out of the pool and in every position they could think of until all three fell asleep curled around each other.

When Dosalia awoke she was between both men and each had a hand on her belly as if they wanted to protect the child and she could not stop the tears that formed as she placed her hand over theirs. “Oh little one you will be born into such love and have two of the best men as protectors and guides for you. I promise I will give you brothers and sisters and we will be a great family one day.” Closing her eyes she slipped back into sleep thinking of all they would accomplish in their lives.

Chapter 77

Marcum forced his head to stay in the correct position even with the pain that radiated down his neck to his back and he refused to take the medication the Losaduna had made for him for it made him feel like a fool and that was not what he wanted. Now that he no longer needed the poultice that the Losaduna wrapped his head with it was easier but his muscles still screamed at him to hold his head to one side but he refused. As he entered the camp of the Second Spring Cave which had returned to its original position, Marcum went to the tent of the leader and scratched on the opening. Netdi had come to him to tell him what he planned to do and though Eretia was shocked that Netdi would expose Marcum to Stelo was livid and that Marcum had agreed when he had the power to deny Stelo a place at Second Spring Cave made her even more furious. He smiled now thinking of her anger and how she had looked for he had never seen her other than docile and loving but in protection of him she had become a tigress and he wanted her even more. Netdi had been right when he spoke of how he and Stelo had been best of friends and the competition to see who could get Dosalia to mate with them had gotten out of hand and he could not remember how it had gotten so ugly. Had he not met Eretia the summer before he hoped he would still not have been with them in their attack of Dosalia, but he did not know and that bothered him.

Now that he was here, even knowing that this was something he had to do, he jumped back slightly when Netdi opened the leather closure of the tent. Smiling Netdi stepped out of the tent and placed his hand on Marcum's shoulder, feeling the tremors that he was hiding well. "I had not expected you to come so soon Marcum."

"You were right in that he was my friend and we were close when we were younger and I do not know where or when it all went wrong." Marcum paced in from of the tent and then stood again in front of Netdi. "I was thinking on my way here that I hope that I could not have been talked into joining them in their attack on Dosalia if I had not met Eretia, but I do not know and that bothers me."

"There is not one man who has not reached that point in their life Marcum and I will be the first to tell you that none are innocent. I wanted Madenia since before she was a woman, but after Charoli and his gang attacked her she would not even look at me. I almost put myself forward to open her when she finally agreed to First Rites, and I cannot honestly tell you what stopped me. It was many years before I finally got my chance when the Mamutoi man Danug brought Charoli back to Hot Spring Cave. I came thinking that with this closure surely she would look to me and she did. You are so much luckier with Eretia for she will be the mate you need and she will defend you against all which will make you a better man for you will want to be deserving of that faith in you."

"I want to see him, but I am not sure what I would say to him."

"Let him make the first move."

Marcum followed Netdi into the tent and was surprised to see that not only was Stelo's mother present but Netdi's mate Madenia was there as well. After what Stelo had done he was surprised

that Madenia would want to be anywhere near to him yet while his mother sat off to the side, Madenia was washing his face and then lifted his head so that he could drink. Although he was a boy at the time he remembered the adults around him talking about her bravery in facing Charoli and here she was showing all the Losaduna her strength again. He could do no less in the face of what she had suffered compared with him.

Sitting next to the pallet where Stelo lay, sweat shining his face even in the faint light coming through the smoke hole of the tent, Marcum had to wonder if it was from the pain he was probably still experiencing or the warmth of the tent which was less that it could be since it had been moved and set up against a corpse of trees. When Stelo's eyes opened he groaned and immediately closed them. "We cannot hide from this Stelo." When he did not open his eyes again, Marcum turned to Netdi. "Can we talk alone?"

"They can't. He might hurt Stelo." Marcum looked tiredly at Stelo's mother who seemed determined to make Stelo helpless from the time they had been at the Plains Cave and he was sure that it was a large factor in what had happened.

"Brancia, I do not think that is a worry, now come and allow them to settle this between themselves." Madenia put her arms around the older woman and guided her out of the tent and smiled when Netdi followed her out.

"It used to be we could tell each other anything with no worries of what the other might think. I cannot tell you how sad it made me when we could no longer do that. At the second Matrimonial I will be mated to Eretia and we will be living here at the Second Spring Cave. It is not what she wants but moving to Hot Springs Cave she would lose her hearth and that is not something I want. She wants to protect me and I do understand, she however, does not understand how close we once were and is terrified that one day you will come after me again."

"Never, Marcum." Stelo whispered. "I can never expect you to forgive how I have been when I have treated you like the lowest of people and then to attack you like I did. You have so much more courage than I do and even now I am lost as to what I need to do to repair all the hurt I caused." He groaned when he moved to get more comfortable and smiled at the pale fear on Marcum's face. "I am still paying with my punishment and suspect I will for a time but nothing will happen. Marcum, did you know that Madenia blamed herself for Charoli's attack on her?"

"No. I have never really talked with her for fear of making her fear me."

"She has talked a lot to me since this happened and I am not sure I can make up to Dosalia what I have done. Dosalia was sharp, confident, and despite our words to her to make her think less of herself, I have never had a woman who gave so much of herself to me. I wanted the mine but I wanted Dosalia more but when she was so hateful to Derlio I believed that Retchen was right about her. Madenia said that Kaunai has loved her even as a child and somehow Retchen knew this. We all allowed ourselves to be used by him to make Kaunai think he was worthless, but I had another motive, I wanted her. How I thought she would want me after I attacked her I do not know."

Marcum stayed quiet as Stelo talked and for the first time in years it was as it had been and he hoped Stelo understood just how bad what he had done was. “Dosalia was the one who told me that she would never accept any of us because we never took the time to know her and we too worried more about ourselves and what we could gain than her pleasure or friendship and she was right. Until I meet Eretia I did not know what she meant but I do now. I wanted to know everything there was to know about Eretia for she became that important to me and I curse the time I wasted by pursuing my own wants that I missed so much of her life and possible time we could have had together. I think if Dosalia had really been important to you Stelo, you would have tried to find out everything there was to know about her and done everything in your power to make her happy and want to be with you. She truly loves her two mates and I am happy for her and wish her the best, now however we need to work on you. You have to want to be better than you have been Stelo and I think if you look back you will see that Retchen and your mother are the source of your problems and you already know that you have not the right to Dosalia or any of her flint mine.”

“That stupid mine is worthless to me for as hard as I tried I am not a good flint knapper and I hate working with it. Do you remember when the Aklmor was at Hot Spring Cave and we thought he was a giant?” Marcum only nodded wondering what Stelo was thinking. “He took me and Madenia’s brother out to collect grains even though it was the middle of the winter. While the others were collecting what little there was he pulled me aside and said he saw hate in me and wondered who had hurt me. I wanted to tell him Marcum but I could not, and still have not told anyone.”

Marcum adjusted himself in his seat uncomfortable even thinking what he had witnessed so long ago that he had finally put it from his mind. “Stelo, Garlui is dead for what he did to Madenia and in some way what he did to you and you know I never told anyone what I saw not even when your mother threatened me that I had injured you in some way. Now I wonder if I had been wrong to keep it silent Stelo and maybe if you told someone now the truth it might help.”

“When I heard Garlui killed himself I left the camp and screamed that I had not been allowed my revenge. Losaduna of North Spring Cave and the rest of the leaders were responsible and Laduni most of all since he allowed Verdegia her blood. Yet you stayed with me and allowed me to rage against it and that meant more than I can ever tell you Marcum but it also made it easy for Retchen to use me because I think he knows. There have always been rumors about him and Charoli’s gang and I have to wonder if Garlui told him what he had done to me.”

“Then tell Netdi. I know he wants you to heal and be whole and I do not think that is possible if you keep this inside.”

“I will think on it Marcum, it is all I can promise.”

Chapter 78

Dosalia could not believe how wonderful she felt as they walked in the early morning light. As sad as she was at leaving the caves she was eager to return to the summer meeting and her family. By the time they returned she was sure her mother would have placed all gifts in her chamber but they could wait until the summer meeting was over. The travois, being pulled by Kaunai at the moment, had all the treasures they had collected during their time in the valley and she was pleased when the men agreed to follow the valley west until they would be forced to climb the mountains that led to the plains of the Mother River. The herds between the ranges of mountains and glaciers were large attesting to the rich food sources that the valley contained. They were wary of the predators and took only when they needed fresh meat which was seldom since they used their slings more often than not, Trilon even bringing down a young antelope. Though knowing she would never be as good as Ayla, Dosalia was pleased with the greater accuracy they all were experiencing since being on this trip for they used the sling as a way to pass the time as they travel as well by choosing a target and each trying to hit it before moving too many steps.

Looking at the two men she was glad that they finally seemed to be working in tandem even when they shared pleasures, taking turns pleasuring her even as she worked to pleasure each of them. There was no longer talk of sleeping separately except when she had over exerted herself and had been sore at the end of the day. Even then they had both massaged her body until finally relaxed she had slept until the following morning. Realizing now why she wanted both men she was pleased that they seemed to have worked out their difference, still she knew Trilon had the hardest time, but she made sure he had as much of her attention as Kaunai so that he would never feel the lack.

There was no rush to return to the summer meeting still they moved quickly even when they stopped to explore something that caught their interest. It wasn't long before all of them recognized the southern area that they had hunted before the summer meeting and were surprised to see so many animals still in the area. They knew the majority of the animals that migrated north had left and been hunted for the matrimonial but the number of animals remaining was as large and of greater variety. With all the young within the herds, the number of predators in the area was also greater and they moved toward the foot hills cautiously, they had no need to hunt and call attention to themselves.

When they crested a rise that they thought might lead to a second valley, Dosalia immediately dropped her spear thrower on the travois and pulled the sling from her wrist where she had wrapped it and placed it next to the spear thrower. Rolling her shoulders and looking at the ground while still keeping watch on what was below, made the men look closer. There below then were seven clan men tying the legs of an auroch to two spears that had been latched together. One of the men looked up seeing them and immediately the men gathered their weapons and stood to face the threat.

“Kaunai do you know any of the flathead language.”

“No, ok very little that I have picked up from Dosalia at summer meetings.”

‘Allow me to talk to them. Do not look at her for they will assume that she is my mate and you the son of my hearth. It is better that they think this. Stay relaxed and keep your sling in your hand, your spear thrower in the quiver and we will be fine.’

The dropped the travois at the top of the rise and descended to face the men of the clan but carefully watching their every movement. From what little of their personal language, for most clans had two, Dosalia could only pick up who was the leader and that one of the men wanted to kill the three of them where they stood, but the leader seemed more curious than the others and signal them to stay alert but not to threaten the others.

Looking directly into the eyes of the man Trilon assumed was the leader he signed a greeting and stopped before actually reaching the men of the clan. There was little shock from the men of the clan that Trilon had greeted them in their language and he wondered if Reggdi had somehow interacted with these men. Knowing he could not look at Dosalia to see if she thought the same he asked the question any way. “We are glad to see men from the clan that taught the hunter Reggdi. I am Trilon and know Reggdi well.” Trilon hoped that he would not have to prove that lie.

“I a Urk, hunt leader.”

“Urk Reggdi brought boy to cave of my mate. He worries for his safety.”

“Why would he take deformed child without a mother? It is strange. Rig good hunter, good mate to Ogg, but strange. Mogur glad not to expose women to death curse. Hunters glad no death curse made.”

“My mate has agreed to adopt the boy.” Seeing the man shake his head he wondered if he should have said anything.

“You are brave to allow your woman to take a deformed child but it will allow Rig to return. Many would like to see him again.”

Dosalia pressed a packet of flint points into Trilon’s hand and with a smile, Trilon held them out to the hunt leader. “I see the man Rig has given you points for your spears. These are from the best flint worker of my people.”

All the clan men gathered around the hunt leader while still not looking away from the men of the others and saw what was given the hunt leader. “These are well.” Reaching inside his wrap Urk handed Trilon the claw of a bird of prey. Looking at the man’s chest he thought it probably a eagle since that was the man’s totem if he was right about the symbol.

“This will stay with me to remind me of the friendship we have.” Nodding his acceptance the hunt leader said something to the rest and the auroch was picked up by two and the men and the melted into the trees.

“We have to get back.” Dosalia said as she watched the clan men disappear in the foliage of the forest.

Chapter 79

The hardest but shortest route to return to the summer meeting area was to travel over the hills and once they were sure the men of the clan would not return Kaunai led the way with the travois and Trilon took the rear to protect them from any threat coming from that direction. They only got as far as the foothills the first day but as they made their camp next to a stream, Kaunai saw a flash of silver and quickly got his spear thrower with the special spear he had made the summer before. Attaching a thin braided rope of grasses at the hole carved into the fletched end of the spear he followed the stream until he saw a pool of clear water where various fish swam. Holding the spear thrower in readiness he watched the larger fish and waited until they moved closer to the top to capture one of the insects that fluttered over the water. Trilon and Dosalia watched keeping away from the water so that their shadows would not spread over the water both of them wanting nothing to interfere with Kaunai getting fish for their meal.

Kaunai saw the silver rise toward the surface and after watching the fish he knew once they broke the surface it would immediately swim for the bottom of the pond. Pulling back just a fraction he released the spear waiting only a second before grabbing the rope and pulling. Once they saw him struggling Trilon and Dosalia rushed forward and helped to pull on the rope smiling as a small sturgeon came from the water thrashing wildly until they managed to get the fish well away from the water. All of them smiled at each other as Trilon slapped Kaunai on the back and knelt to start cleaning the fish with Dosalia and Kaunai laughing and joining him. The first order was to remove the roe from the sturgeon when they saw the long black sacks filled with eggs denoting the fish as female. Running to their packs Dosalia returned with a large bowl that Kaunai set the sacks in and Dosalia gently coaxed the eggs from them. Unable to help herself she took a taste and closed her eyes in pleasure wondering why the fish had maintained the eggs so late in the season but pleased to have such a treat. Using her fingers she scooped small amounts of the eggs and fed them to each of the men as they worked throwing what was not needed or wanted from the fish back into the water to allow the other fish to eat.

They lay back against the rolls of leather full and looked at the fire. On the opposite side was a make shift rack where Dosalia had placed long tongues of meat from the fish to dry. Off to the side of the fire was the remnant of the meal that had been roasted over the fire and would serve as their meal in the morning. Hanging in a tree was the remainder of the eggs, high enough to prevent most scavengers from getting to it. Though they wanted to return to the summer meeting they would take the few days it would take to dry the fish meat and consume the remaining eggs for they would not survive the trip and there was no use wasting them.

Reggdi entered the tent not sure of his welcome considering Stelo's words when he had joined the hunting party with Loug in his arms. Soon the council would be calling him for he knew that they had taken a break after deciding the punishment for Stelo and Derlio but now they were meeting once again and he was sure it had to do with him and Loug. Seeing Stelo trying to stand

on his own, Reggdi rushed forward before the man fell and caused himself even more injury. Taking Stelo's entire weight on his handless arm, Reggdi used his good arm to pull Stelo against him to stabilize him until he could stand. Once standing Reggdi released him and watched as Stelo slowly bent over and panted as if he could not catch his breath. Reggdi kept his hand on him and waited wondering if it was pain he was still feeling that was causing him to act so.

"What are you doing?" Reggdi heard the yell but the shove was unexpected and being off balance as he fell he tried not to release Stelo but as the man fell awkwardly, he was not able to catch him before he hit the hard packed floor softened only by the leather ground cloth. The screams were piercing as Stelo curled into a ball but the silence that followed was worse. Looking at the woman who had caused the problem, he cursed under his breath as he went to Stelo. "Get away from him. Get away from him!" Her piercing screams were worse than Stelo as he tried to turn him over only to find that he tucked himself tightly which could only mean he was conscious to Reggdi's relief.

"Brancia, be quiet." Reggdi looked up to see Netdi enter the tent and sighed with relief as he came to kneel beside him. "What happened, Reggdi?"

"I came in and Stelo was trying to stand on his own and was not doing a good job of it but I was able to get to him before he fell when this one.." he pointed to Brancia. "Pushed me and I lost my hold on him. When I fell I may have pulled him off balance and he went down."

"I will take care of him, run and get Losaduna of North Spring cave and hurry."

Reggie did not wait as he jumped up and ran from the tent. Netdi bent over the fallen man and could hear him breathing through his teeth and knew he had reinjured himself in the fall. "Stelo, it's me. I am going to lift you and get you back on the bed and it is going to hurt but there is nothing I can do about it. I know you are hurting but try and roll on your back and I will help you." He heard the groan as Stelo tried to turn slightly taking big gulps of air trying to breathe over the pain.

"Stop you are hurting him."

"Brancia get out of this tent now or I will have you forcibly taken from here."

"He's my son, and that horrible man was attacking him."

"Lie." Stelo's soft word was barely audible over his harsh breathing but Netdi had heard it.

"Stelo says he was not attacking now leave." He stared at her until crying she ran from the tent. "Okay, I am going to help you turn the rest of the way and then I will pick you up and get you to the bed space. Do you trust me to do this?" Stelo barely nodded his head and Netdi slowly aided him to turn on his back then quickly lifted him and carried him the short distance to the bedspace. The odor let him know why he had risen and instead of paying him down he placed him in a sitting position. "I am going to change the bedding and then I will get you a new tunic

to wear. I am sorry you were left for so long Stelo, it will not happen again.” Still curled Stelo nodded slightly.

By the time Losaduna arrived, Netdi had Stelo cleaned and dressed in a tunic top and lying on fresh furs and covered. “Stelo, I am going to have to have you lay on your back and stretch your legs. I need to see if there are any new injuries.” With his eyes still closed, Stelo attempted to comply with the healer’s request and was grateful when he felt Netdi hands aid him. Relaxing his legs slowly, gasping with the pain that seemed to be fading just a little, he finally got his legs straight.

Reggdi felt the bile in his throat at the sight of Stelo’s groin and ran from the tent wishing he had never seen the injury and wondered how the man still lived is such pain. He had not known that his punishment included so horrendous and injury and wondered if perhaps the loss of his hand was the better punishment. He had only gone to ask if Stelo wanted to learn the spear thrower since he and Derlio had both refused to learn the weapon and now that it would be a long time before their hands were healed enough, he could teach them to use it. When he entered his tent to get away from people, he was surprised to see Noonie feeding Loug for although she had never been mean to the child she had ignored him since his return. Why the daughter of a leader even considered him for a mate was beyond his imagining especially since he was gone so much of the time, still when he was home she seemed happy to see him and sharing pleasures with her made him feel whole and undamaged. When he had appeared with Loug however her welcome was not so joyous and she had yet to share her furs with him and she had pointedly ignored the child.

“Noonie?”

“He was hungry and I did not know how long you were going to be.” He saw the tears then and went to her and pulled her into his arms. “He knew I was you mate and signaled that he was hungry. He tries all the time to help me and I have just pushed him away and now... I lost another one while you were gone Reggdi.” Looking down at the son of his hearth he knew now why she had acted like she had. She had been blessed three times now and three times she had lost the child and he returned with a half clan child he claimed was the son of his hearth. All thoughts of Stelo fled from his mind as he held his mate to him wanting his warmth to fill her.

“I never mated with you for your ability to have children Noonie, but because you were like the sun and moon in my world. Once you shared pleasures with me on a dare from your friends, but I never forgot that night thinking that I had touched the sky and would never have thought I could do so again. I am sad that I was not here when the child was lost but you did not tell me you had been blessed again before I left. This time however we are going to see Losaduna of the North Spring Cave and tell her of these problems for I do not want to lose you to anything or anyone.”

Chapter 80

Moving straight up the hills was impossible as several times they came to areas that were impassable and had to divert south to find another path to cross the mountain into the steppes.

All were tired and ready to stop but they pushed themselves but rested midday for only a few minutes to get dried meat or fish and water but did not stop long until it was near nightfall. Collecting wood and other burnable material as they moved and eating the traveling food there was no need for hunting as they moved. Once Kaunai used his spear thrower and got a giant hamster that crossed their path and the fresh meat was appreciated but they did not divert to hunt.

Now looking down on the steppes from the top of the ridge they realized that they had traveled south enough that just below and north of them was the summer meeting area. Not wanting to fall and injure themselves they made their way slowly down the hills disappointed that they could not reach the area in a single day. The men refused to continue in the dark when Dosalia would have even knowing that they would probably reach the sight within hours if they continued but neither man was willing to risk Dosalia or the child she carried being hurt. As they had a clear night they did not bother with the tent and only used the ground cover and a few furs that now that they were at lower elevations were needed less.

In the morning the men continued to keep Dosalia at a sedate pace as they made it to the foothills and started north. When they got to the mine, Dosalia looked in passing and was pleased that she had to look twice to see the opening even though she knew it was there. With the strong winds and rains of the summer storms the hide closure and the stone in front of the cave effectively hide the mine. As they reached the crossing, Dosalia turned at the sound of her name. Coming from the cave was her mother who moved quickly to pull her daughter into her arms and hug her. Dosalia relaxed in the arms of her mother relaxing and glad she was back among her family.

“I could smack that woman for not telling me before you left that you had been blessed.” Dosalia chuckled as her mother pushed her from her and looked her over critically. “Well you do not look worse for the trip but did you have to be so long?”

“Yes Mother, we did. Now what...” Just then Dosalia looked and saw Reggdi and Noonia coming across the river and Noonia was holding Loug in her arms and the child seemed very happy by this. “Mother?”

“The councils have been meeting for the last three days and now they have asked Reggdi to come and tell them what happened. It seems Noonia lost another child and since the half-flathead boy is being claimed by Reggdi she has asked to be allowed to adopt the child. Well you can imagine that up roar, but Laduni has agreed to allow her to adopt the child even without the council’s consent which did not sit well with the Losaduni or the other leaders. You know how closed mouth Losaduna can be and he is no help since he has told me nothing about what is going on but I did hear that Netdi also gave Reggdi permission to join the Second Spring Cave.”

Dosalia turned to Trilon who barely nodded and Kaunai also nodded. “Mother we have to go to that council meeting since we have some very important information.”

“What?”

Dosalia kissed her mother’s cheek and started toward the council tents with Trilon and Kaunai following. “Later mother, I promise I will tell you later.”

Reggie took Loug from Noonie despite her tight hold on the child, if the council was going to punish him he did not want Noonie to be injured as well even though everyone at the summer meeting knew she had asked the leaders individually if they would accept her adoption of Loug. The first to say he would was Laduni who had also offered them all a place in his cave. How that would affect what happened in this tent he did not know but he was determined to shield his family as much as possible. Taking a deep breath he entered the tent and immediately was faced with an angered Tomasi and Artioni as well as the Losaduni for each of their caves.

“Take that abomination out of this tent, it has no place in here and I will not stand by and allow you to affect the women of my cave.” Tomasi’s face was red with his anger while the others standing appeared almost fearful and pale.

“No they will stay.” All eyes turned to the entrance again as Dosalia, Trilon and Kaunai entered and as Dosalia came level with Reggdi she held her hands out and giggling as any little boy would do, Loug put his arms out to go to into her arms. “What a brave little man you are Loug, but why don’t you go to your mother.” Dosalia gave the boy to Noonie who gathered him to her and held him tight, tears of gratitude flowing down her face.

“You have no say what happens in this tent Dosalia, neither do your mates.”

Dosalia ignored Tomasi and turned to Gulloni who was the recognized leader for this summer meeting. “Gulloni, I have testimony to give to this body on this matter when it is time. I ask permission for myself and my mates to remain until it is time for us to speak.”

Gulloni struggled to keep the smile from his face. He was tired of the ranting of the four that were standing now and to have someone else have something other to add but hate and perhaps to give Tomasi and his cohort something else to think about as they wondered what she and her mates would say was worth keeping the threesome around. “Please take a seat and if you will motion when there is something that we need to know about please do so otherwise we may make the wrong decision.” Dosalia and the two men nodded and took seats on the logs provided which were covered with furs. A smile did break his face when Dosalia pulled Noonie down to sit beside her leaving Reggdi alone standing.

Chapter 81

Netdi left the tent and walked straight into the woods without looking around at those still within the camp and not at the center of the summer meeting for whatever reason. Once he thought he was deep enough he leaned against a tree and allowed his body to reject the meal he had eaten just before going in to see Stelo. He wished he did not know what he now knew as imaged of a child being so abused made him as sick as he had been when Madenia had been raped by those animals. It did not excuse what Stelo did but now there was more of the puzzle of what had changed the boy so that it had affected the man. Trying to think back how Stelo had acted around other men he could not remember any fear just a sense that he would fight anyone to do anything other than what he wanted. How is he supposed to guide this young man with this in

his back ground, it was all he could do to keep his stomach under control and his features bland while Stelo talked, thankfully exhausting himself so that he was quickly asleep after the telling.

Turning his back against the tree he closed his eyes and tried to relax breathing the clean air scented with the years of leaf debris and the sounds of life of the forest slowly returning after his intrusion. The sounds coming from the summer meeting soon filtered in so that he could hear them and somehow it was a comfort to know that there were so many who would never know that Charoli's and his gang's effects were still being felt even now. Shaking his head he went back to the camp to see Brancia going into the tent when she was supposed to be with Madenia helping with the celebration of Marcum and Eretia's promise later in the evening. Anger flowed through him as he marched toward the tent and looking inside he saw her sitting and staring at her son.

"Brancia, you need to leave and allow Stelo to sleep. Losaduna was just here and gave him something to help him sleep and I thought you were supposed to help Madenia?"

"But he is all I have and Madenia has plenty of help with her mother."

"No Brancia, you have a chore to do and Stelo is healing well and does not need his mother to coddle him any longer. He is a man and needs to stand on his own now. If you do not stop interfering with his recovery I will send you away."

"But we are to be mated, even if you do not come near me."

"I told you that we are being mated to help with Stelo. At the matrimonial I will adopt him and he has already agreed to that. I do not have to mate with you for you have your own hearth be he needs a man of his hearth, he needs someone to help him and that includes helping him break the bonds that you have tied around him."

"Why are you being so mean to me, I have always only wanted to care for my son."

"But he no longer needs his mother Brancia, he needs to be a man and take responsibility for his actions which he is trying to do and you are not helping him."

"Mother, go away." Brancia stared at her son, shocked that he would speak to her so. Shaking her head she raced from the tent.

"You, young man are supposed to be asleep."

"I told Losaduna I did not want the tea."

"Well then maybe it is time you get out of that bed and into the sun. We are going to celebrate Marcum and Eretia's promise this evening and I think it is time you joined the rest of the cave." Netdi saw the flash of fear in his eyes but still bent and pulled the cover off of Stelo. "I will be nearby, but you need to expect some hard feelings especially from Eretia who is very protective of Marcum." Netdi went to his bedspace and returned to Stelo with a set of leggings that

Madenia had been working on which when tied to the waist the crotch had been made into a flap that would not put pressure on Stelo. When he held it up for Stelo to see he saw the beginning of a smile that he had not seen in a very long time. “Madenia made it for you so that you can go out and begin to be a member of this cave. Understand this Stelo, I have reaffirmed that you are a member and your status has not changed but people know what you did but they also know of your punishment. Some will let it be enough others will not and how you respond to both will tell others if you can be trusted. The actual trust will be long in coming because you have to earn it, but if you try and if you act like the man you are, trust will eventually come.”

“You are right I do not deserve their trust, but perhaps if I am not hidden in this tent I will get a chance to talk to Dosalia.”

“That is not something you should count on especially since the men she is mated to will never allow her near you.”

“I cannot blame them, but I know Dosalia. If she wants to do something she will do it no matter what others say.” Netdi laughed agreeing with Stelo for he had seen too often since her return when she had left the safety of the cave even knowing a storm was brewing and that she might get caught in the mine.

Chapter 82

Dosalia lost to the need to yawn as she listened to the same argument given by the same people over and over again until finally as she had hoped Tomasi brought up the fact that they had to fear the clan attacking. Looking over at Trilon who smiled at her he nodded and stood up and stepped in front of Reggdi.

“Yes Trilon?” Gulloni would have called one anyone to keep from hearing Tomasi from repeating himself one more time no matter what he was told.

“The clan has no intention of attacking Gulloni.”

“And how do you know that?” Tomasi yelled upset that he was interrupted yet again and no one was listening to what he was saying.

“On our way back to the summer meeting we met some hunters from the clan that Reggdi had been trading with and they have no desire to attack since in their mind Reggdi did them a favor by not having to call on the evil spirits to perform a death curse for the boy. They are confused why he did it but they hold Reggdi in high regard. We told them that Dosalia was adopting the boy and this seemed to please them for then Reggdi would be free to return if he desired to.”

“That makes no difference it is known that abominations such as that can affect other women.”

Losaduna of North Spring Cave finally stood and looked around the room, it was getting late and she was tired and hungry and had other patients to look at before returning to her home camp.

“I have heard this story, and that is what it is a story, that is erroneously perpetrated from generation to generation but never, and I repeat myself never has there ever been any child where the mother has not had close contact with an adult flathead male where a child of mixed spirit was born. Never, Tomasi! The mother chooses the spirits to make a child and I know of no instance where the spirit of a child was ever used. It is quiet obvious that this is a child, barely at the age of weaning and of no threat to anyone. Laduni has already said that he would accept Reggdi as has Netdi so they will not be returning to your camp Tomasi and Artioni other than just the fact he is of mixed spirit I have heard no other arguments from you. It is late and we have been discussing this for days. I vote that the child stay with Reggdi with whatever camp accepts him.”

She sat down and before Tomasi could say another word, Gulloni stood and asked each of the leaders and each of the Losaduni and other than the four that originally objected the rest agreed with Losaduna of North Spring Cave. “Well that’s the end of it then. Reggdi if you can get a cave to accept you and the child then there is nothing else you need to do except perhaps protect the boy from those that do not understand.”

“I will, and I thank the council for their thoughtful actions on this issue.” Turning he held his hands out and the boy nearly jumped into them obviously happy to be in his arms, then he left the tent with Dosalia, Trilon and Kaunai following.

“Well that went better than I thought it would, we rushed back thinking they were going to kick you out or something.”

“It helped that Laduni came to me to tell me not to worry that he would arrange things then Netdi got involved and Losaduna of North Spring Cave came to examine Loug to make sure he was healthy but when Noonie started caring for him it no longer mattered.” He pulled his mate into his arms and hugged her for a moment and smiled at her. “As long as she is with me there are no problems we cannot handle. I am glad that we have a choice and I am thinking of going to Second Spring Cave. They are closer to the clan and I would like to help Stelo.”

“Stelo?” All three questioned as they looked at Reggdi as if he had lost his mind.

“That’s right you do not know.” Reggdi laughed and gave Loug to Noonie who gladly took him and the two smiled at each other. “I think you might want to talk with him Dosalia.” He put his hands up to stop her mates from arguing against any connection between them. “I have no power to command you to see him, but I think you need to talk with him even if it is just the two of you or with your mates or Netdi with you. I will say that Madenia has taken him in and she and Netdi are going to adopt him. Netdi is contemplating mating with his mother but I think that might be a big mistake, but go talk with Netdi first if that would ease you any. I would have for Stelo to wait as long as I did for people to see that fear and sorrow comes in all forms.”

The three watched Reggdi walk away and it was Kaunai who spoke first. “I know if we tell you no you will do it any way but please let us talk with Netdi first and see what happened. I am sure after he was punished he is sorry but I cannot believe that it is something that will last.”

“I wonder what punishment they got?” Although she said it aloud it was to herself so the men were not surprised when she turned and headed to the cave where her mother had been.

Chapter 83

The three of them started at Solandia shocked at what she had told them. The men had known of Dosalia’s testimony before the councils to plead with them not to cut the hands off either of the men and none were surprised by the compromise that the leaders and Losaduni came up with knowing eventually the men’s hands would heal. What shocked them was what they had done to Stelo. Both men felt sick at the thought and a ghost of a pain went through them at the thought of what he had and was suffering. “How...” Dosalia had to stop talking to get control of her stomach as she swallowed convulsively several times. “Why did they do such a thing. I told them mother that other than the beating there was no harm. Stelo does not know any other way of sharing pleasures it is why I stopped sharing with him and Derlio. Derlio has no excuse except that he is arrogant but I do not think that is the case with Stelo. There were times...” Shaking her head she held her hand clutched together tightly to stop the shaking.

“He forced you to share pleasures with him Dosalia and that cannot be excused.”

“And they lost the use of their hands for a very long time with no assurance that they will ever be normal again. This punishment was uncalled for.”

‘Perhaps to you since you are involved daughter but not to the rest of the Losadunai who will know that such an action has a severe penalty. What if the next time a man thinks to do this thing it is a girl such as Madenia, no it was an appropriate punishment but I think both should have shared the same.’

Dosalia rushed from the cave knowing if she stayed longer she would not be able to control her stomach but even with the fresh air and soft wind, images filled her mind. Tears filled her eyes until she could barely see stumbling until strong arms wrapped themselves around her and she could no longer control her sobs. Kaunai was at a loss and as he watched Trilon emerge from the cave he knew there were no answers there as well. He wondered if he was wrong to agree with the leaders and Losaduni since to him it was better than death as he had wished for the pair. Although most of the bruising had faded from her face, there were still marks on her skin even now. He remembered her crying in his arms before when Stelo had been rough in his handling of her and his disappointment when he saw that she had once again returned to Stelo’s side. How she could defend him was beyond him, yet she did.

Trilon put his arm around them both and lead them to where they had left their packs and supplies. Picking up the travois he moved up stream instead of crossing into the summer meeting area until they had a chance to talk. They all stopped when Netdi called Kaunai’s name and turned to watch as he quickly crossed the water. As he neared Netdi’s smile faded for all three looked as if their world had collapsed. “What happened?”

“How could they Netdi? How could they do that to him? The hands I could see but why would they crush his manhood?”

“Come and let us sit down and talk. I think you all need to hear what has happened and what we have learned since you left.” Kaunai pulled them toward the rock wall and as they passed a jutting rock, there was the small entry leading to the chamber they would now be living. Dosalia pulled from Kaunai’s hold and went to the main area and started a fire, rubbing away the tears that continued to fall but it was her hearth and she was going to make sure that she took care of her visitor. When Trilon would have stopped her she twisted from his grasp and continued to heat water for tea.

“Dosalia, do you want answers to your questions?” Kaunai’s voice was gentle but he would not be put off. He saw her shoulders sag and she turned and went into his arms and he was thankful.

When they were all seated Netdi took Dosalia’s hands in his own and waited until she looked up. “I know you know what was done to Stelo but it had to be done Dosalia, no let me finish. It was not even the pain that he suffered and it was tremendous, but finally he did not get away with what he had done. I want you to know that there was a lot of discussion after you left as what was the appropriate punishment. There are too many young men that have problems controlling themselves now. It was better after Charoli and his members were punished but recently there have been issues and I know you know about them for you made it very public when you rejected Derlio. To allow them to get away without harsh punishment would have endangered too many woman and men for that matter considering what happened to Marcum.”

“Marcum....” Dosalia gasped having forgot about his injuries and shamed that she had for he tried to prevent the attack.

“Marcum is doing well and will still be mated at the second matrimonial. At the same time I will adopt Stelo and mate with his mother so that I can control her a little more.”

“Netdi?” Kaunai was shocked by his brother’s words.

“I am the leader of the Second Spring Cave and Stelo is my responsibility but more than that, I have talked with him and to let you know, the idea to adopt him and mate with his mother was Madenia’s idea.”

“What could have possibly possessed her?”

“She spent hours helping to treat Stelo and whenever he was awake they talked. She never told me what they discussed but I believe she told him of the time she was forced and those talks have made a difference. We were able to keep his mother away from him for a long time and I think without her harping and trying to protect him against all evils, he realized what he had done and knows there is much to be done to repair what he damaged. There is a lot about Stelo that is not know and I wish now that I did not know, it is not an excuse and it is not something I can share, I can only say that had Hilmoi known about it at the time I hope he would have done something. I do not want you to think that I believe Stelo is innocent of his action for he is a man and made the choice to act as he did, but I am beginning to believe that Retchen had more to

do with the actions of Marcum, Derlio and Stelo and I am going to try and find out what he has done and if he has started on maybe younger boys.”

Chapter 84

Dosalia sat quietly as she thought about what Netdi said and she knew that although they could have killed Marcum, they did not and Derlio caused her more pain than Stelo yet Stelo was the one who received the worse of the punishment. “I need some time alone, please.” She looked at Kaunai and Trilon and neither were happy at her announcement feeling she needed to talk about what she was thinking.

“Marcum and Eretia are having a promise ceremony this evening and I want you to know that Stelo will be there. He may not be able to stay long but he will be there as he will more and more be involved in Second Spring Cave’s celebrations.” Netdi smiled at Dosalia and left the way he had come hoping that she could convince her mates that she needed to talk with Stelo.

“Dosalia..”

“Trilon, I do not know how I feel right now except that I feel ill that some much damaged was done to Stelo when he hurt me the least. I wanted them punished but never did I want them to suffer like this. It is so much worse than what Reggdi and the other received.”

“They could have killed you Dosalia.” Kaunai could not believe that she was thinking that these men were harshly treated. “They did almost kill Marcum and I cannot believe he would allow his future mate anywhere near the man.” Kaunai knelt in front of Dosalia and held her hands. “Dosalia, you did not see yourself when we took you from the cave, I thought you would die from what they did. No punishment was too much for them for what they did to you and even now I wish I would have killed Derlio when I had the chance, but getting you out of there was more important.”

Dosalia brushed back the hair falling in his face as she looked into Kaunai’s face. “I can never tell you how sorry I am that I cause you and Trilon so much worry and pain. Had I lost this child I probably would have felt the same as you both do but I did not. The child remains and is well as I am. I do not know if you can understand this but I need to see Stelo at least, I need to know what he is thinking and will I live the rest of my life worried about another attack. I cannot, will not live that way, I would rather return to the Zelandonii instead.”

“I think if this is what you really need to do there has to be rules. I will be close, to so close to interfere with your conversation but close enough to come to you if there are any problems that is the best I can do. I do not trust a man who would do such a thing and Stelo and Derlio did to you. Like Kaunai said, we thought they had killed you or at least injured you so severely as to make your life a struggle. We watched as you tried to continue and saw each wince with nearly every step you took. You tried so hard to hide the pain, but we saw it and we felt helpless to do anything about it. The only reason I agreed to the matrimonial was because it would give us a chance to get you away without questions so that we might be able to help you heal without everyone watching your every move. You know as soon as we were away you relaxed enough to

finally feel the full brunt of what was done to you. We never want to see you in that kind of pain again.”

“I am not as open as Trilon to a meeting between the two of you, but I know even if we forbade you from having anything to do with him, you would find a way to see him. I think it is foolish and can only hurt you more but I will be as close as Trilon if not closer. If he makes any movement towards you I cannot promise not to send him to the Mother’s underworld.”

“With the promise ceremony this evening, it might be a good time because so many will be around. I promise I will stay out of arms reach but I do need to do this.” She put her arms around Kaunai and felt him shutter as he held her against him.

“You are a foolish woman Dosalia but I love you terribly.”

Dosalia pulled away and smiled at both men whose faces looked as if carved from stone. Looking around the chamber she saw that they had brought in their supplies and there was plenty to eat and drink and they would not have to go out and greet everyone who would notice their return. “You know it might be better if no one saw us until we went to where Second Spring Camp is set up. We have plenty of water, food and a large warm bed in a chamber that is little change from the weather outside.”

“You are terrible Dosalia to try and wheedle us when you have already gotten your way.” Trilon came forward and captured her lips even as Kaunai pulled her tunic down so that he could capture her nipple.

Chapter 85

Trilon held Dosalia back as the neared the area Second Spring Cave was camped and was pleased that when they had moved back to the central area they moved closer to the woods which Trilon suspected was to keep the tent that Stelo was being housed in cooler and less exposed to the sun. He wanted to watch the camp for a while so that he could gauge where they would place Stelo and how to best protect Dosalia. Looking to where Kaunai was pointing he held his breath and Netdi helped a much thinner, obviously painful Stelo from the nearest tent. Hunched over he took it one step at a time until Netdi was able to help him turn and he was set on a pile of furs that were placed against a tree. Stelo was nearly bent in half after being placed on the furs and slowly lifted himself into a sitting position then leaned back against the tree and as he did so his body relaxed into the furs.

Dosalia stayed put knowing she did not want to cause a conflict. The men had agreed to her seeing Stelo and she was going to allow them to do what they needed to feel she was safe. Seeing Netdi help Stelo out of the tent was heartbreaking for she could see even so long after the punishment occurred that he was still in severe pain and had lost a lot of weight. She gasped when Marcum came up to him and took his arm in greeting and handed him a plate of food. Unable to hear what was being said she saw the slight smile on Stelo’s face and had to wonder what had so changed this man that Marcum would serve him after what was done to him. She would have been surprised to know that both of her mates had the same thought as they watched

Marcum sit next to Stelo as they ate in companionable silence until Eretia came to them and laughingly pulled Marcum back into the crowd. Dosalia stepped from the shade of the woods and almost stopped surprised that the men did not stop her though they followed her but stopped and allowed her to approach Stelo alone but both kept their slings handy.

Stelo saw the shadow and turned his head and gasped at the sight of Dosalia standing next to him. All the images that he fought flooded his mind of each time they had been together and especially the last time. Turning a little more he saw that both her mates waited ready to defend her should he try to injure her at all. Turning back to Dosalia who stood waiting for something, she looked so beautiful until he looked closer and saw the remaining smudges on her neck. Marks he had put there, marks he wished he could take away. How had he gone so wrong with this woman who only wanted to help her people, enduring being away from her family among strangers to learn how to mold stone into usable weapons and tools. All he had done with his life was try to take what others had, he had produced nothing. He wanted to invite her to sit and allow him to apologize but his throat constricted as he struggle to control the emotions battering him.

“Do you mind if I sit?” There was no anger in her voice when there should have been and he nodded and took a deep breath regaining some control.

“I think they need to be here as well.” Stelo nodded to the two men and Dosalia waved them forward and though the men did not look like this was something they wanted to do they came and stood next to Dosalia not wanting to give Stelo or anyone else the advantage. As much as Stelo wanted to smile he thought better of it for he did not think either man was in a generous mood where he was concerned. Turning back to Dosalia he did smile slightly for he saw the deep concern in her eyes. “Even from our earliest time together, I never wanted to hurt you and I know that I did. There is not excuse, no explanation, no reason for what I have done to you and though I can never expect your forgiveness I do ask that you take my sincere apology for what it is worth.” He chuckled ruefully as he bent to take one of her hand and groaned in pain closing his eyes against the onslaught as he tried to right himself and felt the strong hand move him to his original position. Panting until the pain passed he held perfectly still but stiffened when he felt Dosalia place her hand in his.

He opened his eyes and saw concern in her face but smiled again. “Believe me it is a very small price to pay for what I did and planned to do. I thought that if I could force you to mate with me that everything would be fine and I could convince you that I truly cared but I know it isn’t true. I would have still be abusive until you had enough and either sent me to the Mother or Kaunai would have for you. You made the right choice when you chose Kaunai for I know he has cared for you a very long time and since you showed such insight in that choice I can only assume that you second mate is also a good choice.”

“Did you know that I was so jealous that you asked these two to mate with you when at the time I thought I had wasted so much time trying to court you, looking back I know how foolish it was.”

“Stelo, I am so sorry...”

“No Dosalia, there is nothing, and I mean nothing that you are responsible for. Did you know that Madenia thought she was responsible for those men abusing her? No, you are not responsible for my actions, I am. I thought that everyone owed me whatever I wanted. As much as I would have liked to not have the pain I am having, I do not think I would have changed if they had not punished me as they did.”

“I went to them and told them I did not want your hands removed because I heard that was what they were talking about I never thought they would think of such a punishment.”

Seeing the tears in her eyes made him feel even worse for he knew Madenia was right that she blamed herself even hearing that he knew she was not. He did not know how he could convince her that she was innocent and the victim in all.

The scream came out of now where, as did the woman welding a knife and running towards them but she only had eyes for Dosalia. When Kaunai went to stand in front of Dosalia, the woman veered and Trilon caught her arm but as she spun to get away from him he felt the knife slash across his face. Stelo stood and grabbed her feeling the blade of the knife sink deep into his shoulder as his lung carried them to the ground. Pain radiated through his body but he held tightly on to the struggling woman, even as he tried to speak but all he got out before her trashing legs kicked his groin was “Mother, please...”

Chapter 86

The entire Second Spring cave was alerted by the screams of the woman and Netdi recognize the voice even if others did not. Rushing toward where he had left Stelo, he was met with Dosalia hovering over Trilon and Kaunai was trying to control Brancia who was being held by Stelo. Rushing forward he saw that there was so much blood on Trilon’s face which Dosalia was trying to stanch with her tunic and all over the three still wrestling on the ground. Going to Kaunai he pulled his brother away then grasping Brancia’s wrist he twisted until she let go of the knife that was stuck into Stelo’s shoulder. “Someone Get Losaduna of North Springs here now.” His yell brought those that had stopped shocked at the scene into action as men picked up Trilon and Stelo and carried them into Netdi’s tent. Brancia was continuing to scream until Madenia walked up to her and slapped her with all her might. “Shut up Brancia. You have done enough damage.”

“They’re going to kill my son. They’re going to kill my son.”

Madenia slapped her again and put her face next to her’s, her anger evident, “If Stelo dies it was because you stabbed him. You are responsible for Stelo’s injuries not these people who only came to talk with him.”

“No, I wanted to kill her, she did this to Stelo. She’s responsible for all his pain.” Brancia grunted as she continued to twist in Kaunai’s grasp

“Tie her up and keep someone with her.”

“No.” She screamed and twisted then bit the man who had taken control of her from Kaunai and ran into the woods.

“Brimlic go after her and be careful that she doesn’t injure you. You might take someone with you.”

“I will go with him.” Madenia looked at Kaunai who at the moment looked lost and angry at the same time, she nodded then followed Netdi into their tent. Right behind her Losaduna entered with several other of the Losaduni and she looked at Trilon first then went to Stelo who was making short shallow breaths. “Everyone out but Kirloni, Netdi, and Dosalia, out now.”

She waited until everyone had left then began removing Stelo’s clothes. “I think she forgave me before Mother showed up. I held on to her Netdi and did not let her go.”

“No you did not let her go to hurt others, you did good Stelo. Now keep quiet while Losaduna works.”

Losaduna looked as saw that all the swelling that had gone down was not only back but was spreading and she feared that something had rupture and he was bleeding internally as she touched the area to find it was cold. Moving to the knife, she noticed there was very little blood even though it looked like everyone around him seemed covered with it. With a compress ready she pulled the knife and there was a spray of blood that quickly turned to a trickle even before she could place the compress. Seeing his color fading and feeling his skin cooling and sweat broke out over his entire body she knew there was little she could do for him. The symptoms did not make it any easier as she watched as Netdi took the compress from her limp hands and press it to the knife wound.

“Is Mother alright.” His voice was low and his breathing worse as he groaned when he tried to take a deep breath. “I’ll be okay in a few minutes as soon as the pain goes away. Was anyone else hurt?” He coughed once and groaned again as a slight trickle of foamy blood dripped from the corner of his mouth. Taking a fur, Losaduna covered him and held his hand knowing neither would stop the inevitable. Netdi who continued to press looked at Losaduna who appeared to not be doing anything but when he saw her shake her head he understood and relaxed his grip on the compress. “Netdi?”

“I’m right here, Stelo.” How he hated the loss of this young man when he had made such progress. As soon as he found Brancia he was going to make sure she was severely punished for her actions this day.

Stelo smiled and looked at him. “Thank you for believing in me and tell Dosalia I meant what I said.”

“I will.” With that Stelo closed his eyes but moments later they opened again and to Netdi they appeared sightless, then he understood. He had expected something more, but Stelo just stopped breathing the smile still on his lips. Bending his head he told Losaduna what had happened that

led to Stelo's death and Trilon's injuries. Both looked up when Kaunai entered the tent and shook his head at the sight of Stelo knowing he was dead. Before going to Trilon when he wanted to be, he went to his brother's side knowing how hard he had worked with Stelo. We could not find her but Brimlic is still looking as are others from all the caves. I am sorry about Stelo Netdi, I know you had high hopes for him."

"Perhaps this is better, I do not know. He is in no pain and he does not have to see his mother's punishment, for she will be punished as hard as I am allowed to punish her." Kaunai could not remember his brother being so angry, but he understood and nodded as he went to where Trilon lay.

Chapter 87

"Let me move the compress Dosalia." Losaduna placed her hands on Dosalia's and gently pulled her hands away and then removed the rabbit fur that she had been holding to Trilon's face. Her jaws tightened at the sight of the slash from the knife across his forehead and over his eye which lay wasted within the socket. There was no saving the eye and looking at the eye that was partially opened she knew that Trilon would now be totally blind. "Dosalia why don't you go find Losaduna of Hot Springs Cave, your mother and Laduni, you might also want to tell Gulloni to find Kirloni for me. Kaunai you might want to go with her just in case until they find Brancia." All she got were nods from them before they left the tent.

"Is it that bad that you had to send them away?"

Looking down at Trilon who was trying to smile but grimaced in pain instead, she sighed wishing the Mother made the situations easier. "It is bad Trilon. There is no way to save the eye that she damaged with the knife."

The smile finally materialized and she wondered if perhaps the knife had gone deeper than she assumed. "It seems that I should have expected something. Just when my life seems perfect something happens to change its course. Looks like Kaunai will have Dosalia to himself after all."

"You will not die Trilon, that I can promise you."

"Perhaps, but how can I ask Dosalia to take on such a burden Losaduna. I will be totally blind now unable to do anything but sit and be guided through my life."

"Right now I would rather repair as much damage as I can then I would suggest you allow Dosalia make the decision of what she wants." Losaduna started heating water in several bowls the first a disinfectant that would clean the wound, the second was datura so that she could remove what was left of the damaged eye to keep it from crating an infection especially so close to his brain. Looking up when Kirloni entered the tent and at the shake of her head when he looked at Stelo he came to her side and looked at the terrible wound on Trilon's face. How could this have gone so wrong so quickly when Stelo was healing and understanding what he had done and working his way back into the pulse of the Losadunai? Kneeling down he took over making

those concoctions his mother would need as she gave Trilon the tea that would allow them to work without giving him any more pain that he was already suffering.

“I have asked Dosalia and Kaunai to remain outside for now since I did not know what to expect, now I am glad I did. Do they know?”

Losaduna looked to make sure Trilon was sleeping before answering. “I do not think they know how bad it is. We are going to have a problem because Trilon does not want to be a burden on Dosalia and I think he might endanger himself.”

“Unfortunately Mother, if he is determined there is little we can do, but I would not count out Dosalia’s affect on him and his attitude just yet. She is a scrappy woman and I know many women who would be near invalid if they had suffered what she has and they would have demanded Stelo’s and Derlio’s blood where she did not.”

“No she has not acted as many would but I wonder what she is thinking or perhaps holding inside.”

Once she removed what was left of the eye, Losaduna was pleased to see little damage to the socket and after cleaning the wounds again she placed a compress over the area and tied a covering of softest fur from the hide of an infant reindeer around his head so that both eyes were covered. Seeing no other wounds, Losaduna of North Spring Cave and Kirloni moved away to take the body of Stelo from Netdi’s tent to that of the Losaduni. They would do a cleansing ritual as soon as possible for all those that had been in the tent when Stelo’s spirit passed, but for now they would restrict access to the tent. When they returned they escorted Dosalia and Kaunai into the tent and with them Solandia and Losaduna of Hot Spring cave. Their expression matched in the sorrow Dosalia and Kaunai were suffering.

Dosalia was pleased to see Trilon sleeping comfortably and without all the blood that seemed to be everywhere after he was injured. Unable to help herself, she brushed a lock of hair from his forehead careful of the wounds that were exposed above the poultice. “He looks so pale and just hours ago...” she could not continue to remember the sweet hours they had spent waiting for the time when they would approach Stelo. Now because of her insistence to see Stelo, he was dead and Trilon was severely injured. Not knowing if Kaunai had seen the horrible injury she had remained quiet for she knew he was also blaming himself for thinking only Stelo posed a treat.

“I will not lie to you Dosalia but Trilon will never see again and he is already talking of breaking the bond so that you will not be burdened to him. If he does this I believe that he will most likely will himself to die. I do not know what his talents are other than he was an excellent hunter considering his limited sight but if there is something he can do without sight we need to discover it quickly. It will take patience because if he truly wants to die he will fight for all he is worth to make your life and everyone around him lives miserable. I do not think that it will take long for him to get to this point and until we can get him some semblance of worth, he will be in danger.”

“I wish to have him moved back to the cave to our home where Kaunai and I can care for him and he does not have to deal with everyone else.”

“That is fine Dosalia we will do that. We are going to have to do purification before moving him and all of you who were here when Stelo died will need to be purified. Kirloni will be remaining at Hot Springs Cave from now on at the request of the Losaduna of Hot Springs cave and he will eventually take Losaduna’s place.” Solandia gasped at the news for he had told her nothing of his plans. “We are all hoping that in many years in the future Solandia for there is a lot that he can teach Kirloni that I have neglected.”

Chapter 88

Finally her struggles ceased be still he held her head underwater for a few minutes more before releasing her and allowing the body to float down the river toward the falls where it would be lost to the searchers who were even now looking up stream. If he had learned nothing at all he learned that never leave a witness or anyone else that could point to what he had done. Smiling at how well he had succeeded in convincing Brancia of Dosalia’s continued enmity and now that she had two mates who also hated her son. When he had seen Dosalia and her men approaching Stelo it fit perfectly into his plans as he searched and finally found Brancia pouting because her son had sent her away. The news that Dosalia and her mates were with Stelo and that he was defenseless was enough to have her run at top speed to save her son from the revenge of a vindictive woman.

Humming in monotone he wondered how long it would take for the stupid woman to fall apart now that one of her heroes needs constant care. That was sure a wind fall event, he had only thought Brancia would get close enough to injure Dosalia but now with one of her mates severely injured her time will be taken up in caring for a blind man. She will have no time to work the mine and soon people will start to complain and they will have to take the mine from her. It would take time but that he had in abundance. Maybe he could still get Derlio to move the situation along. He would have to that idea some thought.

Dosalia struggled to keep from cringing as she helped Kirloni change the poultice from around Trilon’s face. The long gash was red and angry which made the empty eye socket look even more gruesome. For two days since he woke from the tea Losaduna had given him, he had tried to push her from him, but she refused to go and as Losaduna had predicted, his anger at her knew no bounds. Although he was quiet now, she knew it would not last, but at least they would move him today to their own home so that he would not hear the others outside the tent making speculations and in one case laughing crudely at a statement made by one whose voice she did not recognize. As soon as the wrap was in place, Dosalia left the tent to get something for Trilon to eat since he had eaten little since he received the injury. She had taken only a few steps when Kaunai appeared and pulled her into his arms and held her.

“He does not mean anything he says but he can hear others wondering when you will break the hearth with him and he is fearful of not only that but of being a useless man. He cannot think of what is to be only what is and we need to help him understand that we are a family and he has a duty to you and to me to be the best he is able to be.”

“I wish Slindi was still around. He was always so much worse because his camp gave him no help to survive still he learned to make beautiful things.”

“Perhaps we might get Reggdi to speak with him.”

“Not yet when he is so hateful, maybe after we get him moved.”

Once the stretcher started to move, and Dosalia assured him that his face was covered by the poultice, Trilon remained quiet even when one of the men slipped when he entered the water. He could feel the change as soon as they entered the cave for it was so much cooler than the heat of the tent and with the sun beating down on him. He could smell the particular oil he used on his wood and knew they had entered his home but he waited wanting those who had carried him to be gone before venting his frustrations. Listening intently served his well as he could hear the movement of the men as they left, but it also increase the pain in his wound. When he was sure he was alone he sat up and just as quickly he felt her hand on her shoulder and only then did he smell her unique fragrance. “What are you doing here?” He cringed at the anger in his voice but he wanted to scream with frustrations that he finally found a sense of peace in his life only to have it snatch away. When he felt Kaunai’s hand on his other should, and he knew it was Kaunai’s, not only by the weight of the hand but he found that his comate also had a unique odor that he never noticed before.

“Scream if that is what you need to do Trilon for it is just us here and we are not going anywhere no matter how much you try and push us away. We are a family, and as such there is nothing other than death that will separate us.”

Trilon put his hand on each of theirs trying to control the overwhelming emotions that threaten to overtake him but feeling their hands tightened he released all his anger and pain. The roar of his voice reverberated off the walls as he vented, screaming for the pain and the loss of all he had known. Both Dosalia and Kaunai put their arms around him wanting him to know that they were there for him no matter what the future held. Dosalia rested her head on his shoulder and looked away as he began to sob, and it hurt that from the damaged eye he could not even cry and she began to cry for him.

As she closed and opened her eyes trying to clear them something niggled at her mind but the sorrow and hurt seemed too deep for anything to penetrate. Finally the sight of the nodules of flint caught her eyes and she lifted her head and stared at them. Turning her face she kissed Trilon’s cheek and when to where the nodules were and looked at them closely. All four nodules were different even though they all came from the mine, and next to them were the green and red stained flint nodules she found at various areas during their trip. Collecting the smallest ones first she took them to where Trilon sat with Kaunai now sitting next to him. Going back several times she finally had all the flint next to the bed space.

“Kaunai, help me sit him on the floor.” Together they got Trilon to sit on the mat that she had made for him and then she sat next to him. “Trilon.” Gently, she raised his head and took the wrap from his face, knowing he needed to know that no matter how he looked he was still the same man. Placing her hand on his cheek she turned his face to her and bending forward she

softly kissed his lips. “Trilon, you are not a worthless man just because you cannot see. Look at what Reggdi has done with his life but he has at least some help from his cave. There was a man who had no help and was even abused by his cave even though he had the same punishment as Reggdi, he was only allowed scraps that he could find and he lived in a collection of ragged leathers that others had thrown away but he made into a tent that even in the winter he could live if not comfortably, at least he could live. With things that others threw away or what he could collect he made beautiful things from clothing to fanciful carvings that had to take him months to make each single piece. He did not blame fate he just did what he had to do so that he would survive. He could have traded these items for a better living but instead he gave away all he had made in an effort to repay what he had taken. Madenia received wonderful gifts that she did not know where they came from until she caught him leaving them for her. When Danug came to the Losadunai he began teaching Slindi his craft and in a very short time even though he had never touched flint before he was getting very good.”

“This is not just a story for you to listen to Trilon, you can do anything you set your mind to, you only have to care enough for me to want to stay with me and Kaunai. I love you and want you in my life until the Mother sees fit to separate us. I want to share your body, your mind, your laughter and even your anger when things do not go as you want them.” Picking up the smallest nodule she placed it before him between his legs. Taking a striker she quickly removed only a small portion of the cortex. Repeating the process for three of the nodules from the mine she placed them and was pleased that all three were different quality of flint. She repeated the process for one of those she had collected on the trip and set it with the others.

When she had everything in place she noticed Kaunai’s questioning glance then his smile. “Trilon, take this and tell me what you feel. Losaduna of North Spring Cave said that with people who are blinded they have stronger senses of smell, or hearing, or touch, sometimes all three. You did nothing until the men who brought you here had left and still did not move long after I could no longer hear them so this must be true. If this is so you can learn flint. If you can learn the difference of the feel of the cortex and the feel of a small part of the stone and can judge them it would save so much time. Once you do this and develop the skill if it is something you can do, I can see no reason why you could not feel your way to carve the beautiful things that you do.”

Chapter 89

Trilon listened to all Dosalia said but he could not see how he could learn to judge something he had no knowledge of especially flint which even experienced flint knappers like Jondalar of the Ninth Cave occasionally opened flint that was flawed inside. Still to please her he began touching the nodules and found there was a difference between them though he did not know what it meant. Still he continued to investigate them touching the cortex and the small opening Dosalia had made. “There is a difference.”

“Tell me about the cortex first.” Dosalia urged.

Feeling each of the stones he tried to put into words what he was feeling with his hands. “This smaller one the cortex is stronger or tougher I am not sure which but there is nothing coming off in my hands. While this one..” he rubbed the largest which was one she had picked up on their journey. “This has large sand falling off of it every time I touch it. The rest are between these two extremes.”

“Tell me more.” Dosalia wanted him to pick up the discoloration if there was a different feel to the cortex for it usually denoted a flaw with the stone inside.

Frustrated that she was not happy with what he said, Trilon once again felt each of the stones but only touched the rough outer cortex that protected the stone within, then he noticed something he had not noticed the previous times he had rubbed the stones and pulled the next smallest stone to him and felt all over its outer covering paying particular attention to the area that felt differently. “This area of this piece feels different but I could not tell you why.”

Dosalia bent forward and kissed him cautious of his still open wound. “You are amazing.” Thanking the stone from him she removed the rest of the cortex and handed it back to him. “Now feel it.”

“The stone is flawed.”

“Yes it is flawed, but it is not always as visible as it is one this one which is why even Jondalar chose stone that was flawed but I am positive eventually you will be able to chose stone that is flawed even before I take the cortex off which means I will not have to waste my time with it but more importantly I will not give it to someone to use.”

“I still do not understand Dosalia.”

“Trilon, you can learn new things you never thought to do while you could see. Only your sight was lost not you. You are still yourself but now have to learn a whole new way to see and that is with your hands and nose, how what you are walking on feels on your feet. How different people smell so that you can tell them apart. It is new and different, but I know you can do it if you want to because I know you are very good with your hands.” She kissed him again and was thrilled when this time he kissed her back.

Kirloni watched from the entrance to the chamber and Trilon once again began to feel the stones Dosalia had placed in front of him. Given time alone he was sure that Trilon would be able to learn everything Dosalia thought he could learn. He was glad that the summer meeting was almost over but perhaps before his mother left they could do something to cover the raw eye socket and soon people will ignore how Trilon looked. Turning he left the threesome to their learning for he was sure they would all learn from each other. Right now they did not need his intrusion, there was time for Dosalia to learn all she needed to so that she could care for Trilon and his wounds.

Epilog

People were amazed at the difference in Trilon as he sat next to the flint area seemingly unconcerned with comments being made about him as he continued to work on one the sculptures he made during the winter. No one had ever seen him wield the knife that had been used to carve the ivory or wood he carvings were made of but they saw the results in the scars on his fingers as he placed sand into a worn piece of leather and began rubbing the carving, using his fingers to feel the grooves and lines as he moves to each area. Since he and his mates did not attend the previous summer meeting this was the first time that anyone outside of Hot Springs Cave had seen him until now and they were surprised that he looked as healthy as he did. Seeing the muscle ripple along his arms as he worked let them know that he had not just been sitting in his cave.

“Dosalia I need some good flint for some spear points.” Netdi looked at Trilon and was as surprised as the rest of Trilon’s features. Even with Kaunai telling him when he had visited last fall of Trilon’s working in the mine and had started going on hunting trips to see if his hearing would help him to hunt again. Although it took more effort for someone had to be by him all the time and remain silent so that he could hear, they finally discovered that if they were with just the three of them then Trilon could hunt successfully. Since he had not seen him perform this task, Netdi was still skeptical. Seeing the work Trilon had caved in the past two years was astounding considering he was blind. Kneeling and placing his hand on Trilon’s shoulders as Kaunai had recommended, Netdi picked up a piece of ivory that had been carved like a lion hiding in a cave. The piece just fit into the palm of his hand but was exceedingly detail. “Trilon, what would you trade for this lion carving?”

Trilon stopped his sanding of the carving of an ivory owl and lifted a hand to Netdi’s face. Netdi had been prepared for the touch for he had been told that Trilon seemed to be able to gauge a person’s sincerity in wanting one of his carvings. “I need more mammoth tusks cut in pieces the length of your arm.” Trilon smiled when he felt Netdi face turn to one of concern trying to think of where he might find the tusks.

“How many tusks?”

“How much is the piece worth to you? Now, about that flint.” Trilon picked up several nodules of flint that Dosalia had taken a small amount of cortex off and handed one to Netdi. “This one is not the best the mine produces but the density is great for spear points.”

Stunned Netdi took the flint and looked at Dosalia who was blessed again. “Mamma, Trilon, Netdi come.” They all turned toward the sound even Trilon knowing the sound of the daughter of his hearth. He could smell that Kaunai was with her as he placed her on the ground next to Trilon and he smiled as she hugged him tightly. He had never been so fearful of being without sight as he been that night Dosalia had go into labor and Kaunai had left to take a message to Second Spring Cave for Laduni. As much as he worked to get to know the inside of Hot Spring Cave, the knowledge seemed to have left him when he tried to find Solandia but also not wanting to leave Dosalia alone. When Reggdi bumped into him he had grabbed him with all his might to keep him from leaving.

“I have to get back to Dosalia, we need Solandia.” He released Reggdi and returned to the chamber and sat next to Dosalia. Unable to stop the sigh of relief when Solandia did come, he was more relieved when he smell and heard Kirloni was with her. In their little chamber he was very comfortable, knowing where each piece of furniture and article that made their chamber a home was located so was able to provide Solandia with all that had been prepared for the birth. Her moans then screams of pain nearly tore his heart out but then he had heard the very angry voice of the first daughter of his hearth. Talia was placed in his arms only seconds after birth and even if he could not see her, he knew that he would do anything for her. Now as she hugged him he could think of no greater pleasure between a man and a child.

He looked on the family unit hating that all his plans had go to naught since Dosalia and her mates left the summer meeting and did not return until this year when it was held at Second Spring Cave. They had found Brancia’s body too soon and he was forced to stay low and not bring attention to himself. Now Trilon nor the other were ever alone that he could tell and there was no one left in which he could use to finish what he started. With the death of Tomasi from the wooly rhino they had tried to hunt before the summer meeting, Derlio was more likely than not to want him to leave the Plains Cave now that he was leader. Nothing he said had an effect on him even though he had full use of his hand again, his hunting skills had diminished but even that flaw did not allow him to gain a foot hold. He had acted too fast when he disposed of Brancia and regretted it now. Dosalia showed no sign of giving up the mine to anyone and with Trilon doing so well he had to wonder how they had managed. That he was able to judge flint even before the cortex was completely removed there had to be some trick to it and how was he carving?

Dosalia looked at Trilon holding her daughter and smiled. It had not been an easy two years and there had been several times Trilon had wanted to give up but between Kaunai and herself, they had not allowed him to wallow in his anger and sorrow for what was lost. She had been proud of the carving tools she had made for him from flint that curved enough to allow him some safety when using them but allowed his imagination the freedom to create such beautiful pieces. She loved the piece he carved of the Mother that was in its own niche in their home. The small oil filled bowl kept a light on it whenever they were present and made her feel as if the Mother truly blessed them. When turned forward it was an obvious representation of the Mother but when turned on either side it depicted either a snow leopard on a branch or a wolf hidden in a cave. The rear of the etching was that of a flock of white birds taking flight, each perfect in their rendition. Taller than most Duna carving it made her feel the Mother presence whenever she looked at it. Trilon took the job of lighting the oiled wick and each time he did he turned the carving. When she had become so large and could not work in the mine, Kaunai took Trilon to the mine until he was so comfortable within the dark cave that he could go to any wall and remove already exposed flint nodules or dig softly to expose others. The only down side was that he was unable to move the debris pass the entrance but Kaunai had eliminated that problem by disposing of the debris before leading Trilon back to the cave.

She was so proud of the two men who were her mates for they worked well together now as a unit and she wondered if they would have done so well if Trilon had not been blinded. Fear had nearly blinded her when Kaunai had first taken Trilon out to hunt, but the radiating happiness

when he returned successful was such that she could not deny him this pleasure no matter her own fears. That the blindness no longer mattered to either she knew because of their love for her and her daughter and could not wait for this new child to be born into this loving unit.

Catching the movement out of the corner of her eye she saw Retchen move away from the crowd that had gathered around them. Remembering Kaunai telling her of Stelo's last words to Netdi, she wondered anew if Retchen was responsible for Brancia's attack and death. She had no proof of her suspicion but she still had to wonder. Looking back at Trilon she noticed that Derlio was approaching and nearly groaned aloud. They had not seen each other since she and her mates left the summer meeting after Trilon's injury and did not want to return until Trilon was comfortable being with people. She and Kaunai had quickly gotten used to the sight of the empty eye socket that eventually healed over with deep scarring but it was obvious that the eye no longer existed. Since they did not react or talk about how he looked eventually Trilon forgot about it as well. Now the comments of other did not seem to faze him as he was enjoying showing off his skills and the crowd that surrounded him seemed pleased to see that he was still a valuable member of the Losadunai.

"Trilon, Dosalia, Kaunai." Derlio nodded to each as he addressed them. "I would like to talk with all of you but we need to be away from the summer meeting area. I know you have no reason to trust me so I ask that you bring whoever you want so that you will feel safe." Dosalia nodded and watched him walk away and turned to her mates.

"Well?"

"I do not like this at all Dosalia, especially since he knows Trilon is blind and though he is accurate with the sling when he can hear his target there is no advantage here."

"He said we could bring who ever would make us feel safe and perhaps it would be a good thing to ask Kirloni and Flinon since they will both be the next Losaduna and Leader of Hot Spring cave and both are good hunters."

"If they agree where would you want to meet?" Trilon asked

"Why in the tent of the Losaduni or leaders of course." She saw the smile on both men's faces and Kaunai left to ask if the two men would be able to join them.

Derlio was surprised by the two men that accompanied Dosalia and her mates, he had thought she would have brought at least her current leader and her Losaduna and perhaps a few others but he was pleased that she felt he was not so large of a threat that she needed many to protect herself. He sat on a log across from her and looked her in the eye so that there would be no confusion and no misunderstanding between them. "There is really two reasons I wanted to meet with you and your mates but after Stelo's mother's attack I could not approach you to give you my apologies for all that I did to you. As much as I wanted to blame you for all that happened to me, it was seeing Stelo make such a dramatic turn that convinced me that I have

been so stupid. Did you know that this all started with a contest to see which of the three of us could get you to agree to being promised? There was never talk of mating only of getting you to promise to one of us. I want to tell you it was all in fun but it wasn't not after Retchen became involved."

"You know how we were both raised and when Retchen paid attention to us it was as if we finally had the father figure we both craved. Tomasi always blamed others even before the problem with Charoli and he never changed and I saw him as being weak and to me at the time Retchen seemed more decisive and stronger. When he learned of our little contest he started telling us about the mine and how it would bring us so much status that we could take control of Hot Spring Cave. Never did he let up in pressing us to get you to accept one of us, but you would have nothing to do with us. When Marcum decided that he was done, Retchen turned us against him, telling us he was weak and not worth our time and sadly we fell for that as well. Soon the friendly competition became all too real when you announced you had promised to two men. It was Retchen's idea to steal you away from the summer meeting and convince you that you could not handle the mine alone being a woman and needed a strong man or men to help you. We were to keep you separated until you agreed to break your promise and mate with us instead. "

"There are not enough words to tell you how stupid I have felt, how disgusted with myself I have been. Truly Dosalia I had never planned to injure you the way I had and you and your mother had every right to call for my blood. I am telling you all this because I think that Retchen was behind Brancia's attack and I would not be surprised that he killed her himself in order to hide what he did. Now that I am the leader of Plains Cave, he is my responsibility and I want you to know that I take that seriously. I have already told him to stay away from the three of you or he will be out in the cold for I have already told the other leaders my suspicions. If I had proof then I would have brought him before the leaders but I have nothing. I have two of my hunters watching his every move and telling me what he is doing. Because of his good looks there are several women in the Plains Cave and Second Spring Cave that would do his bidding should he ask and I had already told Netdi who they are, but you need to be careful of them as well."

"Vonlia moved to Plains cave last summer just to be near him. She has not been accepted into the cave for she had made many very unhappy at her condemnations of everyone's work. I have asked her to leave and from what I understand, Netdi has denied her a place at Second Spring Cave for her attack on Madenia. She will understand shortly that Retchen does not care about her as long as he is comfortable. Retchen will not attack unless he feels he cannot lose or he feels he is stronger than the other person. Now that I know this I cannot believe I followed him so blindly. "

Dosalia was stunned by all Derlio had told them and she felt relief and fear at the same time and could not tell which was stronger. "Thank you Derlio for coming to us and telling us your thoughts. I know it was not an easy thing to do with all that has happened."

Derlio looked at the blind man wishing that his own actions had not precipitated this man losing his sight. "If there is anything that I can do for the three of you, all you need do is to ask and I will find a way to help you."

Trilon faced the river, and this he knew by the sound of the rushing water and the spray that hit his face. The water was flowing swiftly and he knew only a short distance away was a ravine that the water tumbled into in the form of a waterfall. Being so early in the summer all the rivers were full and dangerous and this one was no different. He wanted to bend down and scratch his legs but he knew better than to move.

“Well, look what we have here.” Retchen’s voice seemed almost gleeful as he approached Trilon from the rear but Trilon remain standing exactly where he was. “It might be my lucky day, too bad it looks like it will be your unlucky day, the Mother surely is not smiling on you this night. I cannot believe that Dosalia would allow you out of her sight for even a moment, but no matter I will comfort her on her loss and perhaps the other whelp will end up having a tragic accident as well.”

Trilon felt the hands on him but he spun quickly and grabbed the front of Retchen’s tunic and fell backwards into the raging water. Holding onto the man as hard as he could he waited for the water to throw him back to the surface and even with Retchen holding onto him for dear life, when they broke the surface, Trilon holding Retchen’s collar, plowed his fist into the man’s face feeling the satisfactory crunch of his nose beneath his fist. The water pulled them under again and Trilon fought to stay below the water until Retchen finally released him and only then did he swim back to the surface.

When he broke the surface he could feel the pull opposite to the pull of the water and then the scream as Retchen was thrown over the cliff. He relaxed he body and allowed it to be pulled against the current until he felt hands grabbing his legs and pulling him onto the shore and finally he sat, wet, exhausted but pleased. “Anyone around?”

“Not that I saw, I am not sure who will be sorry when he is found in the morning.” Kaunai could not keep the laughter out of his voice.

“Seems a fitting end considering what he may have done to Brancia. How long did Kirloni say that Dosalia would sleep?”

“We better hurry back. It took some time for Retchen to gather his nerve to attack a blind man in the back.”

“Hopefully Derlio won’t think that his words gave us this idea.”

“What are you talking about? I saw that you had fallen into the river and pulled you out. Never saw anyone else.”

Both men laughed as they headed back to the summer meeting area, neither of them saw the two smiling hunters who turned and followed them but broke off and headed for the tent of Derlio before reaching the main camp.