

The Clan

(parts 1 & 2)

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Fan Fiction for the Auel Board

Chapter 1

The heat of the day was on them but no one moved. Buzzing and biting fly opened wounds and caused unbearable pain and itching, still they did not move. Below them a herd of red deer meandered through the lush mountain valley trying to escape the heat of the plains. On this one hunt alone four were using the spear thrower and the rest now experts with the throwing spear could take enough animals to last the entire winter with what was already in storage. Above the cave was a deep storage area that was easily accessible even in the worst winters for it was dug in a small cave and the men kept the path cleared for the women, it was already nearly filled with various meats and those items such as grains and certain fruits and nuts to add to their diet. Still there was dried meat they would use as necessary but the frozen meat produced the oils so needed in the winter and early spring when the animals of the steppes were so lean. Looking to his side, Junko was as still and steady as the clan men he hunted with and Durc was proud of him. This spring he was again in the company of the Elk Camp leader's son Trunoi. Because Trunoi was not a hunter of the clan and from what Durc could see he made no effort to learn their ways, he would never hunt with the clan and still remained in camp. Junko had arrived in spring and the news he brought was welcomed and troubling.

Danug had returned home from his journey for which Durc was thankful, but he was not alone. In his company was the sister of the mate Ayla who had traveled to the west with Ayla. Unconsciously he touched his amulet with the small flint oval that was sent by his mother's mate along with the best spear tips he had ever seen. With it was the piece of amber sent by his mother along with the knowledge of her continued love and pride in him and his accomplishments. The news that he had at least one sibling, a female child, and that his mother by now would have another child was precious knowledge along with the love and sorrow she still had of leaving him. Uba was thrilled at the news that Ayla knew that to the clan she was no longer dead but more importantly she would not take Durc from the life he knew. To Uba Ayla sent a package in a red dyed bag with instructions that neither Junko, nor any other of the men understood but Uba seemed to know exactly what the meaning was.

The animals stopped at a particularly succulent area where the green grass was hid their lower bodies but that same grass also hid the danger of the hunters that stalked them. Moving forward, Durc stood with his spear thrower making sure he was also in range of the men with the throwing spear. Throwing his spear he did not see it land as he touched his cheek knowing he felt something touch him lightly almost like a caress. Looking about the men were already moving down the hill where seven animals lay dead. It was a good hunt and already the women were coming from their hiding place to complete the butcher of the animals. Only Uba was missing from the group of women. Behind in the cave Vorn was ill and Uba was worried more than Vorn's symptoms seemed to warrant which worried Durc as well.

Durc watched what was happening around him but his thought turned toward the cave. He was not ready to be leader of the Clan especially now when the Clan gathering would take place the following summer. Though this day was hot, the nights were already freezing water and winter would soon isolate their cave from the rest of the world and there were so many decisions to be made. Goov still taught Sag to one day take his place just as Vorn spent time with not only him but Brac as well. Since Droog's death, Grev had taken over as tool maker for the clan and was

now teaching Brac's son Rold though Durc was sure when his own son Bloc grew older he would pass his knowledge onto him. The arrival of the spear points from Ayla's mate brought Grev so much pleasure as he tried to match the technique but without the teacher it was difficult but Durc knew he enjoyed the challenge. Their Clan had grown so much under Vorn's leadership that he was sought after by other clans wanting his advice though their visits were always couched in the excuse of a hunt, still Vorn never allowed them to be less than respectful of any who visited. He wasn't ready, that he allowed his mind to wander in the middle of a hunt proof of that. Vorn had to survive until after the Clan Gathering, he had to survive.

Loug stood next to Durc awaiting his attention for he could see the hunt leader was troubled and did not want to add to that concern. Durc's adoption of him as a son and teaching him the new hunting methods of this clan had given him a pride he had never known in his previous clan. Soon he would mate with Iza since he had proven he could provide for her and any children she had. It had taken him a long time to fight the over whining pride that he did not deserve, but Durc's methods of training did not allow one to feel pride they did not deserve. He was hoping with the kill he made this time, Durc would finally begin to teach him the weapon he used. Loug knew that only those who had learned to make the weapon would be allowed to train with it and his was now complete. Grev had made him a tool that allowed him to make the fine cuts needed to make the weapon. It was only after he was given the tool, which he had to describe to Grev, that he learned that the tool was never to be given to others who were still learning to make the weapon. They had to learn what was needed. Loug was happy that he had seen Durc use the tool to make a small version of the weapon for his mate's son Agal.

Durc looked at the young man standing at his side and knew he would soon ask Vorn to allow the mating between Loug and Iza. He had learned well and now knew where he fit within the clan. His over bearing manner when he first arrived had all but disappeared only occasionally did he try to make himself more important than he really was. He had become a good hunter and Grev already told him he had asked for the tool. Durc knew that some of the men would never understand how to make the weapon but it pleased him the Loug had figured it out. He had never hidden while he made Spear throwers so that the other men could see how it was done but only a few figured out that they needed a special tool. It took a while for Durc to convince Junko that this had to be the way otherwise the men would use the weapon and when it broke or was damaged he would not be able to replace it, now the Clan was assured that the next generation could make the weapon and would be there to teach others.

As they made their way back to the cave, he was filled once again with a sense of pride and of belonging. This was where he belonged and as much as he missed that golden woman in his dreams, he was glad that she had been forced to leave him with the clan even despite the terrible years of Broud. Agal, Ura's first son was so much taller than the age-mate boys he played with and was also often the leader as they used their smaller spears and practiced in throwing. Ura's youngest son Ruj, though still very young followed his brother as well as he could. The women carried what meat and hides they could while the men brought the rest on the travois. Immediately there was a flurry of activity as some of the women continued up the hill to the storage area while the remaining women processed what was left for drying and to cook that evening. So many tasks and he was at ease with his life among the clan and saw no reason to return to the land of the others though he would like to see Danug again.

Chapter 2

Durc sat next to Vorn as he gave the account of the hunt. Ura looked at her adopted son and knew that he and the other men had no idea that Vorn was ill, so much so that though he had no severe symptoms he would soon be in pain and that she could do nothing to stop the disease. All she could do when he truly became sick was to make him as comfortable as he could be. She had seen the blood in his stools. The teas made with agrimony and alfalfa would control it for a while but there would come a time even her medicines would not work. Vorn had even demanded that she not tell Goov of the problem and she was forced to comply. For now the medicine that Ayla had sent to her was a blessing from Ursus for she had not been able to find the Mogur Root in their new area and all she had remaining was the single root for the next gathering. As they traveled to the next gathering she would still need to get Vorn to allow her and Iza to search for the root even though Ayla not only sent two roots to her, she had also sent a medicine that while similar to the root the yellow liquid acted more like Datura. She had tested it on herself and knew it would take very little for the effects were strong. The yellow fruit and the instruction she gave to make more pleased her and she wanted to see if the plants that produced the roots here also produced the fruit for then she would have another medicine to treat those in pain.

Vorn looked at the adopted son of his mate and knew that he would be leaving the clan in good hands. The fact that Durc did not want the leadership would make him a good leader for he would think well before making a decision, but he already knew that Durc was capable of making quick decisive decision especially if there was need. As his second in command he was often in charge of the hunters that were being trained and those already hunters. The boy Loug, who arrived puffed up with his own importance, had made great improvements and Vorn knew Durc was right that he should mate him with Iza before winter. Uba's daughter already treated most of the wounds the hunters got as they hunted, trained or practiced their particular skills. As the next medicine woman of the clan it was time for her to mate and produce the medicine woman that would follow her as much as he would hate to lose her from his hearth. As usual, Eyla, Ura's daughter shadowed Iza in whatever she did.

From the time she could walk the older girl took the child on their forays to collect plants and food for the clan. She had patiently taught the child what they collected and why and all their uses. That the child seemed to pick it up quickly made Vorn wonder if perhaps the Others passed their knowledge as did the Clan for it was obvious that Eyla was of Ayla's line. She was a golden child having lost all the hair she was born with to have it return golden darker than Ayla's but similar enough that it was obvious. Not as ugly as Ayla had been, Vorn did not think he would have a problem finding a mate for her and if she had the training of a medicine woman she would even be a greater asset.

"Vorn, we still need to go to the sea one last time before winter. We need salt to send back with Trun when he leaves in the spring. Junko still wants to try and talk with the other clans at the gathering even though we both have told him that they will probably reject him."

"They might not reject him once Grev shows the spear points."

“What about the spear throwers?”

“No. That we will keep we will need it later. Tell Junko that he will not give others this weapon or he will lose our friendship.”

“I will tell him.”

Junko tried to get Trunoi to at least be able to use the throwing spear for before Ayla and Jondalar came to the Mamutoi it was the weapon they used though the clan version was heavier. The man refused to defend himself and he was going to be at risk when he returned to the Mamutoi. “Do you understand you fool that you will be alone on the steppes. You will be killed if you cannot defend yourself and get food for yourself.”

“Why must I go alone? We have always traveled together.”

“I am going with the clan to the next clan gathering to see if we can expand beyond this clan. You are returning to Elk camp with the trade goods ALONE!”

“I cannot go alone!”

“Well you will have to because I am not going with you.”

“Mother said I was to go with you to help protect you for she wanted no one to travel alone.”

“Brecie wanted me to teach you to trade with the clan. Do you know they consider you a child? You have no hunting abilities that I can see and they believe that a man is not a man until he makes a kill by himself.”

“I hate hunting. I never had hunted even with the group. My mother’s mate took me one time and I was sick from the experience and I do not wish to repeat it.”

Then I suggest you stay here until I return.”

“Why am I not going with you to this gathering?”

“Because you have learned nothing since I have been bringing you to the clan. This is a very important meeting and you will not interfere. When I return to Elk Camp I will make sure Brecie knows that you can stay with the Mamutoi for I will not bring you back to the clan.”

“She will never allow it and you cannot leave me here alone.”

“Those are your only choices Trunoi, learn to hunt and defend yourself or stay here until we return. Those are your only choices.”

Chapter 3

Durc shook his head as he watched the man Trunoi miss again. At least he could hit a stationary target with the sling but the spear seemed beyond him. Knowing that Junko worked on the man's strength daily, Durc could not understand why he could not throw the spear to the target. It was already the middle of winter and he had seen no improvement in his case. Ura's son Agal was better able to defend himself than this man. "Junko he is not improving. He does not care."

"Durc, he fears hunting."

Durc looked at his friend as if he had lost his mind. What man fears hunting? "How can he fear hunting?"

"He got sick when he was taken when he was very young and now fears it."

"He makes others care for him. He does not contribute. This cannot be. You must let me train him as I trained you and he cannot come to you for help."

"I will tell him, but Durc it is winter, what will you hunt?"

"Giant deer are still on hills of valley and seiga are in the woods, there are things to hunt even in the winter. There is always rabbit, but more important there are wolves, lynx, hyena that are hungry. These are lessons he needs to learn he cannot stay when we leave he is considered a child."

"You have my permission to train him like you want. I will not interfere."

Durc nodded and left to allow Junko to tell the man of the others that he will learn the clan way.

The wind was bitter but it was a clear day, the second that they had been traveling from the cave although unknown to the man he traveled with they had been going in ever widening circles so that they were never far from the cave itself. The constant up and down the hills would increase the man's strength for Durc could still hear his breath even though they had been going down hill most of the morning. Durc was determined that this time Trunoi would make a kill or he would starve until they returned to the cave. Twice Durc had continued on ignoring his complaints because they were not in clan language and because he was acting like a child and poor performing children were ignored. Durc knew of Trunoi's complaints to Junko and was pleased when Junko told the man that he was under the hunt leaders training and there was nothing he could or would do for him. He had sulked and refused to train so the entire cave ignored him and no one fed him. When he had tried to sever himself Durc had stopped him and told him that the women knew their jobs and that unless he contributed to the meal he could not partake of the food. Trunoi had paid more attention to practice lessons but was still unable to use the spear and Durc was unsure he could overcome that early fear. It did not matter for Trunoi carried only his sling and knew if he did not make a kill there would be no food to eat this night as well.

Durc had the luxury of having Ura make his pack which included traveling food and dried meat. He had no intention of sharing for hunger was a great motivator and he was determined that this man would learn if it killed him and at the moment Durc was unsure which he preferred. Durc stopped when he saw the movement and waited to see if the man of the others had finally learned his lesson. When Trunoi stopped and looked toward the shrub Durc held his breath as they both removed their slings and put stone in them. Durc would not fire until the man of the other did so, still the thought of fresh rabbit was tempting to take the shot and not worry about the man with him, but he knew he could not. It was now his responsibility to train him. He watched as he used everything he had learned and finally put it to use when the rabbit moved the stone stopped it before it could make another step. The whoop from the man echoed in the woods and Durc looked up at the fresh snow that had fallen before they had left the cave. Although some powdered snow fell from the edges of the rim it would not take much for it to break loose and fall. Turning to the man who was staring at him with a big grin on his face. Using only clan language he reprimanded him for the noise.

“Look above you. Loud noise will make snow fall and you would be dead but worse you endanger me and if I die you endanger my family. You made a kill good, but not great, it is the duty of a man to provide for his family and himself, now get the rabbit we will return to the cave.” Durc turned from him but continued to keep an eye on the snow.

Under his breath Trunoi cursed Durc lack of acceptance to what he had done not even giving him time to gut the rabbit. Putting the rabbit in his belt he followed the clan man but after while began to look at the overhanging snow that seemed to worry Durc. Fear began to gnaw at him as he thought of the tales of avalanches he had heard where the victim were not found until the following spring and usually only after predators and scavengers had found the body first. Seeing the wisps of snow that fell from the edges as they moved through the area he moved closer to Durc and also began to watch the snow until they were well away from the area.

“Durc, this man would apologize” He had to say the word apologize for he did not know a clan word to match.

Seeing his confusion Durc relented. “There is no word. A man does not apologize, a man learns from his mistakes and does not make it a second time that is all I have asked of you.”

Trunoi thought about Durc’s words and realized he was right. The Clan’s second in command, the son of Ayla had only asked him to better himself but he had made the same mistakes over and over for he could not get the images of the blood and entrails that was bad enough until the man of his hearth wiped the blood from the animal across his face and he could actually smell the death of the animal. The Clan gained nothing by his ability to hunt or not to hunt, they gained nothing if he survived the trip back to Elk Camp and lost nothing should he die. All Durc and the rest of the hunters including Junko had done was to make him learn to support Elk Camp and protect himself. He had been spoiled and he knew it, his mother had groomed him to be the next leader but how could he possibly make decision if he did not know how to hunt, or what went into planning a hunt. All thoughts of his hunger fled with his thoughts as did his anger except that directed at himself. He had railed at his Mother for sending him with Junko for he was of the opinion that the flatheads would not possibly teach him anything of any value. When

they had returned to Elk Camp last fall he had accepted the accolades of a job well done for he thought at the time for his treatment by the clan members he deserved it, but all he deserved was Junko's animosity which the man never showed.

"You are a stupid man Trun." Durc heard the man talking to himself and if he had not spent time with the Mamutoi he would have thought the man deranged. Perhaps he was finally learning, but he would wait and take him out when another break in the weather came. Right now he could feel the difference in the air and his surroundings. Trunoi had been lucky to get the rabbit for most animals were looking for some place to hide from the coming storm.

Goov saw that both Durc and the man of the others who acted like a child were in deep thought but Durc's anger was obvious and Goov did not understand his patience with the stupid man. Still it allowed Durc to develop the skills he would need as a leader so he had not interfered and was surprised when Durc came to him. "Goov, the man of the others Trun, has a fear of hunting and he seems not to be able to learn how to protect himself. I have a need to help him but do not know how. Junk has said that his mother's mate took him at a very young age but does not know what happened but the boy never went hunting after that time. Did he do something on that hunt that the spirits would take his ability to hunt?"

"I will ask the spirits for you Durc but not for the man for I see no use in him." Durc looked back at the pensive Trunoi and saw that the rabbit was still in his belt. Going to him he told him to take the rabbit to Ura.

Chapter 4

Junko was amazed in the change in Trunoi when he returned to the cave with Durc, even though all he got was a young rabbit, it was something and when he went to the hearth assigned to them, Durc had to remind him of the rabbit he still carried in his belt. Taking the rabbit to Ura who waited until the strange man placed it on the ground before touching it, looked at Durc for guidance and was told to fix it for the men of the others and themselves. Durc could see that his mate was having trouble controlling her mirth though as a good clan woman she would never embarrass a man in such a manner.

Going to the hearth, Junko sat quietly waiting for Trunoi to tell him what happened. "I have been a fool and even though I know you have told me this over and over I did not see it. I have such a short time to learn all you and Durc have been trying to teach me, so much wasted time."

"I am glad you are finally seeing the light. The clan was beginning to think that you were very stupid and could not learn. What happened?"

"I killed a rabbit and whoop like an idiot not knowing what was going on around me and put us both in danger from an avalanche. I tried to apologize and Durc only said a man does not need to apologize if he learns from his mistakes. I have not learned a thing since I have been coming here. I have to go. I want to be perfect with my sling."

Junko worried when the mogul called Trunoi to him for the he had never even approached him previously but seeing that Durc was with him, he wondered what was going on but knew better than to ask but he would make sure Trunoi told him in case it weakened their relationship with the clan.

“Trun, Durc has asked that I look to the spirits for help for him. This I have done. Your Totem, the boar, is ashamed. You have the power to please you totem but you will not release what happened in the past. It is over, it has nothing to do with your life now. You horde it like a fur close to you and you totem cannot help you so you act like your totem and stay with what you know but it is the wrong thing that you keep doing. You will stay with me and you will see your totem and that which you fear but do not fear.”

For the next weeks after meeting with the mogul, Trunoi was good to his word working with the sling and the spear thrower both until he could always hit the target. Asking Junko how to ask for a thick mat from the women, Ura provided him which what he wanted but the men of the clan watched unsure of what he was trying to accomplish as he hung the folded mat from a leather thong that was attached to one of the stalactite that hung from the roof of the cave. When it was ready and he pushed the mat so that it moved back and forth the clan men continued to watch as the man Trunoi tried to hit the moving object with the stones from his sling and the practice spears from his spear thrower. Watching as the man many thought more child than man as he attempted to hit the moving object were surprised on how quickly he picked up on the moving object and hit it. He did not fare as well with the spear thrower but they silently gave him credit for trying.

“You have made a difference.” Vorn’s statement was not a praise but an observation and Durc took it as such. “

“I started it but he has done the work and is now accepting of other’s advice. He will be able to survive to reach his home in the spring and that will allow Junko to travel with us.”

“He will not be accepted into the camp of the clan gathering.”

“He knows this and Ura has made him a tent that will stand to the summer storms that happen at Klug’s clan.”

“You will meet leaders when we arrive.”

“Many will have changed. Norg was old at the last gathering as was Sar.”

“The leaders will not accept you decision.”

“They do not have to. This is my clan, they can only determine status and they can put us last again. Our hunters will put us first. Grev will talk of the red deer hunt when we brought back many animals that most clans cannot think so many can be taken. You will win with the sling and the bolo, Brac will win at wrestling, and Atta has only gotten faster. Goov will be first among the mogurs for they do not care about status only power and he has become stronger since

the Death Curse. Many think Creb works through him, this may be so he has not said. Uba is still first among medicine women as Iza will be. Ura is the best basket maker so Uba says and the rest of the women will do well. Loug also wants to race it will be up to you if we allow him but he has done well and many of Set's clan will be impressed for he was badly trained. He also tells stories well. He would like to tell of the bison hunt when we allowed him to be a man. It would be a good story and it would show that we know when a man is trained correctly and how to train hunters with your throwing spear."

"It will be as you wish Vorn and I will stand at your side no matter their decision."

"That is good. The hunters will also stand at your side as well, remember that. This is your clan. You may be deformed but you are not a cripple. That is the difference." Both men turned to Goov as he approached and Durc was glad that he was also on his side for he could convince the mogurs.

Chapter 5

They watched Trunoi make his way north towards Elk camp and his home, Junko had a wish to be both places for to talk with the clans was not a guarantee but he had to try, yet he missed his mate and wondered if she had a daughter or a son now. Also he was proud of Trunoi for he now was wearing the tattoo of a hunter of the clan and the boar was his totem for as Goov explained a boar was relentless when they wanted something and Trunoi had proven in both extremes that he was tenacious. That he had killed a large boar for his kill fit the picture of the clan totem choosing the man of the others so that the clan would know. Dressed as the rest of the hunters of the clan, Junko turned with the clan without a backward look as they began their way east, a trip he knew it would be a long since it would take them to the furthest known clan to the east.

As with all travel with the clan, traveling food and dried meat was the staple but occasionally they would stop for fresh meat. The women carried most of the family's belongings even Uba who also carried her medicines which had to be more extensive than any other medicine woman at the gathering. Although Vorn had not been happy, he agreed before they left to stop near their previous cave but the women would not be allowed in the valley which Uba assured Vorn she would not need to go but to a small area to the east where the medicine woman Iza showed her where to collect special medicines. Since only he knew she needed to collect the Mogur root, Goov was in full agreement that the stop was required, but he allowed no hunters to accompany her for it was medicine woman's knowledge to have and no one else's.

Uba was uncomfortable being alone near the place where three death curses had been called and although the one on Ayla had been temporary and the second fail, still from the tales told of that time with Broud, Uba wanted nothing that she did to incur the wrath of the spirits that Goov was required to call for the death curse. As she slipped into the cool dark small spring area, she immediately found the plant she needed but instead of pulling it quickly and leaving she looked around and saw a larger plant did in fact have fruit which she quickly collected along with several of the small plants for their roots. Once she had what she came for Uba did not stay but returned quickly to the clan. The fruit would once again prove she was first among the medicine women which would mean that Iza after her would also be first all she needed was an

opportunity to use it. Looking at her daughter she knew that during the clan gathering she would deliver her first child and if that was a daughter then their line was assured, still she would continue to teach Eyla for the child of Ayla's line seemed to pick up the healing knowledge as if she had been born to her own line.

Vorn waited only until Uba returned before continuing their journey for he did not want to stay in the area for there was too much fear in the women and he would also protect them from any lingering spirits that might be in the area and since it was easy traveling they would be just that much closer to their destination. The hunters that had gone to the old cave to place the death curse on Broud were also nervous though they tried not to show their unease. When they were finally allowed to stop for the night the women quickly made a meal for all, but Uba separated herself just a little distance with Iza and Eyla though they remained within the light of the fires. Showing both girls how the root was treated and placed in the pouch so that it would dry properly, she also taught them about the fruit of the plant as Ayla had told it was to be prepared. This not only was not something for men to see, it had to be hidden from other women as well for the root could be as evil as it could be good for the mogurs. Still it was new and as she had to go over the instruction again and again until she knew them well, she would have to do the same for her daughter and Ura's daughter.

As the group traveled Vorn moved among the hunters which allowed him to talk with Goov and assure himself that when they arrived they would be of a single mind. Soon they would stop for he had asked Goov to intercede with the spirit to make sure he was making the right decision. All the hunters needed that assurance and it would be a time for all the hunters to ask their questions and make whatever statements they needed to express.

Chapter 6

As with each time before when all the men were involved in the ceremony of clan men they each saw their totems in the spirit world among the totem of the rest of their clan. There was no animosity between the spirit totems for they all had the same intent the protection of the hunters. As the group traveled the steppes as they lived their lives in the spirit world seeing scenes that their totems thought were of importance, as they neared their new cave the grey wolf moved to the front of the group where the lynx had been walking with Ursus. Together they moved until only the grey wolf remained with Ursus and among the group a snow leopard appeared.

All the hunters drank water to ease the thirst that occurred when ever they entered the spirit world. Usually after a spirit journey they disbanded to think on what each had seen, this time it was different for Goov told them that the spirits would be asked about Vorn's decision to make Durc leader after him. Goov handed traveling cakes high in fat to each of the hunters to make sure that their minds were completely with the rest of the group. When he was sure that all the hunters were ready he nodded to Vorn who remained sitting for the traveling food did not agree with him and the pain in his stomach was not something he wanted to show.

“The mogur asked the spirit of Ursus if I had made the right decision. Durc is the son of my mate though adopted and he is deformed. I trust Durc to be a good leader and I stand by my decision. We must be one when we arrive at the clan gathering.”

Grev stood “I would speak.”

“Grev may speak.”

“I have not always thought it was a good decision to have a deformed man be leader after Vorn. This clan has changed because of Ayla, because of the hunter Junko who was not allowed to join us though he is a hunter of the clan, he is not clan. Durc is a good second in command and good hunt leader. I will follow Durc as leader.” When Grev sat Brac stood.

“I would speak.”

“Brac may speak.”

“I was told from the time I can remember that I was to be leader after Broud. Broud was a bad leader and the hunters followed Vorn as leader still Broud said I would be leader. Broud never taught me to be leader. Vorn teaches me how to lead now but I am not a leader. Vorn has been a good leader and Durc has learned from him. I will follow Durc as leader.”

When Sag stood Vorn waved the usual formalities. “I have been in two clans. I was born to Norg’s clan and became a man in Vorn’s clan. I became a man because a boy taught me to use a weapon he developed and helped me to be strong after the medicine woman Uba healed me. I will be mogur after Goov, that is how I am trained. Durc will be leader after Vorn for that was how he was trained. It is in Durc to be leader. Durc is deformed but he is not crippled there for we do not go against our memories or the memories of the clan. I will follow Durc as leader.”

When Loug stood he looked directly at Durc. “When I came from the clan of Set, I was told I was a man for I had made my kill. Durc refused to see me as a man of the clan and called me a child. Durc showed me that I was a child then trained me to be a man. I am a man because Durc showed me what a man of the clan should be. I will follow Durc.”

As Loug sat Crug stood. “I am older than most of the hunters yet I follow Durc for this clan does not have to worry about hunger in the winter or early spring when animals are thin and meat is not so good. I know from other clans this is not so most of the time. The hunters of the clan return with one animal if lucky two. With the throwing spear we can get more animals and the hunters do not need to leave the women unprotected as often. Vorn found our cave, Durc will keep the cave safe. I will follow Durc.”

Vorn looked at Atta who had yet to stand and wondered if he had a problem with Durc being leader not that it would matter with all the rest of the rest of the hunters backing Durc, but then Atta was a thinker and Goov at one time thought to make him a acolyte until Sag came to the clan. When he finally stood Vorn could not tell what his thought were.

“Vorn I would speak.”

“Atta may speak.”

“This clan is not like other clans. We are different. We use different weapons. All the hunters can use the bolo and the sling as well as Durc’s throwing spear and some even his spear thrower. To bring our kills back to the cave we use Durc’s drag. We now have many children because Vorn has made it so others, young boys could come to this clan. There is no hunger with this clan, no fighting since the man Broud is gone. We follow the clan way yet we are different from other clans. When Vorn was leader and not Broud, the leaders of the clan made this clan of lowest status. Yet this clan always has hunters chosen for the bear ceremony. Last time two were chosen which is not known in the clan. It was the mogurs who made the decision right with the leaders for only the best could be chosen. When we get to the clan gathering they will make us lowest status again for Vorn’s choice. We are a strong clan and we will leave with the most status, it can be no other way. The hunters of Vorn’s clan accept these differences, the leaders will not. I do not care what the leaders of other clans have to say, I will stand with Durc as leader of this clan.”

When Atta sat the rest of the hunters nodded and Vorn knew that the rest did not need to speak.

Chapter 7

When they arrived in the deep wide valley that Klug and his clan made their home. Vorn was pleased to see that they arrived early for only Norg’s clan was in evidence. Being met by Klug, Vorn introduced Durc as his second and hunt leader. Though the leader made no comment that he was surprised was evident. “You have a man of the others with you Vorn.”

“The man is Jun and has my respect. He trades with the clan for the mammoth hunters. He wants to talk to others about trading.”

“Broud is not with you?”

“No.” The single answer let Klug know that Broud was no longer living but he would not ask more.

“Neg’s clan is here.”

That Klug mentioned Norg’s mate’s son meant that Norg had given over leadership to another. Vorn tried to remember the son of Norg’s mate and knew he would be a good leader. “It is good that Neg is leader.” There was nothing against Norg only that he had chosen well.

“We are going to hunt, my mate will show you where your hearths will be. The man of the others Jun may use the cave next to the visitor’s cave for his use. It is small but he is just one.”

“We would like to hunt with Klug and show him a weapon made by Durc.”

Klug looked at the deformed man of Vorn's cave and although different looking he seemed to be a strong man and was very respectful in that he watched Vorn's moves at all times while still keeping an eye on the conversation. There were many of the clans coming that would not like this man who was deformed but Klug had watched him last gathering use the sling and the bolo with great expertise though he was not a hunter at the time and could not compete. Many thought that was the only weapon he could use but now Vorn said he had a new one. Looking at the spears that the hunters of Vorn's clan carried, they seemed to light to be of any use still he nodded to Vorn's request.

"I will stay and talk with Norg, Durc is my hunt leader and will lead my hunters." Klug nodded wondering how Neg and his hunters would react but he was host and leader it would be as he says.

When the three clans gathered Klug did not want too many with him since they would not be taking any of the women so he allowed those leading the hunters to choose five of their hunters. Durc chose Brac, Grev, Atta and Loug to join him since they were the best with the throwing spear. Klug informed Neg that Durc and his hunters were to go first to show them a new weapon. Neg did not like the fact that the deformed man had been placed in a position of power over his hunters but did not press the issue but also did nothing to stop his hunters from tripping the deformed man and when the hunters from Vorn's clan surrounded him, his hunters and several from Klug's cave knew implicitly what they thought of his abilities. All the hunters of Vorn's clan were teased as to the thin weakness of their spears.

The hunters came upon the herd of roe deer late in the afternoon and since the animals looked healthy, Klug was going to pass them for the herd of bison in the distance but Durc stopped him.

"Klug, this man Durc would show the leader our weapons so we do not have to travel further and will be able to return to the gathering area before dark."

"The deformed man is scared of the dark."

"I would not want my mate to have to beg for food because I was foolish enough to travel after dark when there are cave lions in the area." Durc pointed to a shaded area between the deer and the bison and the man subsided.

"Durc, the deer are jumpy from the lions it will be difficult to get close."

"We will not have to get that close." Durc started toward the deer to the astonishment of the rest of the hunters as they watched the hunters with him follow. Since the grasses were high, they needed only to crouch so they were able to move swiftly into position. None of the hunters that remained could see Durc make any signal but knew he must have as the other hunters spread out and looked to Durc as he continued forward. The men of the clan shook their head when Durc and the men with him stood too far away to make a kill and watched as the deer leaped from the area spooking the bison as well. Now they would get neither.

Looking back to where the hunters were they lost track of Durc and those with him until the men were seen walking up the hill to the rest of the hunters each with a deer slung over his shoulder. Durc placed his in front of Klug and the rest followed suit. "The flying spear can travel farther and more animals can be taken in a hunt so there would be no need to hunt as often."

Klug examined each of the animals and saw that each animal had a single wound in the chest beside where the hunters had sliced the throats. There was plenty of game in his area but he could never take all of his hunters for there was also a large number of cave lions, bears and wolves in the area because of the presence of so much game that traveled little in the year. Reindeer were even known to stay in the area during the summer for there was cool air from a nearby glacier that they did not get over heated. With this spear they could get more animals and more hides so that everyone would have enough to keep warm in the winter. Since he had taken over for his mother's mate, he had tried to see that they all had everything they needed to survive often taking the hunters out often to make sure there was more than enough for winter something that was not done in the past.

Durc knew that Klug would never ask to see the spear so he held out the weapon that was totally new to the clan. Klug spent a long time examining Durc spear and noticed the different clan marking denoting the various animals and was concerned. "Your weapon is marked with spirit signs."

"Yes. Mogur Goov said that the marks of the animals the spear has killed should be on the spear so that the animals will know that even though it is not a clan spear it is accepted by the spirits or Ursus would not allow it to work. This spear has been used on all these animals with success. This is the first time it was used for roe deer and Mogur Goov will add it after we have sent the blood of the deer still remaining on the spear to Ursus."

Klug nodded satisfied that the Mogur who was first at the last clan gathering had investigated the spear so that Ursus would not turn from the clan should it be used.

Chapter 8

The following day saw the arrival of an additional three clan to the area with news that three others were close and would arrive the next day. Vorn was told by Klug that the leaders would meet the day after the last arrival before the sun reached its height. As the women were left to decide how to display their wares and gossip with the new arrivals, Vorn and his hunters went to look at the various area where the contest would be held. None of them reacted to the insults geared toward Durc, who ignored them or those against their clan for allowing a deformed child to live. For Durc, Goov had already informed him and Vorn of the talk within the ranks of the Mogurs that were not happy Goov had made the deformed man a hunter and now since he was, he must be given the same options to compete as the other hunters, but the Mogur from Klug's clan sided with Goov for if Goov had not made him a hunter as he deserved then the clan might incur the wrath of the spirits who obviously favored the deformed man Durc.

"With the weapon he uses and has taught others in his clan to use, the hunt that might have taken two animals for the fires of those already here brought back enough meat that when all the caves

arrive we will be able to have a feast. Five hunters from Vorn's clan left with the hunters and they are the only ones that came back with meat for no other hunter was close enough."

"Goov, we will not fight when the leaders make Vorn's cave lowest ranking for the hunter with them and the news Vorn will give the leaders. Vorn's hunters that you say many were trained by the deformed man will have to rise Vorn's status. The medicine woman Uba's has status and that cannot change. Yours status as the mogur has not changed despite your action in making the man Durc a hunter. There are none here as strong and many of us are young and new and will need you to teach us."

Uba walked with the other medicine women as they collected the roots and plants they needed to treat their hunters and others in their care for during the clan gathering there were often broken bones and other injuries that needed care. Although they collected together and exchanged ideas of what they knew each medicine woman collected special plants that they had in their memories that either they used alone or differently than the other women and these special uses were never shared for the other women would not understand their uses. Uba knew this was not so for she had the fruit from the plants she had collected that Ayla sent word of still she would not share this information for it along with the knowledge of the red root that she knew the other women did not have made her first among the medicine woman which would only help her mate.

Grev did not like the accusations that many of the younger hunters who like he had not been hunters at the last clan gathering made against not only Durc but at Vorn as well. That most of the hunters were of Set's clan he wondered if they knew how poorly they trained Loug was when he arrived, for the first time he wished there was a hunting competition so that all of Vorn's hunters would win including Durc.

He was startled when Brac came by and pulled him with him. "The Leaders are meeting and all our hunters are going to be close for they will try to make Loug leader after Vorn."

"How do you know this?"

"Loug has been going to each of the hunters and telling them. Set came to him said they knew what Vorn planned and it would not be allowed. There will be a competition I am sure of it. It is not Loug's wish."

Grev could see the rest of their hunters making their way slowly toward the area the leaders would meet. Usually the hunters practiced the skills they would later use and ignore the meeting though it was allowed for any hunter to attend they seldom bothered. There were others present besides those from Vorn's cave and Grev could see that most of those that attended were interested in what might happen. The appearance of Neg as leader did not please Grev but as leader he had a say in what might occur.

Brac looked at all those present and knew that only the tale that Vorn would make Durc his successor brought so much attention to the leader's meeting. When Vorn arrived as leader at the last clan gathering only the leaders then the mogurs attended with the rest of the hunter pursuing other things. He had still been a child at the last gathering still he knew that Broud wanted the

leadership and expected the other leaders to hold up his right to be the leader and not Vorn. They had not and from the conversation between Uba and Oga, though the women would not admit to knowing such things, only the backing of the mogurs had eased Vorn's acceptance. This was completely different and Vorn was right when he said only a complete show of loyalty and one mindedness would the leader know that they would follow the leader's choice and not their choice.

Chapter 9

Klug looked at the larger than normal crowd of hunters that were paying attention to what the leaders talked about. Most of the time these meeting were boring and thankfully short, now with the news of Vorn's decision spreading quicker than a fire on the steppes thanks to Neg, He wondered if he should start with something less abrasive but then knew it was better to get it out of the way. "Vorn you would speak?"

"Klug, I would speak." Vorn stood and to most he looked well and wondered why he had made his decision so soon. "When Ursus takes me, the son of my mate will follow me as is the way it should be."

"Vorn," Neg wanted the older leader to spell out exactly what he was saying. "Your mate has no son."

"Neg, it is obvious you talk little to your mogur. If a child is adopted by a woman, that child is hers. Is that not right Goov?" Vorn had seen the Mogurs approach from the corner of his vision though he did not move his gaze from the young leader.

"Vorn is correct if a woman adopts a child that child is her child." Goov made his signs sharp so that no one could possibly miss understand.

"Neg, what you want to know is that Durc, son of the woman Ayla, medicine woman of the clan as approved by the mogurs, adopted by Ura, mate to Vorn and clan leader who has chosen this son to follow him as leader." Vorn sat heavily and watched the shocked faces of those that had not heard. He could not see the hands of all but the younger leaders had lost all respect until Klug stood.

"If you would speak then you will ask to speak so all can know your words." Klug looked darkly at the young leaders that had shown they have no manners.

"I would speak Klug." Neg was first to stand and waited patiently until the host sat and motioned him to speak. "I will not accept a deformed man as a leader of Vorn's clan. It cannot be. This is known to all that deformed children should be returned to Ursus and not kept to put a burden on the clan. Vorn has the choice of not one but two of Broud's mate's sons to choose from without choosing a deformed man." Neg sat and Crum stood.

"My sibling Loug is mated to the true daughter of the leader Vorn's mate. She will be the clan medicine woman after Vorn's mate. Loug is not deformed, he is not crippled, Loug should be

leader after Vorn.” Crum sat and looked at his younger sibling expecting gratitude not the blank stare he received.

“I would speak.”

“Loug may speak this time, but this is a leader’s meeting Loug.”

“It is understood Klug. I am Loug second son of the mate of Set. Set gave me to the man Durc who was returning from a journey to the others. He was in the company of a man of the others Jun. I had made my first kill and this was told to Durc. When I went on a hunt with Durc, he said I was badly trained and not a hunter even if I had made my first kill. I was angry for I had killed and was a man. The leader Vorn was told this but he agreed with Durc, that I was not a hunter but a child for I was not trained correctly.”

Crum stood and faced Vorn, “You let a deformed man tell you my sibling was not a man, had been trained badly?”

“Crum, I am talking.” Unlike his brother, Loug’s movements showed no anger. When his brother finally sat down, Loug continued. “Durc asked that I be given to him to train, this also Vorn agreed to. Durc was right, I was a child with no manners because I was taught wrong. I did not know how to respect women who were mates to other hunters. I did not know how to follow a hunt leader’s directions. I did not know how to hunt as a member of a clan. I did not know how to protect the hunters with me, and I did not know how to protect the women and children. I was a child when I arrived at Vorn’s clan. Durc worked with me every day at first with the sling, then the bolo for these weapons have proven to Vorn to save lives. They are not only the weapons of old men. Durc then taught me to use the spear that flies. When I was good enough and had learned enough, only then did Durc take me on a hunt. I was allowed to choose the animal I was to hunt for becoming a man I deserved to know the spirit of the animal I had chosen. I chose an Auroch bull for it was large and Durc had made me confident that This I could accomplish. We did not have to chase the bull to tire him, I walked to him and threw the spear Durc had taught me to use. I became a true hunter of the clan that day for I had been trained correctly by Durc. I will not take the leadership after Vorn, I will follow Durc as a hunter.”

When Loug sat, Crum stood again angry that Vorn’s clan though so little of the clan he now led. “I would speak.” The leaders could see that he was angry and some agreed that he had the right to be some did not and knew that Loug spoke the truth for Crum had no manners.

“Crum may speak.”

“I was with my sibling when he made his first kill. Our leader Set placed Loug with Druf for training for he was our best hunter. Loug killed a seiga. Loug was a man when he went to the clan of Vorn. If he had returned to the Clan of Set he would have had his manhood ceremony and Vorn would have had to accept him as a man and hunter. Do we let others tell us if our men are men?”

Klug stood again and looked at Loug. “Loug tell us of your first kill.”

Loug was now ashamed of that first kill for it was not worthy of becoming a man. Durc and Vorn never asked but now they would know the truth of their words. “We were on our way to Vorn’s cave and our leader, my mother’s mate told me that I would have a kill on the way so that I would arrive at my new clan as a man. We were traveling fast and saw a seiga trapped by a log. That was my kill.”

The leaders did not look at Crum for although he told the truth he had held back that a child could have killed the seiga without a spear. “I would speak to Brac and Grev.” At Klug’s words both stepped forward. “Some of the leaders think that you should be chosen to follow Vorn. I would hear your words.”

Brac stepped into the circle of leaders but addressed Klug. “I was told since I was a child that I would be leader. It is not what I would want for I do not know how to lead. The mate to my mother was a bad leader that endangered the lives of the hunters and would not listen to the Mogur or to his second in command. He thought of himself not the future of the clan, the children. I was not trained to be leader and even now Vorn trains me but I will not be a good leader. I will follow Durc as leader.”

When Brac was finished Grev took his place. “The leaders of the clans here control their clans but they do not control Vorn’s clan. We are hunters, men. We will choose who to follow. No matter who you choose to accept, we do not have to follow them for we are men and hunters. We all chose to follow Durc after Vorn. Durc is deformed for all to see. Do any here doubt he is a man of the clan? He is strong and he taught us to hunt as one with a weapon he made. Durc does not think of himself, Durc thinks of the clan, all the clan including those not of Vorn’s clan. He offers his flying spear to all here. I will follow Durc for he is the best of the hunters and the son of the mate of the leader. It is as it should be.” Grev stepped back into the crowd that had increased even more.

Chapter 10

“I would speak.”

“Mogur Goov may speak.”

“Klug, I would ask questions of some of the leaders, would you permit this?” When Klug gave his consent, Goov turned on Neg. “Neg, you went with Klug to hunt along with Durc and some of his hunters?”

“Yes, but Vorn was invited not the deformed man, I was not happy that Klug allowed him to lead the hunters of Vorn’s clan.”

“Did Durc slow you down, or hinder your hunting?”

“No.”

“How many animals did you kill?”

“None.”

“Did Durc prevent you from getting a kill?”

“Yes. The rest of the herd we hunted took off when he and his hunters went toward them.”

“Did Durc and the hunters with him kill?”

“Yes. Each hunter got a kill.”

“Klug, is this what happened?” Goov knew he had essentially called the young leader a liar but all those in the area knew he did not tell everything.

“The man Durc was allowed to chose hunter to take with him from Vorn. I allowed him to come to show new weapon Vorn talked of. We found a heard of roe deer and Durc asked to show his weapon and I allowed it. Neg did not know the weapon so he could not join with Durc and his hunters. There were cave lions so we could not go around but Durc said he did not need to. The hunters from Vorn’s cave worked together well and each took an animal with the new weapon. If the new weapon was not used and we were successful we would have brought back two animals. Durc had five. The animals left after the five fell but they would have left had we hunted as we have always hunted.”

“Mogur Trun, you would speak?”

“I would speak.”

The mogur of Crum’s clan stepped forward. “The mogur’s had talked to Ursus and know this. Durc is a deformed man, but he is a man of the clan accepted by both Brun, Vorn. The hunter Durc is not crippled and can follow Vorn. The mogurs agree with Vorn’s decision.”

None of the leaders moved with this revelation for the mogurs seldom interfered with the leaders roles. Many could not remember when they had even gone beyond giving the leaders advice. Krug stood to face the mogur of Crum’s clan.

“The leaders cannot go against Ursus. Did Ursus tell the mogurs what to do about the man of the others?”

“Ursus was not asked.”

“Then I will not talk with him yet.”

“No.” Neg stood and faced the rest of the leaders knowing that they would follow the mogur’s decision. “This man has proven nothing. When we were on the hunt we never saw the kill. The man Durc must prove himself.”

Vorn finally stood again, “I would speak, Krug.”

“Vorn may speak.”

“Neg you will go against Durc with whatever weapon you wish or if you want to use two weapons you may. We will go to the bolo test area and you can challenge Durc.”

“I accept.” Neg left the area immediately to get his spear and bolo. Although he disliked using the weapon his mother’s mate made sure he could. He was better than anyone of his clan with the weapon and planned to join the test to see who was best with it. Now he would show everyone that a deformed man cannot lead hunters.

Chapter 11

Games of strength and talent were not new to the clan they had competitions at every clan gathering. This was different it would pit a deformed man against a leader of a clan, that was not done also there was no real reward should the leader beat the deformed man as everyone expected and so no gain for Neg and they wondered why he bothered. Most of the contest during a clan gathering was open to everyone who wanted to watch, this was for men, for hunters only, even this the hunters wondered why the leaders did not keep it among themselves just in case the deformed man was lucky. The bolo field had three logs suspended from oak trees and set at a height that a red deer’s body would be since that was the most numerous animal in the area. Each log had two sets of twin limbs that were tied together with leather rope and slung over the log to represent legs of the animal. It was up to the contestant to wrap the bolo around both front or rear legs and even better both sets. For this test however since spears would be used so the log had been replaced with a rolled hide that was old and no longer useful. Vorn, Krug tried to decide what would be the best way to make the contest even when Vorn asked that Norg be involved.

“You make it too easy Krug.” Norg told the host leader. “This is a contest to see if the deformed man is as good as any other hunter.

“I would have it harder still, Norg.” Vorn admitted. “I would have mark made in the dirt that they cannot pass before they use their bolos or their spear.”

“How far?”

“I will leave that up to both of you.” The current leader and former leader watched as Vorn walked away thinking the man might need a replacement sooner than later but as much as Norg knew the son of his mate was a braggart, he did want the contest fair.

Norg and Krug walked the area around the target and placed two limbs in the sand. The first was the closest you could get before throwing the bolo and the second closer limb the closet the men could get before using their spear. The clan used their spears by lunging at animals but in the case of those animals with large antler racks the spears could only be used from a distance which took agility and strength to wield the spear with a single arm. Although Durc was taller he appeared not to have the upper body strength of Neg still thinking what Vorn had said the men place this second limb so that even Neg would have a difficult time.

When Vorn approached Durc who sat with his training spear and bolo, he was glad that both Brac and Grev were with him. "I told Krug that he made it too easy and it needed to be more difficult. They do not know your flying spear and will make it closer than you need even for the bolo. Make sure you are further away from the target than where Neg when you throw the bolo and throw your spear."

"What would they do if I used the spear thrower?"

"That cannot be. It is a weapon of the others and you need to show them something you are responsible for making and not the others."

"I understand Vorn."

Durc would have been surprised to know that Norg gave no such talk to Neg, for the new leader should be the best hunter of the clan he led. When the men were brought to the area, they were allowed to look over the changes made and explained all they must accomplish making sure they knew they could not pass the marks for each weapon. Both men were taken to Goov, who recognized as the highest status of Mogurs, was holding two spear. Both spears were identical having been made years ago by the same spear maker. All the mogurs tested them each year for they were used to choose in what order those involved in the various contest competed. It was necessary that the spears were truly identical for whoever they pointed to would be the first to compete and in many instances this was an advantage for the targets were well worn by the time the last man would compete.

Holding the spears completely vertical, Goov released them and the crowd hunters watched as they stood for a second before falling and pointing at Neg. The leader struck his chest to show he was pleased with the outcome for it was obvious that Ursus was behind his efforts. Neg walked to the entrance and waited until all those who wanted to watch were in position. He wanted everyone to know that a deformed man could not possibly lead hunters. Walking to the bolo mark, Neg looked at his target and knew it was further than he had ever thrown as he spun the weapon at his side and threw it with all his strength toward the target. The sound of the thunk of the stones pleased when the leather ropes spun around the front limbs representing the legs and the stones finally hit the wood which had it be an actual animal would probably broke both front legs. Walking with confidence, he walked to the spear mark and with all his might, holding onto the end of the spear as he would for an animal that had large horns, he sunk the heavy clan spear through the rolled leather where it stuck in the ground. Pleased with his results he roared his victory and walked back toward where the mogurs and Durc waited.

“You can walk away deformed man and not embarrass yourself.” Neg did not hate the deformed man only that he thought himself good enough to lead.

“Thank you Neg for your concern.” Durc nodded politely and went to where Neg had entered the area. Instead of walking to the Bolo line, Durc took two steps into the area and started to spin his bolo above his head. Most of the hunters that knew the weapon shook their head for he had started too soon and the bolo was in the wrong position. With all his might, Durc released the weapon and watched as the two sets of string wrapped around both front and rear legs and the resulting thunk of the stones hitting wood quieted the restless crowd knowing if this had been the actual competition, Durc would have won. Expecting him to move forward the hunter’s barely turned back to him when they saw the flash and followed it and saw the thin spear imbed itself through the leather just about where the animal’s heart would have been and sink into the soft ground around the target where it remained.

What noise there was came from clan members talking to each other in their personal clan language while others were silent using the formal language of the clan as they discussed what they saw. Finally Norg walked up to Durc. “Throw a second spear Durc.” Durc nodded and caught a spear thrown to him by Grev. He would have smiled when he saw that it was one of the spears he had made for Grev so long ago that he used them for practice now not trusting them to hold up in an actual hunt.

This time Durc waited until all were paying attention and the first spear was removed from the target that now was moving rather than still as it had been before. The movement made no difference as Durc remained where he was and again threw the spear. As it had the first time it struck near to where an animal’s heart would have been and bite deeply into the ground. Those who thought the thin spear that Durc and others in Vorn’s clan carried were too slight to actually be of any use, now looking at the results of what was obviously a useful weapon to have. “Durc, you had others with you on the hunt are they as good?”

Durc retrieved both spears that had been removed by Vorn and nodded to Grev and Loug both were excellent with the flying spears though Brac was better with the spear thrower. Handing each man a spear he stepped out of the way. Both men stood in the same position Durc had been in but they did not look at the target but at Durc. When they saw the slight nod of Durc head each turned to the target and threw their spears. This time more hunters went to the target to get a closer look at the spears, especially the tool makers who were also responsible for making the weapons for their clans. It was Grev who answered the questions these men had for this was now his specialty. The son of his mate although young was also an excellent tool maker but until he was a hunter he would not be able to make a weapon for a hunt but Grev knew he was surely capable.

Chapter 12

Norg looked at the weapon Durc handed him and knew that the leaders could not stop Vorn even if Durc had not developed the new weapon and trained all the hunters of Vorn’s clan to use it efficiently and well. It was an obvious that although the man was deformed he was not a cripple but as strong as other hunters and with the patience needed to be a leader, more patience than

even the son of his mate who he was very proud of. Taking him aside to remind him that Vorn had the right to choose his successor just as Norg had and Neg will have when it is time, he will also remind him that the new weapon could make a difference for their clan since they had so many predators that hunting was difficult. The rumors that Norg heard of a weapon the man of the others had also interested not only Norg but he knew that Set wanted to see and talk with the man of the others who was said could talk correctly and was very respectful of the clan. Both men knew that to do so without the leaders or at least the mogurs talking to the man first would cause more problems than either man wanted with this latest trouble.

“Neg, I would talk with you.” Neg nodded and followed the former leader who he had made his second for Norg had always place second to Vorn’s clan. He was not surprised that Norg led him away from the rest of the hunters examining the weapon used by the deformed man. He also wanted to see it for he had not actually seen it work on the hunt. With both Grev’s and Loug’s abilities with the new spear, perhaps the deformed man would train him in the use of the spear so that he could train his hunters but the sting of the loss was still fresh and he was not sure what to do. Perhaps Norg would know.

“Neg you did well on the test, but the weapon used by Durc would make hunting at our cave easier than it is now.”

“I have thought of this but how to get the deformed man to teach me without losing face.”

“You have not lost face for I do not think any of the other leaders except Vorn could have matched him with his flying spear. You also told me that the hunters worked like one. I know our hunters are well trained and you continue that and it is good but they will still act as each sees fit on a hunt. Vorn’s hunter waited to throw until Durc gave them a signal to do so, that also we must do. A single hunt could feed out clan for almost a winter if each hunter had and knew the flying spear.”

“How do I make Durc teach us this spear?”

“Make is so that it is part of his acceptance they are of equal value.”

“Crum will still make problems. He wants his sibling to be leader so their status would be more. I do not want that and we have heard what they did to allow him to make his first kill. I want to talk to Durc alone.”

“If that is what you want I will make it happen. Why?”

“I need to talk with him, I do not know him. I ignored him as a deformed cripple never to be a man. Why would I bother?”

Norg nodded his understanding and wondered if other leaders thought the same. Durc was unknown because no one took the time to know him as a child especially the younger leaders. Crum was another matter. The son of Set’s mate did not act like Set but worse. His hunter thought him a good leader but there was a hate in him and he wondered if it was because of the

man whose mate had a deformed daughter and no sons lived. The girl's beating at the last summer meeting was not unnoticed and many of the leaders thought the man should have been reprimanded for his excess. It was apparently not true that the then girl was bad luck for Norg knew she had three children two of which were male children. The oldest already was faster and taller than many of the male children his age and he had manners and knew that striking another was not acceptable. That kind of action came from the leader who accepted such things and Norg knew that Set had not allowed the man to be involved in any of the contest nor was he allowed to hunt during the clan gathering. Still he would talk to Sar and the son of his mate Jag who was now leader.

Chapter 13

Ura finished placing the bowls she had made during the year as Uba had instructed to make the different designs given off by the various grains of the wood stand out for those who passed to see. She was proud of the bowls for she had taken those made by Durc's mother and attempted to copy them and she knew she had. Their smooth texture would be the envy of the women from the other caves for she had yet to see any who had taken the final step to make the bowls glisten when ever moisture touched them. Taking those parts of the tree that no one else wanted her bowls were uniquely designed even among other clan women. She had just placed the small bowls she had made to feed her own family when the shadow fell on her.

Fear slammed into her as she looked up furtively in case it was a man, and it was. Pain was all she remembered when she was in this man's care and no one in the clan would stop his abuse not even the leader. Here at the clan gathering Durc must be all clan and show none of the softness she had become used to when they were at their home cave. Making no move when his foot came down smashing one of the small bowls she had spent days making, for she knew to react would incur his anger. "These are not fit to be displayed for the other women for they are not deformed as you are. You should never have lived but that I was punishing your mother for wanting a girl child. Now the deformed man, Brun promised you to would be leader to continue to have deformed children. Look at them woman. They should have been given to Ursus when they were born. I will show you how a good clan woman should act." Ura was shocked when the man gave her the signal that he wanted to relieve himself with her. She had never heard and could not remember a man of a hearth using a daughter of his mate but she slowly took the position knowing he would beat her if she did not.

Just as the man was attempting to press his member into the ugly deformed woman, he turned feeling the cool sharp edge against his neck only to face the deformed man with anger so deep he was absolutely still with it except for his eyes. Slowly he pulled the spear away from the man's neck but did not look away from the man.

"You have no more manners than your leader. You are lower than a snake's belly to dishonor me with your action. If my mate needs correction I will correct her, if you wish to use her to relieve your needs you will ask permission and you did not. If you come near her again I will split your belly and leave you to the hyenas. The clan man short even for the clan did not like looking up to the deformed man and knew he would do as he claimed. Angry at himself for letting himself be caught correcting a woman not of his clan especially by this man, he left but

was determined that he would get the woman eventually. Her bad luck had stayed with him since he was not allowed to hunt for the last gathering he had been unsuccessful in many hunts since then that he was now seldom asked as the leader thought him too old. He wasn't too old but the bad luck from the daughter of his mate.

“Ura, who was that?” Durc pulled Ura from the floor and looked at the broken bowl she had spent so much time one trying to make for bowls that almost matched perfectly. She had been so proud of them.

“He was the man of my hearth. My mother's mate.” The idea that the man of her hearth attempted to relieve himself on her made him ill and the anger that had begun to cool resurfaced more than before but he knew he was powerless to do anything.

“Finish what you were doing and stay close to Uba or Cana. Never be alone. If he comes near you again, ignore him and walk to where ever I am.”

“Yes Durc.”

Uba saw Durc leave the cave and the look on his face told of his anger, wondering what Ura could have done to cause so much anger in a man she quickly went to where they were placed to see Ura picking up the pieces to one of her bowls. “Ura, Durc did this?”

“No. The man of my hearth came and broke the bowl and gave me the signal that he wanted to use me to relieve himself when Durc came in and made him go.”

Uba knew that as angry as Durc was it would take very little for him to respond to any threat to Ura or the clan. Leaving the cave she went in search of Vorn. As medicine woman of the clan she had some small power that allowed her as a woman where a woman might not normally be allowed. She seldom used this but this was too important to wait. She sighed when she saw that Vorn was not at the meeting of leaders but talking with Norg. Placing herself in a position and waiting to be recognized Uba knew Vorn would not take long in responding.

“I will ask Durc to see Neg before the day is gone Norg. I do not want them to be enemies. The son of your mate is a good leader and respected by his hunters.”

“Your weapon maker Grev had said he would show any who want to learn how to make the flying spear and Neg and I will be there to watch.”

“I will tell Durc.”

Vorn waited until Norg left to signal Uba she could speak for he knew she probably wanted to give him one of her concoctions she thought would make him better but Goov had already told him that he would probably not return to the cave for his totem seemed to be very weak.

“The man of Ura heath came to the cave and broke one of Ura's bowls and wanted to use her to relieve himself without asking Durc and Durc saw this.”

Vorn closed his eyes and turned to where the leaders were gathering near the tool making area. He had planned to take Jun for a walk and tell him the decision of the leaders but he knew he had to find Durc first.

Chapter 14

Durc looked at Neg and wondered what he was up to as he walked directly towards him. “We should not be enemies Durc. I want you to come and we will talk alone. Maybe I can convince you to teach me of your weapon and I will not look like a fool.”

“You are not a fool Neg, but the son of the mate of a great leader. There are none that do not respect Norg and Norg trained you to be a leader.” Neg seemed pleased with Durc assessment of his mother’s mate but he could see that he was apprehensive. When he finally nodded, Neg started walking towards the woods that lined the area to the north of the gathering. Finding two downed trees in the cooler shade of the woods they facing each other. “There is talk of not accepting your flying spear but I do not have a choice. There are many predators around my cave and the game is constantly fearful and difficult to hunt. There are many times the hunters come back without a kill, and all a very good hunters. If you would teach me this weapon I can teach my hunters and we would not have to worry about our mates and their children not eating in the winter.”

Durc nearly sighed in relief knowing that it took a lot of strength of character for Neg to approach him as he did, especially after Durc beat him in the contest. “I have always wanted what was best for the clan all the clan, they are my people even if they have never accepted me as a child and now as a man and hunter of the clan. If I train you with the flying spear then others will use it and there will be less hunger for all. I will train you but we have to do it away from others for I do not want the hunters of any to see you fail and you will fail until you are used to it. It is not hard only new. You can use a sling?”

“No, it is an old man’s weapon.”

“No, Neg. It like the bolo is a weapon that can mean life or death, eating or starving.” Durc told Neg of what happened on his journey from the Elk camp and how they had survived.

“Norg is very good with the sling I will ask him to train me.”

“Train all your hunters for it will make it easier for them to learn the flying spear, still I will begin to train you with my spears but watch how Grev makes them for his are even better than mine. We will meet at first light and work until we hear the others or we can make an area above so we can watch the gathering.” Durc handed Neg his own spear and waited while Neg examined it.

“This one is different than the one you used.”

“Those were old spears used for practice and ones you will use to begin with. You see both ends are pointed so that it does not matter how you grab the spear it is ready to use. This one has been made by Grev and he made the points longer. He hardens the points and only the tips break but they are easier to sharpen and harden again. The old way the spears last longer but become brittle so they are only good for practice.”

“You have totem marks.” Neg ran his fingers over the various marks and noted that except for the mark of a lynx and snow leopard they were all female signs.

“They are marks made by our mogur. Each time Ursus is pleased and grants us success, the mogur puts the totem sign for the animal on the weapon so Ursus knows we understand he is allowing us to use this new weapon.”

Neg grunted his understanding and thought that Vorn’s clan was more steeped in tradition than even his own. For their mogur was only used for ceremonies. He could not think of a time they had used the mogur for advice especially about hunting for although he had made his first kill the mogur did not hunt now and took his due from the kills and gatherings first before any other. He would have to talk with his mogur and see what he thought of his role. The two men started back to the weapon area so that Neg could watch how Gove made the hardened tips of the throwing spears and Neg was happy to see that his own weapons maker was next to Grev as he explained each step.

Vorn and Norg looked at the assembly and the men they sought separately. Vorn went to Durc and pulled him aside from where he stood next to Neg. “I know what happened and you know your every action will be watched.”

“I will allow no man to injure Ura again. The man of her hearth was going to use her as a woman. Tell me that is permitted Vorn?”

“I cannot but it is something we will take to Goov about before you take any foolish action over a woman.”

The two men started it was as if Vorn’s mention of the mogur that he appeared. Goov liked to cause people to wonder about him and he would not tell these two that he had seen the anger in Durc and wondered at its cause that caused him to join them and whatever had occurred one of them mentioned his name just before he arrived.

“Goov.”

“Vorn, there is a problem?” Vorn and Durc both explained what had happened and Goov knew that after what happened to Ura during the time of Broud and what happened during their travels, Durc had become overly protective of Ura but he also knew that what the man had done was wrong. “There is nothing to prevent him from using a woman, any woman to relieve himself and it is a courtesy that a man asks a mate if there is one. The men of a hearth are there to protect the females under their care. There is a chance that the man’s totem was used to create the child but if I remember the woman was attacked by men of the others and since Ayla was a woman of the

others I think the totem of the men of the others was used by Ursus for Durc to have a mate. This man did this thing to degrade the woman and her mate not for release. For now I would let it go. If he nears her again then I think Vorn needs to formally ask the mogurs and the leaders to reprimand the man. That way it does not cause blame for Vorn and his people.”

“I will leave it for now. I told Ura never to be alone but that still might not stop this man.”

“A man that beats a child is a coward Durc. Understand this he will not attempt to go after a hunter or more than one woman. A woman should be punished when it is needed but never beaten. Ayla was beaten so severely one time it took many weeks for her to heal. Broud was severely treated after that and Brun almost chose another to lead after him but Ayla was a woman by then and not a child and what she had done was very wrong but she did not deserve such a beating. Broud lost control but he was never a coward. This man will not lose control, for what he does is a sickness with his totem. You do not have to point him out to the mogurs for we already know him.”

Chapter 15

The contests went well and although Durc won both the sling and the bolo competition as was expected after the demonstration he gave earlier, Neg was a close second since he and Durc had been practicing above the camp. Several of the men still tried to make Durc miss with his throws but he was still as he prepared to make his throws ignoring all hits, pokes with spears and rocks suddenly landing in front of him. Atta was unbeatable in the races for though he was older this clan gathering he was still fast with more muscle so not only did he win most of the shorter distances he also won for the long run that lasted from first light to when the sun was at its highest. Durc and Vorn watched as Brac fought the last wrestling match with a much larger opponent.

For someone who was normally very quiet he became an animal many of the others called the clan. The larger man was slow and could not match Brac fierceness or endurance. The two men fought for hours until Brac swiped the man’s feet from under him and he no longer rose. Roaring with satisfaction at the win, Brac seemed almost embarrassed when he looked at the other hunters. When the hunters chosen by their leaders for the hunt gathered they were separated into four groups. Neg and Durc would lead the first group and Durc was sure that Neg had learned enough with the flying spear that he would be able to make a kill and since most of those hunters with them were from their own clans Durc was determined that Neg get the full experience of using the spear.

Mindful of the lions they had seen before they were careful in their movements and when they saw the herd of bison, Neg looked at Durc who nodded that yes the bison could be killed with the flying spear. The hunters followed the two men as when they were close enough all looked around the area for signs of predators for this herd had many young and two of the younger bulls had obviously been attacked by lions before as they had serious wounds on their hind quarters. This was not a herd that would be ignored by cave lions and other predators in the area. Durc explained to the rest of the hunters not of his clan that there was no reason to hide from the animals for they could not get in a tight enough formation to prevent the spears from entering.

To Neg he explained that they needed to kill a single bull first and that entailed getting the bull to react so that he would lift his head. “You will have a very short time but imagine the target you have practiced with and put in on the bull’s chest. Throw as hard as you can for this hunt will only be successful if you are successful.”

Neg nodded his understanding. He had not felt this excitement since he went on his first hunt to become a man. It was an addictive feeling and he silently thanked Durc for this experience. Those hunters from Neg’s cave were not happy that only those with the flying spear would be hunting. Neg understood this but if he was successful then they would see the advantages of using this new weapon. None of these men knew how to use the bolo but they would learn for his own experience with the weapon made learning the techniques for the flying spear easier to understand though he had been frustrated at first that his spear did not go as far as Durc’s. Every day they had gone into the hills to practice until Neg hit the target every time, then Durc had made him get further and further from the target and now he knew at what distance he could always hit the target he aimed at. Though he was confident in his abilities facing a bison with a thin spear was a daunting possibility but he had to believe it would do as Durc claimed and he still had the rest of the hunters behind him.

Only Durc and Neg went forward and as expected the animals immediately went into a phalanx of protection for the cows and the young. They did not want to take the bulls that had been previously injured for there were obvious signs of illness but Durc and Neg noticed a young bull that seemed ready to charge the pair and break the safety net for the others. “He will challenge first when we get closer. I will be next to you but there is time do not rush your throw.”

Neg kept an eye on the chosen bull and though the lead bull stomped his feet he kept his head down, but the younger bull pawed the ground clearly waiting for an opportunity to charge. When his head lifted Neg spotted the area he wanted to hit and threw the spear. As often as he used the spear in practice he was still amazed to see the weapon slip into the animal’s neck as the bull took a step and fell. The phalanx was broken and the rest of the hunters with the flying spear released theirs into the herd including Durc. The rumble of the animals running from the area was deafening as they churned up dust with their escape. None of the hunters moved until they could see the whole area to make sure that they would be the only ones going after the downed animals.

Durc sent Grev and Atta to get poles for the travois they would make and as the rest of the hunters cut the throat from the three downed animals and spearing those still breathing, Durc and Neg cut the throats to allow the animals to bleed out. Four of those from Neg’s clan were ordered to gut the animals for this hunt was about meat only and it would be difficult without the women to take anything else back with them. The men of the other clans watched as those from Vorn’s clan rolled the animals onto travois and tied them to the poles with leather thongs. “Dorc what is this?”

“The others call it a trav. They use it to transport great weights across distances and with less effort. It is a man’s tool for women could not use it with any success.”

As the men started back to the site of the gathering Neg took the travois from Durc and was surprised at the ease that it was to move the carcass of the bull without the help of other hunters. What should have taken all the hunters to carry back to the site, only three men moved the results of the hunt leaving the rest free to protect them. There were too many new things and he was having trouble with all the knowledge that Durc brought and he was now sure that Durc was the source of not only the flying spear but the trav as well.

Chapter 16

Durc was pleased to see that they were the last of the hunters to arrive at the meeting area for everyone knew that Neg planned on using the deformed man's new weapon in the hunt. The hunters in his group were surprised to see most of the camp cleaning up as if a strong wind suddenly came though the area. It was Vorn who approached them first and told of a herd of mammoths lead by a large trumpeting female that stampeded through the gathering, luckily no one was hurt. Durc was more interested in the fact that each group no matter the number of hunters taken had returned with a single animal which caused those who were with Neg and Durc puff their chest with pride for not only did they have three animals but they were bison. Brac came to Durc and walked with him, "Crum is talking to others about your weapon and the presence of Jun. I do not think he is happy that you have gotten all the attention. He is much like Broud and would not allow me to use the flying spear for he thought it makes us weak and slow. I did not tell him if that were true, Vorn's clan would not be first again. There is an old man in his clan that is making charges that you attacked him. No one is paying attention yet."

"It would not matter if they did pay attention, I thank you Brac for your knowledge. I will take care with Crum."

The following day was the last contest before the bear ceremony, the telling of stories. All the meat that wasn't dried for Klug's clan had been eaten from the various fires set up to cook them. Grev's telling of the red deer hunt that many would have thought was a lie before the gathering hunt were not riveted to the tale as Grev described how so many animals were returned to the cave of Vorn's clan that would last them to when animals had fat once again. At the end of the evening would be the announcement of those chosen for the bear ceremony that would occur in three days so that the men who were to take part could be purified and made sure they knew what messages to take to Ursus in case Ursus wished a companion to travel with.

The scream was unexpected especially when it was followed by so many others, the men ran to the area and saw the blood but not what caused it. Others having been warned that Durc did not like his woman touched for any reason did not approach the distraught Ura. Durc touched her shoulder gently and waited for her to look up. "Tell me."

"Shin." Hearing his mate's name Klug stepped forward. "Shin was taken by a lion. He was big, but dirty. He came out of the dark so fast." Ura pointed in the direction the lion went.

Immediately plans were made to leave in the morning to find and kill the lion but the hunter knew that such a hunt as at least if not more dangerous than the bear ceremony. This animal had taken a human and that was a bad thing which could be passed on. Durc went to Goov first

before bothering Vorn. “Goov, I must leave now to follow the lion and I must take the spear thrower.”

“You cannot go alone Durc.”

“I will take others but this animal I must kill and no other. I have been asking my totem since we arrived to give me a sign that I should be leader as Vorn wishes. The lion has three toes and leave a mark like a large wolf.”

“Show me.” Durc returned to where the woman had been taken for all the hunters were away from the area. Though most of the prints were obscured by the foot traffic of the hunters, Durc found a clean set at the edge of the light. It was obviously a cave lion but the right front foot had three toes as Durc has said but still left a mark like a wolf for cave lions had retractable claws that put no nail print in three of the four print but on the three toed print the nail indentations were obvious and with at imprint of a fourth nail made it more like a canine. “Wait until morning Durc and I will make it so. No one will be allowed to hunt the cat except you unless you fail.

Even knowing what was to come, Vorn was not happy. He was running out of time and maintaining the appearance of being healthy was beginning to cause other problems. The mogurs exited their special cave that had been chosen by the mogur of Klug’s cave. The women were told to remain in the cave until the lion could be killed so only the hunters were present when the mogurs came to tell the hunters of Ursus blessing on the hunt.

“Hunter of the clan.” Goov dressed in his Cave bear fur looked about the hunters around him noticing the anger, fear, calm, and excitement. “Ursus is pleased that the message that he was trying to give to one was recognized. The lion with three toes shows the mark of the wolf as a challenge. Only the wolf can kill the lion that goes against the spirit of the cave lion to kill one of Ursus chosen. No one was threatening the lion, no one was taking food from the lion, and no one was threatening the lion’s cubs. This lion had gone against Ursus but Ursus has used the corrupt lion for his own use. The leader Vorn chose the hunter Durc the adopted son of his mate to follow him, and Ursus heard the hunter Durc asking for a sign from his totem but Ursus wants a sign of his own. Only Durc can kill the lion, this is what Ursus wants. The hunter Durc must prove to Ursus that he can destroy this corrupt spirit so that the cave lion spirit can be a strong totem once again. The man Durc may use whatever weapon that pleases him to use but the hide of the lion belongs to the leader who suffered loss. The Mogur Goov will go with Durc as will a hunter from each clan. Leaders choose your hunters.”

The mogurs turned away from the stunned hunters, the leaders no less than the rest of the hunters. Vorn wondered if Creb wielded his power in the same way as Goov but for once he wished he could say the mogur was wrong. He had seen the print and it did look like a wolf’s print and perhaps the mogurs were right in making Durc prove himself but he feared that if Durc was injured or killed he would not know who to choose to follow him. Brac was a good man but he lacked the fire needed to be a good leader and Grev still had anger though he controlled it well. In a position of power he might lose that control. Atta was also a good hunter and learned well as were most of the hunters in his clan but none had the ability or memories to lead.

The leaders gathered their hunters and each chose the hunter that would travel with Durc. Neg decided to go himself as did Crum and Jag who now led Sar's clan. Vorn sent Brac with Durc since he was nearly as good as Durc with the spear thrower. The chosen hunters returned to the mogurs cave and they all looked at the strange and spears even smaller and thinner than those he had used before placed in a quiver that Durc had slung over his shoulders. When Goov appeared all he wore was a wrap and the paint the mogurs painted on his body with the totem signs of all the hunters of the clan. Seeing the hunters were suitably impressed Goov motioned Durc to lead the way.

Chapter 17

Durc was not happy as they moved into the lower valleys with fog settling in many areas making following a cave lion know to attack humans even more dangerous. Of the men with him Durc knew he could trust only three others than himself in Brac, Goov and Neg. He assigned each of the hunters a position and hoped that they were at least concerned for their own skin as for anyone else's in the group and would watch closely for anything that would pose a danger. Durc concentrated on the tracks and signs of the lion's passage. It was as if the animal had no fear of humans and wondered why the resident lions had not challenged him. Perhaps this animal was from Ursus. That thought brought a shiver that did not go unnoticed by Goov. "Ursus and your totem would never purposely send you a test you could not complete, how you complete it is up to you and will determine if you fail or not."

As the day progressed, some of the hunters wanted to break off and hunt some of the herds they passed but Durc held them to the task at hand and ignored their grumblings. Having a lion that liked human flesh was a danger to all and they the hunters were only safe as a group despite the fact that all the men were armed. In the current conditions a lion could attack before a man could even see it coming, there would be no chance to defend themselves, at least together they were safer.

Durc bent to the touch the impression of the three toed lion and knew that the lion was near then looked at the noon sun as the heat and humidity of the steppes increased. They had already found Klug's mate earlier but were surprised that although she had been fatally injured she had not been eaten but rather crushed as if the lion had laid and rolled on her. They all understood animals' need to kill to survive, even if it was twisted and animal would try to survive, this however went against everything they knew and the hunters were now truly fearful. If the animal was still hungry for it had not eaten its prey then they thought it might return to the camp made many want to return. They had taken the time to covered the woman with rocks though many did not want to get near the body but when it was finished there was no stopping with their task for Durc would not send a man back without knowing the location of the lion. Now feeling the moistness of the impression he knew they were near. The sun had burned most of the fog away but still there were low lying areas still obscured by the low lying clouds especially around water ways.

"We should all turn back and protect the women and children not out here chasing spirits. The mogurs should be here not hunters."

“Crum, there are more hunters at the gathering and the few of us will make little difference. As for the mogurs, they have sent their most powerful with us. If you no longer want to take part in this hunt you are free to go. Any that are afraid may leave.” Durc looked at those who he did not know including the leader Jag who was now the leader of Sag’s clan.

“Come, let’s go back to the gathering, this deformed man is leading us on a false hunt for a lion that may or may not be in the direction he is taking us.” As Crum walked away from the group, Durc made no effort to stop him and watched as three others joined him. Although his leaving put a dent in their numbers, the seven that remained only Brac and Neg might have a chance to kill the lion should he fail but the others were known to be good hunters and brave. He could only hope that the lion did not circle back and catch the four men unaware for all they had were clan spears and they would be ineffectual if the lion came suddenly out of hiding.

Durc turned his attention back to where the lion seemed to be heading. With the thick fog below, he knew there was water and where there was water on the steppes in this heat there were be animals, the normal prey of the lions. The question was why he had attacked the woman in the first place. Descending into the valley, Durc could feel his muscle tense. Some where there was a killer cave lion which could reach nearly the size of a horse. The grasses of the plains were tall enough to hide many predators and the hunters movements slowed as they watched for any movement. Even though they could use the grasses as well to hide, the cats could see better than most animals and would be able to detect them even in the grass where other animals might not. All the men with him were experienced hunters and knew the normal habits of the animals they hunted and the predators that hunted the same animals. That niggling in his brain made Durc even more nervous that something was wrong, out of place but he could not think of what it could be.

As they closed on the water they stopped in their tracks at the sound of the roar and the squeal of an animal that had been taken down. The roar of the lion was distinct and they knew the direction but the thinning fog was still obscuring enough details that they could not see where the attack had taken place or if it had been a pride or the single animal they followed. Drawn to the scene, Durc continued forward then as if Ursus want to reveal all to the group a wind started and shredded the fog away from the area. There between them and a mixed herd of steppes animals was a single lion feasting on the freshly killed red deer.

Durc could not believe what he was looking at, it was a female. Never had he known of a female lion attacking anything but prey usually to feed her young and always with a pride. Male came and went but the females were almost never alone, yet this one was. They were the hunters and while the males would and could hunt when they were young before taking over a pride, they were often scavengers or killers of the very weak or severely injured. Usually only the females could bring down a healthy animal and this female although she was dirty as he never saw in a lion before, she looked healthy and fairly young. There were very few wounds that often occurred with the change of males in a pride with the head female usually the worst. Something was wrong.

Using the formal language Durc told the rest of the hunters to remain where they were. “I must see if this animal is the one we seek for it is female and I cannot understand why a young female would attack a human, still I have to be sure before I make the wrong decision. Brac, you have your spear thrower, use it if I fail to protect the others.”
“Durc, we should all go.”

“No, this is something I have to do on my own.”

Chapter 18

Durc approached the lioness with great caution trying to see if the paws matched the print at the gathering. As he approached slowly he could only see the left front paw which looked normal. There was still a possibility that this was not even the animal that had attacked the woman, still he got closer and as he moved he readied his throwing spear. Every muscle was tight wanting to run in the opposite direction. The hot wind that had burned off the fog caused the sweat to pour as he crouched as he neared where the lioness fed. Already the small canines and vultures were already gathering contemplating the meal that once the lioness was finished eating they would get their chance. Durc was worried because the largest scavenger the hyena was missing and he hoped that they would stay away from the area but he knew the circling of the birds above would give notice to all of the kill.

He had never been on a hunt for a cave lion though he knew some hunters at the gathering bragged of it, he wondered if they had snuck up on the animals or remained upright just moving slowly. This was a supreme hunter with few on the steppes it feared except the mammoth and even them only the males in their prime could be assured not to be attacked by cave lions. He remained upright watching the lion as he moved slowly closer watching every move the animal made.

He felt more than he heard the deep rumbling growl and he tightened his hold on the spear thrower, knowing as he got closer the more danger he was in but he had to make sure. If this was not the animal then when he backed away from her kill she would settle down and allow him to leave, if it was not she might attack in any case whether he left or not. Finally as if to protect her kill from being stolen, the cat brought both paws up and pulled the carcass closer and there it was, the right front paw with only three toes obviously from an injury that pulled the side claw low enough to make the final nail impression and deformed the rest of the paw making it smaller and thinner. Unlike the left paw all the nails on the right were exposed instead of retracted and he could see that they were worn to nearly half the length they should be. Soon no matter if he took her life or not she would not be able to hunt for herself and by the looks of it she was a loner for some unknown reason.

Goov watched the animal as it pulled its kill closer and he too saw the three toes but he had no qualms of anything being wrong. Worrying that Durc was too close to the animal especially when Brac told him that Durc was well within range of the weapon he carried, he wondered if Durc was looking for the same sign that this was indeed the animal they were looking for.

The movement was so fast that no one could have responded to the attack in time to stop it. With a deep warning growl the lioness spun and charged the man that was too close to her kill and stood as if challenging her. Durc raised and fired the spear thrower as quickly as he could then tried to get out of the animal's way as she came directly at him. His spear hit her mid-flight but her momentum carried her to him as her paw with all four nails exposed to do the most damage scraped across his chest laying muscles and flesh open as she fell just past him and breathed her last. For a few moments no one moved until Durc pulled his knife to take the skin of the animal. When he turned her on her back he closed his eyes and knew he had another stop to make before returning to the clan gathering.

When the rest of the hunters arrived, Goov prevented them from helping Durc skin the animal. Jag took up the spear thrower and the spear Durc had pulled from the animal wondering how something so small could possibly kill such a large animal but the proof was at their feet. He had listened to both sides and like his mother's mate he would not make his decision one way or the other until he knew all the facts. He had kept silent at the meeting of leaders because like the rest of the leaders he knew nothing about Durc or his qualifications and like the rest thought him deformed and unable to lead. Demonstrating that ability since his arrival, Jag knew that Crum's complaints held no merit, now he knew that there was more to this deformed man than a single clan gathering could reveal. Vorn's clan had many children and his second son would need a mate, perhaps he would send the second son with Vorn for one of his female children and have them return to his clan once mated. Then he would be able to learn the flying spear and this new weapon to train the others.

When Durc finished skinning the cat the men were all for remaining the night but Durc had already started to retrace their steps after taking the spear thrower from Jag. Only Goov felt comfortable enough to approach him. "Durc, you hunters are tired and need to rest."

"Surely if this deformed man can continue, so can they since they are all hunters of the clan."

The men saw his signals and though Durc had used his own language they understood enough that none made a move to stop. As they traveled before they did so now, looking out for predators as more fog began to form around water ways. The men were not happy when Durc stopped where they had piled stones over the woman Shin and began to remove the rocks only to be stopped by Goov. "Durc what do you do?"

"This is something I have to do. Klug deserves the truth of what happened to his mate." When the woman was uncovered, Durc stripped off what remained of her wrap and returned the stones to the pile to cover her and prevent predators from destroying the body until Ursus could claim it. Walking to a nearby stream, Durc put the wrap into the water and lifted it several times then placed it with the skin of the lion. Picking both up he again began to trot towards the gathering but mindful of the hunters behind him making sure all stayed up with him.

With the sun setting, the men just had enough light to mount the hill where the gathering was but as people recognized the hunters, none stopped them until they reached the cave where the mogur's were housed. People from all over the encampment left their chores to follow or notified by other came to where the man Durc waited for the Mogurs and leaders.

Durc waited only long enough for all the mogurs and all the leaders to arrive and he could see that they did not expect his back so quickly and be successful. Some of the leaders looked at Crum wondering why he had returned when it was obvious that the man Durc was capable of following the signs left by animals.

Durc knelt in front of Klug and placed the hide of the lioness at his feet. “This animal was not a sick spirit but a female looking for her young. The woman Shin was wearing the hide of the young and that is why she was attacked.”

Klug looked at Crum who had given him the hide for the daughter of his mate. Shin had told him that the hide was still raw and unfinished but he demanded her to wear the skin to show the leader Crum that his gift was well received. Walking to the girl who stood next to the leader, he pulled her to him and drew her back and pushed her at his second woman. “There will be no mating.” He picked up the lioness’ hide and walked from the circle of people. He had cared deeply for his mate and was proud of the three sons and the single daughter that she had and since all the boys looked exactly like him, he was sure his totem was used to create them. The boys now men had mates with children and the daughter being the youngest had just become a woman before arriving at the gathering. Shin’s youngest son lost his mate as she tried to bring forth her first child and he had been hurt for he had grown up with the girl and cared for her. He had plans to mate him with the daughter of Crum’s second in command but that would not occur now.

Chapter 19

After Klug left the circle of hunters, both Norg and Neg approached Durc but it took a minute for Durc to acknowledge their presence. “Durc, will you teach the new weapon to the clans?”

“No. It is a weapon of the others and was taught to me by the others. The leaders have said they will not talk with the man of the others.”

“That will not change.”

“I know.”

Those from Vorn’s clan walked with Brac and Durc to where they had their hearths and all gathered around Vorn as Durc sat in the center with him so that all could hear what happened. All Durc could think of was sleeping and holding Ura close to him but he knew his leader needed the information of all that happened. Exhaustion more than his stoic nature kept him from responding to Uba’s cleaning and treating of his wounds as he told Vorn of the hunt. He also knew that every hunter that remained with them throughout the hunt would be reporting to their leaders. After telling them of the foggy conditions that slowed them as they began, Durc started from when they found the woman. “We found the woman early but she was not devoured but she was crushed as if the lion rolled on her and it bothered me. Crum wanted to return he said to help protect the women and children and three others left with him but we continued. When we finally found the lion with a fresh kill of a red deer I was bothered by the fact that it was female

and females although the hunters would not attack for no reason, there had to be a cause. I went down alone for that is what my totem told me I had to do and as I moved away from the hunters it felt right.”

“I waited for Ursus to show me that this was the correct animal for it seemed healthy. The lion warned me away but still I got closer then when she brought her paws up to protect her kill I saw that it was the three towed lion. When she attacked I almost did not release the spear but I did when she was nearly on me.” To mention his wound would serve no purpose and to acknowledge that he hurt was to be less than a man. It was being cared for by the medicine woman and everyone could see it so there was no reason to mention it or how it came to be. “I knew when I turned her over why she had attacked and another story I learned came to me. When Ayla was with the mammoth hunters she went out to catch ermines but a wolf attacked and she had no other option than to kill her but found she had young. The woman Ayla followed the tracks back to the den and found only one living cub and raised it. When she left Lion Camp so did the wolf cub. This lioness did not leave a cub though she had been nursing. That is when I knew why she had attacked. I took the wrap from the woman’s body, even though I know this is not done to disturb the dead, and when I rinsed it I saw that it was from a lion but did not know how she got it. The lioness attacked her thinking she killed her cub for the wrap was not treated well and probably still held the scent of the cub.”

Goov stood as he spoke and pulled away the poultice that Uba had placed on Durc’s chest. “Your mother’s totem has accepted you as worthy and wanted all of the clan to know that the cave lion and Ursus accepted Vorn’s decision.” From a bowl he had, he pressed the staining paste into the wounds so that all would know that Durc was protected not only by his wolf but by the cave lion as well. “You will never be alone for your totems will protect you Durc. Uba has said that there will be sickness from the wounds but you will recover and be stronger still. This I also have seen for you will need that strength.”

When Goov returned to his seat, Durc looked at Vorn and knew the mogur was right. He could not invite Junko into cave but he intended to see his and warn him that other clan leaders might go to him directly and not through Vorn as was needed.

Seeing the bedspace Ura had made for them, Durc stood and went to it and lay down sighing that nothing had felt so good in a long time. Ura watched as Durc slept and tried to listen to all that Uba told her but she worried that Durc was so tired. “Will he really be alright Uba?”

“He is strong and he will fight the evil spirits and Goov will help him in the fight. Maybe it will be bad maybe it will not, but it will be.”

Neither woman wanted to wake Durc but they did so that they could replace the poultice that Uba was sure would not only keep the area clean it would help reduce the poison from the cat’s nails from causing too bad of an illness. Had it been any other injury she would have tried to tie the poultice so that the wound openings touched so that they would heal better. Now it was better if they stayed open and drained. “Give him water whenever he is awake and call me should he begin to thrash and I will give him some thing. This cup,” Uba handed Ura a small cup of medicine which Ura placed aside, “must be given a sip at a time, one sip before water and

it will help with the burning of his body. If the heat is bad we will put cold water on him to cool his skin.”

Ura nodded not wanting to be alone with Durc when he was sure to be sick for she remembered when they were at Lion camp and he returned with a bad wound.”

Chapter 20

He watched the child as he had since he had first seen her and noticed everything about her. She would be a good clan woman one day and though not as ugly as her mother she was still not good looking but there was something that drew him to the child. He had not noticed her when he was first told of his mate’s death and the death of the son she carried as she tried to deliver it, but the words of the medicine woman did not ease the pain. Unlike most men of the clan he had known the woman Eak since her birth and even before she became a woman he had asked Klug that she be given to him as a mate. Now she was gone to Ursus but he missed her. The child as if knowing his loss had come to him and rubbed her small hands on his face.

He had seen others push her away from them as she was diseased but those deep dark brown eyes held him with their sorrow and understanding. She was so young and it would be years before she became a woman. Now looking at her as helped her mother gather, he could see the medicine woman also tell the child about other plants she and her daughter collected. When the Medicine woman’s daughter bent over as if in pain, he had thought to help but he knew he just wanted to get close to the child that caused such a peace with in him when all he wanted to do was injure.

The assignment to watch the woman and guard them as she collected was one he had volunteered for much to the relief of other hunters who detested the chore. Now he followed the three women and the child to the cave but did not enter for it became obvious that the medicine woman’s daughter was about to deliver her child. Looking about he spotted Vorn and decided to tell him about what was happening.

“Vorn, this man Eul was guarding the woman and the medicine woman of you clan and her daughter went to the cave. I believe the daughter is going to have her child.”

Vorn only grunted but turned to look at the cave entrance and saw the men who had been inside leave he was sure the son of Klug’s mate was correct. Seeing Loug he motioned him over and told him that his mate was delivering her child. Loug almost ran toward the cave but a look from Vorn stopped him. It was women business and when Atta and Brac helped Durc as he walked from the cave entrance proved that all men were now out of the cave leaving it for the women.

The medicine women from the over clans all stood just outside the demarcation of the medicine woman’s hearth waiting for an invitation. Still they kept the conversation up denoting the progress of the mother to be and there was bartering and with the lack of men within the cave the women were relaxed and several went to their hearths where other women were cooking for the

men so that they would not interfere, not that they would. Still it made them happy when even in this situation the women did not forget about their care.

Iza walked around the hearth as her mother instructed wishing the other women would leave and allow her this time alone. Feeling the pressure increase she knew that thankfully the birth seemed to be progressing quickly and she hoped it would be an easy birth. She had been in the cave just after their arrival when a young woman was having difficulty and Uba was asked to come and help with the birth but by the time they arrived it was already too late. The woman had bled to death and the son with her. It was a tragedy, it happened but she had been so young. Calmly, as she did everything else in her life, Iza propped herself against a pole and pushed. It amazed her that she could actually feel her child move through her body and as she breathed with the pain, she pushed as her body demanded. The sudden flush of fluid brought excitement to the other women and were amazed at the quiet strength in one so young especially for one so young and with her first child at that.

As the women discussed their various births, the urge to push pressed on Iza again and using her hands at the top of her stomach she pressed down with the contraction trying to help the child along its journey. "The head. I have the head, do not push for a minute." Iza panted as her mother grabbed the child's head and slowly rotated the body. "Now Iza." Iza pushed with all her might feeling everything from the child slipping from her body to the trickles of sweat and the flowed over her body.

"You have a daughter, my daughter."

"Loug will be pleased that another generation of medicine women of Uba's line will continue." The contractions came again as the after birth fell from her body along with another rush of bloody fluid.

The men watched as Uba came and assumed the proper position for a woman in front of Vorn. When Vorn touched her he saw the happiness in her eyes and did not need the words she would tell but the others, especially the mogurs did. "Vorn, this medicine woman is sad to report that the woman Iza has delivered a daughter. Both are alive and healthy."

"Uba, tell the woman Iza I will come see the child later." Watching Uba scramble away he realized for the first time that she had aged with him but she would be her longer and be able to help guide Durc though he would never realize it. "The line of Medicine Women of Uba will continue as it should." He would make no other announcement and looking at Loug he nodded and the man to his credit walked sedately to the cave entrance.

Vorn noticed the interest by Klug's mate's youngest son and it seemed inappropriate somehow until he remembered that he lost his mate and her son only a short time ago so perhaps it was not unusual.

Chapter 21

Durc came out of the frigid water and shook the water from his body looking down and seeing the healing wounds on his chest were no worse for the cleaning. The water had refreshed him but his mind was still on the meeting he had early morning with Vorn and Uba. He had awakened yesterday and forced his pain filled body to rise but allowed Uba and Ura to care for him while he moved very little. There were no events that day and most people were in small groups discussing what they wanted to accomplish until the bear ceremony the next day but then Uba entered with Iza who was obviously ready to deliver her child. It was the hardest thing he had ever done when he stood and started toward the entrance, but he was inordinately pleased when Atta and Brac stood next to him and without making it noticeable supported him until he found a tall enough stone to sit on.

After the delivery of Iza's daughter and Uba had informed Vorn, she had stopped long enough to look at his wounds and test the heat he could feel burning his body. "I will return soon to give you something for the fever and place a new poultice." He remembered he could only nod. It had been Atta who had told him of the looks the various hunters gave when they saw the tattooed wound that marked the cave lion as his totem as well as the wolf. "There are many who now wish they would have stayed with you for the hunt for even though you killed the lioness, they would still have the status of being on the hunt. Crum was not happy when the hunters that left with him blamed him for their lack. Set is also not happy for many now think the son of his mate is not brave."

"I think they are right. He is not brave but he tries to hide it and he is more like Broud than I am comfortable with. We will all have to watch our backs Atta. Make sure the other hunters know this so that they can watch out for our women and Vorn who is ill though he tries to hide it."

"Come Vorn is entering the cave and you need to return so others cannot see how sick you are."

The pain on standing nearly took him to the ground but he stood without help and made it to his hearth grateful that Atta was with him. He had just got comfortable when Ura came to tell him a young hunter Eul, Klug's mate's youngest son wanted to talk with him. The poultice and the tea that Uba provided did remove enough of the pain that he was able to sit straight when the man was shown to his hearth. He was very young yet he carried himself proudly and looked Durc in the eye.

"Durc, I am Eul of Klug's clan, the youngest son of his mate." Durc knew that this man had now suffered two losses in a very short time but still kept himself together enough to come to him.

"This man would show his appreciation. When you leave I will go with you and be your hunter. I will support you and protect your mate and her children from all harm. I will protect her first son and support his right to follow after you. This I will do for I want your daughter as my mate when she becomes a woman."

"That will not be for many years Eul."

"I know this but I will wait for there will be much I have to prove to be worthy of the daughter of the leader."

Durc was surprised that this man had so readily accepted his future role when he himself had not. “Why do you make this offer and why not to Vorn who is leader.”

“Vorn is leader now. Vorn is a good leader but Vorn is ill. Durc will be leader after Vorn, it can be no other way and you have the support of your hunter and your mogur. I have gone to Vorn first as a courtesy, he sent me to you as he should for what I ask will not occur as you said for many years. The daughter of your mate is already stronger than my previous mate was at her age and she has the manners of a good clan woman. I will work hard to make myself worthy so that you will consider me for her mate.”

“I will accept you to Vorn’s clan but I will not make a decision on the girl Eyla until she becomes a woman.”

“It is all I ask.”

Looking out at the steppes, thinking back at the conversation Durc knew it would be one less thing to worry about for Eyla was learning quickly how to be a medicine woman and should anything happen Uba and Iza would always have her help.

Chapter 22

The water had refreshed him but his mind turned to the meeting he had early this morning with Vorn and Uba. Neither believed that Vorn would survive to make the long trek to their home cave and they both told him he had to prepare himself. The Bear Ceremony would be later this afternoon and within the next two days they would be leaving on their journey home. Durc enjoyed the cool morning breeze as it seemed to calm his thoughts. He was different, not only as Sethut and others had said that he was a mixture of Clan and the Others, it was more. He knew, if he had to, could function in the world of the Others. His clan was different for their acceptance of a deformed child now a man, and their acceptance of a man of the Others in their midst. The hunters of his clan were now different from all others at the clan gathering, first because of the flying spear he made and now because of the spear thrower that Ayla’s made first made plus the firestone which was given to Goov but kept by Junko and himself.

Dressing in his wrap he started back to the cave knowing that he was also different in his ability to swim. Thought the clan men and women were clean they seldom went beyond the shallows of a river or a small stream to bath and seldom were they completely wet. He enjoyed the water but in order to ease the rest of the clan’s concern he always swam and bathed away from the site of others. Even Ura was beginning to fear water less but she would never enjoy swimming.

When he got to the river he changed directions when he saw Grev and the others being purified for the Bear Ceremony. It was not allowed to interfere with those being purified and readied to set Ursus back to the spirit world. As he neared the cave he saw Norg and Sar enter the cave Junko had used since his arrival at the gathering. The clan for the most part had ignored his existence and at least one of the hunters of Vorn’s clan took him walking away from the area and Ura made sure he wanted for nothing. He could think of no reason why they would approach

Junko except for the fact of the spear thrower. Entering the cave he saw that Junko stood respectfully as Norg explained why they had come.

“I am Norg this is Sar. The man Durc said that spear thrown with a stick is a weapon of the others. He killed a cave lion with one spear. You, the others, would give this weapon to the clan?”

Junko knew of the kill for Atta had kept him informed of what was happening and he had wanted to see Durc when he heard of the horrible injury but Atta told him that the injury did not matter. “There are many clans of the others and some within these clans would not want the clan to have the spear thrower. Elk Camp, Lion Camp and I are not them. Durc and the woman Ura were adopted by the Lion Camp of the Mamutoi and they are family. Durc said the weapon can save lives of the clan hunters. Perhaps if I save the life of a hunter I would be able to trade with the other clans. That was my wish. I have been told that the leaders will not talk with me about the spear.”

“We are not leaders. We will think on what you said. Both men turned to leave and saw Durc at the entrance. “We did not come to harm your man of the others.”

“This I know for you are honorable men, still I would protect him since he is my brother.”

“He does not talk like a child or the others with all their noise.”

“He is a good hunter.”

When the two former leaders left, Junko sighed to relax and walked to where Durc was watching the two men depart. “I did not know who they were but at least they came without weapons.” Junko could see that Atta’s description of the wound being nothing was sadly incorrect for the furrows where the lion had clawed Durc were deep and red even through the black of the stain used to make it as a totem mark.

“They are like Vorn concerned for their clan. The son of Norg’s mate has learned the flying spear quicker than even Brac and Grev. I think some of the others may want to learn it but they will have to come to the cave to learn. You said at least they did not come with weapons. Who else has come?”

“A man, I do not know who he is came with a clan spear obviously upset and though he used clan signs I could not understand him and his words I did not understand.”

“He used his own clan’s language and I think I know who it was. I will send Atta to stay with you until the bear ceremony then when that is done he will come again and stay until we leave.”

Chapter 23

All members at the gathering took positions on the incline surrounding the area in front of the mogur’s cave so that they could see the Great Ursus being sent to the spirit world with all their

wishes. While the men looked on waiting for the hunters to arrive, the women and older children closed their eyes hoping their prayers were heard by Ursus to take with him. When the warriors appeared from a small cave that all now knew was the cave of the Mogurs, they were naked but for a single strap of leather tied around their waist that held the ceremonial knives that would send Ursus to the spirit world. These were the best of their hunters except for Grev. Usually the best of the story tellers were chosen by the mogurs so that should one be chosen the messages the men were taught would come alive for Ursus should the story teller be taken. Durc knew he was not chosen for this ceremony because though Ursus had shown his acceptance of him following Vorn, the mogurs were not about to change this ceremony which might determine the lives of the clan for the next seven years. The appearance of crushed stone outside the main cave entrance earlier in the day worried the mogurs and most left the cave well away from the unusual phenomenon. Durc however stopped for it looked like someone had crushed a firestone and left it. The mixture of the water from the short shower they had earlier made the light of the sun reflect off the grains it was then he noticed the birch bark that the glittering pile sat on. Wet and soft he wondered if it had gotten the grains from the stream, looking to see Vorn well ahead of him he shook his head as started forward just as Crum seemed to fall to the ground for no reason.

Though Grev spent much of his time making the weapons the cave used he was as strong and muscular as any of the hunters though he was a little older, Durc knew he was fast. Atta, having been chosen in the last clan gathering had no wish to repeat the experience and was glad he was not chosen. Brac looked at his sibling and wished he knew how the mogurs chose the hunters to take part in the ceremony for surely he had shown his strength when wrestling. Loug looked at the top of the hill where Iza and the women who needed to be separated from the men were told to stay. He knew she had her daughter with her and Goov had already told them that when they arrived at their cave and her spirit was folded in with the rest of the spirits her name and totem would reveal itself. For now she had no name but Iza hoped that Goov choose a new name for her and not one of the family names that had repeated so often it was difficult to distinguish between them except for what they had accomplished as medicine women of the clan.

The roar below brought everyone's attention to where the cave bear now roared his disapproval at the treatment he was receiving. Once docile to the loving care given by the clan he was now being poked and prodded with spears. The first casualty was quick and unexpected as the now enraged bear grabbed a spear and broke through the cage wall grabbing the neck of the mogur and snapping his neck even as his teeth sunk into his veins spraying the animal and the hunters now surrounding him with slick blood. Each of the hunters encircled the animal as it stood on all four feet so that it could not target just one. Having lost the element of surprise the hunters worked to find a way to kill the animal who now wanted blood to repay for the insult he had been dealt.

When Grev was able to jump on the back of the bear, he used his knife, sinking it deeply into the animal to reposition himself to get to the neck of the animal where he would have a better chance of severing one of the major vessels to the heart. At the first piercing of the knife the animal ignored all the other hunters for the one on his back. Each dig of the knife brought the bear even more pain until the animal stood on her rear legs to his full height of nearly eight feet twisting rapidly to fight the pain and try and grab the source of the pain. It was able to finally grab a part of the hunter and his teeth sunk into the muscle of the leg he was able to grab then the rest of the

hunters moved in and out, each scoring hits trying to ignore the screams of pain of the man as the bear jerked again and again with the leg in his mouth trying to dislodge the hunter. Falling to all four feet weakened from the loss of blood, the bear continued to try and get the original source of his pain. Blood flowed from the various wounds making his hair slick.

The rest of the hunters followed Grev's lead and jumped on the bear's back as one reached around the opposite direction from the animal's turned head and sunk the knife deep into the chest. The second plunge brought a spurt of bright red blood, but it was too late as the bear finally got the one human off his back and sunk his teeth deeply into the neck and chest as his own large heart gave out and he fell on top of his prey. There was an expected silence as the mogurs approached the bear and the exhausted hunters backed away until they were told their mission was complete.

Goov moved the bear as he growled not caring where his strength came from and pulled Grev from beneath the animal but there was no use, Grev had gone with Ursus just as the mogur had. Taking the body of Grev and that of the fallen mogur the mogurs silently returned to their cave leaving the hunters roaring with their success. Those of Vorn's clan watched as the mogurs disappeared into their cave with a vital part of their clan. Durc felt the pain in his chest but waved Uba away for it was not pain the medicine woman could treat. He would not make a fool of himself for he knew this would be the last time he would see his brother. In the last few years he and Grev had become very close as they worked together to not only improve the flying spear but the spear thrower as well. He could hear the keening of Grev's mate and knew it was too soon to approach her now but when they got back he would make her his second woman, under his protection as would be her sons and daughter. The boy was just slightly younger than Agal but already knew the task of making weapons and knapping flint for the hunters though he would not be allowed to apply that knowledge until he became a man and a hunter.

The women moved down the hill as the hunters finished eating the liver to skin and prepare the bear for the feast so that all could be one with Ursus this night even the children. When everyone was done and all that could be eaten was finished, the mogurs would come and remove what remained of Ursus and all would be sent to the spirit world in a final spirit fire. Durc closed his eyes then went to join the rest of the hunters to listen to the retelling of the bear ceremony and the hunters deserved his attention for they had done well.

Chapter 24

No one could leave until the mogurs came from their cave denoting the completion of sending Ursus and those that would travel with him to the spirit world. Vorn's clan was packed and waiting as were all the other clans for the mogurs did not show themselves for two days after the ceremony. When they finally exited the cave they all looked gaunt and ill but there would be no delays in leaving and each clan moved toward their own homes. There was no denial that Vorn's clan would once again leave the gathering as first among the clans especially after Grev's loss but that announcement the acolyte to the mogur of Jag's clan was now mogur. Durc knew that Goov often complained since their arrival that the mogur had been too old and should have long given up his place to his acolyte now he had.

Vorn asked Durc to take the lead after they were out of sight of the other clans and this he did but he stopped early to not only give the women rest but to allow Goov to recover. Sending Brac out with hunters to bring something that could be prepared quickly that would feed everyone, Durc made sure that Eul was with him for he valued Brac's opinion.

"Durc you cannot be too slow to return for we are the furthest and there is much to do to get ready for winter."

"I know Vorn but if I am to lead them I need Goov to be at his best so that he can help guide me." Vorn nodded and was relieved that Durc would seek the mogur should he need him.

The group quickly fell into the rhythm of traveling and Durc had little to do but he kept his eye on Vorn, and Grev's mate Hub who with three children was kept too busy to brood for long. That he had talked with her son Bloc to make it so that she was busy, Durc was sure he also got his siblings to help. Durc pulled him aside each night with Agal and made the two boys practice thought it would still be a few years before they became men and hunters.

Watching their increasing accuracy with the sling and flying spear, the two boys were becoming close but Durc pulled Bloc aside and told him he would be responsible for making digging sticks for the women and they were to be made as Grev made flying spears except with a single point instead of two. Loug was very protective of Iza and her daughter and had to be forced to hunt when it was needed for he still needed to provide for them. Durc was as hard on him as Vorn had been on him when Ura had been injured so often.

They had only been traveling for four days when Durc brought it up to Ura. It was not necessary for him to do so but then Ura and his relationship was not like others for they talked often and though Ura never showed any signs of been anything but a good clan woman, he knew she enjoyed the sharing they had. "I want to take Grev's mate Hub as my second woman. Not as my mate except when you are unavailable to me but he was my brother as much as any man here and this is something I need to do."

"I would never think of telling you what you can and cannot do Durc it is not my place. I was considering asking you to take Hub for she has lost the ability to control her children. Her children are acting up because Grev is not there to discipline them and I thought if you took her as your second woman they would behave."

"They are behaving just as I asked. Bloc knew his mother's sadness was great and I told him to make more work for her so that her mind would be off her loss. It appears as if his siblings were told something similar by him but it has worked. She sleeps at night now and though she is tired, she has little time to dwell."

"Grev is a big loss not just for her but for the children as well. They will all benefit from having you in their life."

“There is more I would tell you Ura. The hunter Eul has asked for Eyla as a mate when she becomes a woman. I will get to know him before I promise that and this he knows. He is well thought of and believes he owes me a debt. I will think about him as I watch how he acts.”

“It would be a good mating for her. The women also noticed his concentration of Eyla while he guarded the women. Eyla was drawn to him after he lost his mate. When she touched his face he did not react like many of the men and push her away but they stared at each other for a long time. He was often with those who guard the women after that and many women think highly of him as well. Before her death, Shin said her youngest had many obstacles to bear before he became a man and she was proud of how he handled the death of his mate who she knew he cared deeply for.”

“This is good to know.”

Chapter 25

As the women packed up to get ready to leave Brac approached Durc, “We have someone following us. Atta and Sag saw their fires when they guarded as did Loug and Eul.”

“How close?”

“They are still half a day behind us but if they are running they will catch us by the time the sun is at its highest.”

“Place two more hunters at the rear and tell them to expect anything.”

Brac nodded and left to make sure all the hunters were aware they were being followed.

The three runners approached the clan cautiously as they traveled going to Brac, who they all knew first. Durc knew of their arrival but since they were no threat he ignored them until they stopped for the night. He recognized Omug from Neg’s clan, Ibug from Klug’s clan and Jag’s sibling Aluk. As they traveled his own hunters rotated making sure that Vorn and Durc both knew their reasons for coming even before they stopped still the men were ignored until Durc and Vorn rested beneath a tree waiting for the meal Ura and Uba was helping prepare for all the hunters. When Eul approached, Durc made sure both he and Vorn were armed for those he knew of these men and knew them on site, he did not know them well. As the men approached he noticed they looked at his healing wound on his chest before looking in his eyes. Listening to Eul introduced them, Durc ignored the men and looked to Vorn who was still the leader and the decisions were his.

He was not surprised that Aluk was the first to speak for he had the highest status of the hunters with him and he was also pleased that the hunter had picked up on the fact that Durc would not engage him as the leader and by pass Vorn. “Vorn, my brother Jag wishes to send to your clan the son of his mate Nug and the son of my mate Irok, to learn to be hunters of the clan from the hunter Durc. It is his wish that these boys learn to be as good of hunters as those of Vorn’s clan.”

“When would he send these children and how old are they now?”

“Nug was born just after the last gathering and Irok was born the winter before. I would bring these two to you before the beginning of the next summer.”

Vorn with a non-committal grunt he turned to the hunter Ibug. “Vorn I am Ibug and have been sent by my leader Klug to ask if you would train his second woman’s son Alok and his sibling Amo as a mate for one of your hunters when she has become a woman of Vorn’s clan. Alok was also born at the time of the last gathering.”

Again Vorn grunted and turned to the last man. “Vorn, I am Omug, a hunter for Neg’s clan for two summers. My mother’s mate is Neg’s second in command and the hunt leader. Neg has sent me to as the man of the others to teach me his weapon. Neg also asks his friend Durc to accept the second son of his mate Mulk, to train to be a hunter. Mulk is not yet a man and hunter but it will not be long but Neg wants Mulk to be a man like Loug.”

“If you stay with us how will Mulk come?”

“The leader Jag has offered and taken Mulk for the winter to await the runner of Jag’s clan. If you accept Mulk and the others they will travel together to come to your cave.”

“Go, eat and rest. I will give you my decision in the morning before we start again.”

The men bowed slightly and turned to follow Eul to the other hunters who were now being given food and water by the women. Vorn and Durc looked at each other and both saw the humor in each other’s eyes. “Apparently your Juk made an impression of Norg and Sag when they visited him. Klug I thought would approach us before we left when he saw how quickly Neg picked up the flying spear.”

“Neg will have to practice a lot before he is consistent but this he will do. But why send one of your best hunters away. Omug is well thought of not only as a hunter but as a weapons maker as well even though he is very young.”

“It would be good for Bloc to have another teach him and Bloc can also teach Omug.”

When the men approached Vorn the next morning Uba came forward with a bundle of food and a skin of water for the two that would be leaving and quickly left. “Omug you may stay with us. Alok and Ibug I send you back to your leaders. Tell them we will accept all they would send us for training but we will keep them until they prove themselves. When they are hunters we will return them to their clans as hunters and men. Jag, Neg and Klug will be proud of them. I cannot promise they will learn the weapons of the other for there is much they must learn first as will you Omug.”

“Omug, “ Durc looked at the man who would be a valuable asset to them as a clan. “Are you mated?”

“My mate was killed when water suddenly appeared in what was usually a very gentle stream.”

“You will be at the hearth of Grev and are responsible for caring for the woman Hub and help train her children.”

“I will do this.”

The other men left to return to their clans as Vorn’s clan continued their journey back home.

Chapter 26

Durc watched the interactions between Hub and Omug and was glad to see him not only taking Bloc and working with him but his younger brother Flin. His presence also seemed to calm Hub and she was more efficient and cared well for Omug and her children and collected more with the women than she had since they started. Brac had started to teach him the sling and bolo both but away from the others for Bloc and Agal were both better with these weapons than was Omug. When he explained to Omug that knowledge of these weapons would help him use the flying spear better when he began to learn that weapon.

“Brac what of the spear thrown with a stick the weapon of the others?”

“Until you can make one after you have hunted with the flying spear you will not be taught how to use it. There are hunters in this clan that still cannot make one and have not learned. Omug, I will tell you now that when we return I will be asking Durc to have Hub as my second woman. Grev was my sibling and it is obvious that Grev’s totem was used to overcome Hub’s to make all three of her children for I see him in them all. If Durc has promised her to you, then you must tell me.”

Omug thought a moment as he looked at the man that would eventually hold the second position in this clan. He had no thought about the woman Durc gave him to care for and there were plenty of women to care for his needs and eventually Durc would give him a mate. If it was Hub or another it mattered little. “I am a good weapon maker and I know the flint stone, I will be able to make it, as for the woman, she is a woman and it is not my decision.”

Brac nodded knowing the hunter did not boast for his mentor had been well thought of.

Durc also watched Vorn for although he seemed worn by the end of the day he seemed able to continue by the next day. The traveling was hard but no one seemed to mind since everyone was anxious to return to the cave. As Vorn had said there was much to do before winter set in and most of it fell to the women since they needed to collect plants, grains, fruits and vegetable. Durc knew they needed to go to the sea soon and wanted the women to collect even more salt than usual. The idea he had would not go over well but if he was to be leader it would be done.

Durc knew as soon as they entered the area of the old cave and made a wide berth keeping to the foothills of the steppes rather than start into the hills too soon. It not only lead around the old

cave but it was also easier traveling. Since it had been a while since they all had fresh meat Durc looked around for what he would send the hunters out for. There were herds of bison, horse, red deer, and even a few megasorus below them. Brac had already said there was water ahead in the form of a small stream with trees to provide shade. Motioning to Brac who seemed to be close of late along with Eul, he pointed to a small herd of seigas just entering the valley. "Take only what we need for we cannot stay. The women can keep the hides and anything that can wait until we return but leave anything else."

Durc watched as Brac chose two others and headed down the hill. He turned at the sound of a gasp and saw Vorn sinking to the ground but Durc was fast enough to catch him before he hit. Uba gave Vorn something to drink and by the look on Vorn's face it was not pleasant, but Durc was worried when he saw the small amount of blood at the corner of Vorn's mouth. "Uba?"

"I don't know Durc, get Goov."

Durc rushed to bring the mogur and with a look from Uba left the area and made sure others stayed away until Ura could tell him. Even from a distance Vorn looked pale and that worried Durc for Uba had told him that should Vorn start to bleed he could die quickly. The sight of the blood at the corner of his mouth did not bode well. Seeing Ura looking at him and quickly look away, he wanted to go to her and feel her warmth and the love she always gave him. Should Vorn die now Durc knew he would have a fight on his hands with the mogur at least and possibly the hunters as well but he was ready for it.

Crouching next to one of the fires, Durc wanted the heat to take the cold away but he knew it was not the weather that chilled him but the thought of being in charge of these people's lives. Twice Uba came to the fire and made a drink but he had no knowledge of what she would use to save Vorn but trusted that if she could not save him then no one could. When he felt the touch on his shoulder, he stood and faced Goov who immediately placed the leaders necklace over his head. Durc immediately looked at Vorn.

"No he has not gone to Ursus but he is too ill to be leader. You are now leader Durc."

"Goov."

"No it has to be. He is too weak and only Uba's medicine makes him continue. She has made sure he will not awake in pain. She says it is all she can do for her medicines are no longer controlling the bleeding."

By the time the hunters returned they did not even need to get to the center of the camp to know what happened and the site of Durc wearing the leader's necklace just confirmed it. Every member of the clan came to greet him to let him know that he was accepted in his new role even though they did not need to do it. That Vorn was still alive no longer mattered for he was incapable of leading.

Chapter 27

The next morning Vorn stood as if he was better but when Durc would have given him back the necklace Vorn held his hand. "It is as it should be. Uba refuses to release me and I will stay as long as she succeeds but I do not think it will be long." Durc nodded and once again took the lead as he led the group between the hills that would lead to the valley and green hills of their home cave. When Vorn rose the next day, Uba's medicine did not have a dramatic effect like it had the day before and by noon, Vorn had collapsed.

"Uba, give him something to make him sleep and we will put him on the travois. I will pull him back to the cave so that if he is going to die it will be in the cave he found for us."

Uba could only nod. The Datura would slow the bleeding for he would not be moving but it would not save Vorn's life, nothing would. She had kept him out of pain with Ayla's fruit but that was all she had accomplished. She would lose him. There was no stopping Ursus when he wanted a hunter with him. When Vorn slept, Durc carefully placed him on a travois that he made on which Uba and Ura padded well so the he would not move much as the trekked through the terrain which was not always flat and even. When they stopped for the night, Durc wanted to continue one since they were so close but Goov convinced him that is was better for all to allow a rest. The women quickly made a meal and Durc and Brac sat with the previous leader both hoping that he would awaken at least one more time.

Looking to Goov as he joined them, Durc looked at Brac. "Brac you are my second in command. You are a man I trust and whose advice is usually good. I know that with all those that will join us next year you will help me train them to be good hunters and men. The girl I will give to Bloc when he becomes a hunter."

"It is a good plan for it will give us ties to Klug's clan even if it is through a woman."

Brac left the new leader and the mogur alone as much as he would like to see Vorn's eye one last time, it was more important that the mogur and leader talk.

"He has trained you well."

"I will not shame him. When he joins Ursus he will be buried next to Brun in the men's cave."

"Durc that was done because it was winter."

"It does not matter. The two best leaders should be there where the men can count on their spirits and totems for help. Vorn has a good spirit and he has been true to his lynx totem. He was never meant to be leader but he was a good one. He deserves this honor more than any."

"It will be done as you wish Durc."

"Once he is sent to Ursus we will go to the sea."

Chapter 28

There was excitement to be home as they entered the valley but the sadness of what was to be put a pale over it. The men moved quickly as Durc moved towards the cave so that Vorn who was somehow holding on could die at his hearth. Durc had seen the blood as it seeped through the furs onto the ground when they rested in the middle of the day and he decided then he would not stop again until he was at Vorn's hearth. Now as he neared the cave he did not even stop to thank Ursus for their safe return, the hunters would do that this night. He had already sent Brac and Atta ahead to dig the chamber Vorn would be placed in, it would be up to Uba to provide the salt needed to help keep the body from deteriorating too quickly. For now Durc went directly to Vorn's hearth and placed the leader so that his head was raised to ease his breathing. Then he waited.

Uba and Ura both tried to get Durc to eat and though he took the bowl he set it aside and continued to watch Vorn silently wishing him to open his eyes. As the cave settled and quieted, Durc remained at Vorn's side. He was the leader and the one man who made a difference in his life and deserved not to die alone. Uba had tried to stay awake but her worry exhausted her. He felt the movement and looked up to see the dark brown eyes looking at him. "Protect your mother and your family, and know I am proud of you." As he spoke, pink foam at the corners of his mouth and Durc knew he would not talk again. When Vorn closed his eyes he sighed but did not breathe again. Durc did not touch him again but laid his own spear thrower next to the man he would always think of as the leader. He had never conquered the weapon for he said it was a weapon for the young to learn but he saw the advantages and allow a weapon of the others to be used by his clan hunters.

Turning his head he was not surprised to see Goov standing over them. "He is with Ursus."

"I know. Let us move him before the rest awake."

"No let Uba do her last duty and clean him for he would not want to appear before Ursus this way." Goov nodded and Durc only had to touch Uba's shoulder to wake her. He stopped her keening with a signal but he could not stop the soft whimper as she began to pull the furs that covered Vorn. Durc left the hearth and woke Ura to go to Uba to help her. When the two women were finished he would carry Vorn to where he would rest.

The people of the clan woke slowly for they were tired from their forced march the last days but the fact that Vorn was no longer in the leader's hearth started the women cries of distress and the men began to move toward the men's area. Already in the grave that would hold his remains, Vorn was naked as when Ursus sent him and painted by Goov in a pattern that would denote his status and that he was a hunter of great renown. The rock edged grave held him sitting upright facing the east so that his spirit would know where to find the rising sun. His skin was caked in salt and over the salt was the red ochre that would protect him as he traveled. Each man placed something in the grave that Vorn would need and as Durc was the last of the men, he placed the tooth of the cave lion he had taken from the skull he never told anyone he had found, at the time it had been a way to be closer to his mother, now he hoped the spirit of the cave lion would

protect Vorn in his journey. Goov looked at the tooth and nodded to the new leader for the gift was of great importance.

When the women were allowed in after the men had left, they placed food, herbs and bowls Vorn would need as he traveled. Uba, her face twisted in pain, placed a small water bag with tea she had added datura to so that Vorn would never again be in pain. Goov the only man to witness the sorrow of the women knew that Vorn would be missed even more than Brun for he had been the heart of the clan that had chosen him to follow, going against clan custom to rid themselves of a bad leader. Though the men did not show it, he knew their pain was at least equal to that of the women. When the area was finally emptied he covered Vorn with the sand he had collected during the night and placed the wood over the grave. Taking the fire stone, he started a small fire on the shoulder bone of a red deer and added it all to the pile of wood. He would keep the fire going for three days then allow it to go out for by then Vorn would have made it to Ursus world.

Chapter 29

Durc felt the wetness on his face but looking up he saw no clouds and knew his mother's eye weakness was affecting him again as he walked away from the rest of the hunters to climb to the area he had used as a child when his life seemed to be too difficult. The tightness in his chest and throat made it difficult to breathe even though he had made this journey so many times. He was now a man, a leader, and had no one to take part of the burden from him any longer. Always he had Vorn, and when he was younger and then after they had reconciled he had Grev and Brac. Brac was now his second in command and would look to him for leadership as would the rest of the clan. Vorn had often told him that as leader he would be alone with only the mogur as an equal.

He watched as the women left the cave and saw the smoke leaving the smaller opening leading to the men's area. Since the women had been allowed in none of the hunters would be allowed in until Goov made it free of all female spirits. As he watched he could see that neither the hunters nor the women seemed to have a direction to vent their grief and knew he could no longer hide. Looking out on the plains of the valley he saw a large herd of reindeer beginning their trek north. They would get as many as they could for reindeer hides were the best for clothing. After that was finished they would go to the sea and collect salt, fish, and shells for weapons for the men and utensils and bowls for the women.

Standing he started down knowing what was expected of him. On the way he stopped at the storage cave and saw that it was nearly empty. It was time to get ready for winter. Walking to the women first since it would be easier to deal with them he told Uba to take half the women collecting for the winter since the stores were empty the rest would wait on the hunters. The sorrows etched in her face made him want to hold her and tell her it was alright that things would get better but he did not believe it himself. When the women left Durc gathered the hunters and pulled Brac aside. "Brac is my second in command and hunt leader. Today we hunt reindeer. Omug you will stay with Loug for he is very good with the flying spear. I know you have been working with Brac and you will continue to do but on this hunt you will see what both weapons can do."

“Brac all the hunters are to stay hidden until the reindeer move from the area and we will be able to hunt them again when the women finish with the first hunt. Atta after the hunt you will stay with the herd until it is nearly dark and report to Brac what they are doing so that we can gauge where they will be when we are ready to hunt again.”

The hunters gathered their weapons and Brac came to Durc’s side to walk with him. “Durc I would ask for Hub as my second woman so that I can raise her sons.”

“I had thought to give her to Omug.”

“He needs a young mate not Hub. I will take her and make her sons good hunters and men.”

“I will tell Hub when we return.”

“Omug shows promise with the bolo, I would like him to try to get a straggling animal with it and make him part of the hunt. I can follow up with the spear thrower and still not spook the herd any more than the hunt will any way.”

“You are the hunt leader Brac. If you think that is how it should be than it will be that way.” Durc knew that though Brac was a good hunter he was not always decisive. If Grev had lived then Grev would have been his second in command for he had the respect of the other hunters and he could make decisions quickly and stood by them. If those decisions were wrong he never repeated them. He could only hope that his support of Brac’s decisions would help the second in command become more confident.

Epilog

Durc walked to the man standing on the outcrop the clan used as a lookout and knew he was waiting for some sign that Trun would be returning. So much had happened since he arrived but he was glad Junko was able to stay with the clan. Soon those leaders wanted them to learn the new weapons would arrive and that would cause confusion. The clan had come through the winter well. Uba stayed at the leader’s hearth with him and continued to be a vault of wisdom though when they talked she was always in a position of respect. The only sadness came when Hub had died. Uba was unsure what had caused the death and Brac was as confused for she had seemed normal the night before but Uba had told him privately the presence of the white substance on her lips and the red of her eyes might indicate that she had taken something. Durc had though she had been pleased to be given to Brac as a second woman for she had shown no signs that she was unhappy. Omug had received his own hearth and was respectful of the mates of the women he used to relieve himself with so none of the hunter complained. Still he could not imagine why a woman would use something that would cause death.

Durc stood for a moment and looked to where Junko looked as saw the richness of the valley. Already the women were adding fresh foods to their diet and it was much appreciated by the men. “He will return soon Junko. His mother will demand that he return.”

“I know but I still worry.”

“I have a request Junko.” He waited until he had the man of the others full attention before he continued. “The fall when you return to Elk camp I want you to think of this. I want you to stay with the Clan for three summers to teach those that will come and learn the knowledge necessary the throwing spear. If you bring your mate I will promise that she will not be used as a woman of the clan for I know it bothers you. I would also ask that you bring her oldest son so that he will know the clan. I would not want someone new to cause stress to my clan.”

“This is an offer that deserves much thought Durc and I will think about it and give you my answer before I leave to go back to the Elk Camp. If Trun returns it means he could be a go between while I stay here. There are many things I have to think of.”

“As it should be.”

When they turned back to the valley, Durc was first to see the small figure entering the valley from the south but he also saw that group that included children entering from the east. Running to the cave he did not see that Junko was right behind him, but he stopped only long enough at the cave to gather several hunters who followed him down the hill. Durc sent some of the hunters to protect Trun and he and the rest slowed to a walk as they approached the clan group whose hunters acted like bison and surrounded the young against the single man of the others.

“Dorc you do not challenge a man of the others from entering into your clan area?”

Aluk’s demands pleased Durc for it showed fear when there was no reason. “It is someone we have been waiting for. We trade with the others of his camp for the others have little access to salt. It is good.” Durc looked at the fear in the young knowing they got it from the adults with them. “Which is Nug?” The boy looked up at his name and looked directly at Durc with a look of annoyance.” Immediately Durc pushed the boy to the ground and ignored the hunters that had brought their spears just a little higher. “I am leader here Nug and you will show me respect. You have no manners but you will. I will take you to my hearth and train you myself. Until you learn manners you will not touch a weapon, not even a weapon of a child. Do you understand this Nug?” The hunters relaxed their spears knowing that Durc merely reprimanded the boy as he should.

“Yes Durc.” The boy looked down and wished his mother’s mate had chosen another for this but the idea of learning the special weapon was worth anything he had to endure. Eventually the men of Durc’s cave would get tired of taking orders from a deformed man and another would be leader.

Dorc ignored the female child who would be placed with Loug and Iza to raise. Aluk introduced the other boys and Durc found himself studying Mulk who would probably be a hunt leader in the future or even a leader should something happen to Neg’s mate’s oldest son. Mulk looked Durc in the eyes but was not being disrespectful but attentive and did not seem to fear him as the two other boys did after he disciplined Nug. “Mulk you will stay at the hearth of Brac my second in command. He will be responsible for all of the training except Nug’s. Irok you will be with Atta a good hunter and an expert with the flying spear, sling and bolo. Alok, you will

stay with Eul and learn with and from him. He is a good hunter and has learned the flying spear well.”

“Aluk, I offer hospitality until you leave to return but understand the men of the others here have my respect and my protection.”

“It is understood Durc. Jag has said the man of the others at the gathering could talk correctly. I would like to talk with him.”

Durc nodded and lead the way back to the cave. He saw that Turn was already with Junko and the rest of the clan was watching the clan visitors as they approached. It was going to be an exciting few years.

DURC CONTINUED

Chapter 31

Goov watched as the young boys practiced with their throwing spears and slings but he saw more than those that trained those that would soon become hunters. He saw the continued hate on the features of the boy Nug who in the year he had been with the clan had not learned that he was just a child and his manners continue to be atrocious. When he had tried to order Ura and Uba, Goov thought Durc would have killed the boy but instead he had given him to the two women to give whatever tasks they required done. Other that had been sent after the last summer meeting quickly learned that even though Durc was deformed in their eyes that all courtesy was to be observed. They learned that every man and woman in the clan had a purpose and as new comers they had no status no matter who their mother's mates were. All but Nug learned and we well thought of by those that trained them, but the son of Jag's mate would not bend and Goov suspected that Durc was coming to the end of his patience with the boy.

Through the months he had seen all the boys, those that arrived with him and those of the clan try to help Nug adapt but each had turned from him at his foul moods were turned on them. Refusing to learn the local language, he forced others to talk to him in the silent language known by all the clan, only Durc refused to do this and Nug's anger and being reprimanded in front of women for being stupid did not sit well. The women and girls alike stayed away from him except for Ura and Uba who had little patience with him and recently had taken on Durc's example and only spoke to him in the local language. That they did not have to discipline the boy let others know that he knew enough of the language to understand and know he did not want to have a woman reprimand him.

The loss of Grev was deeply felt by not only the children of his mate who had followed him.

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DURC CONTINUED

Chapter 31

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Through the months he had seen all the boys, those that arrived with him and those of the clan try to help Nug adapt but each had turned from him at his foul moods were turned on them. Refusing to learn the local language, he forced others to talk to him in the silent language known by all the clan, only Durc refused to do this and Nug's anger at being reprimanded in front of women for being stupid did not sit well. The women and girls alike stayed away from him except for Ura and Uba who had little patience with him and recently had taken on Durc's example and only spoke to him in the local language. That they did not have to discipline the boy let others know that he knew enough of the language to understand and know he did not want to have a woman reprimand him.

Looking at Agal, Bloc, and Rold learning to use the sling, he was surprised that Eul was so adept at the weapon. That he wanted to mate with Eyla who could one day be a medicine woman if not this clan then another for it was obvious that Ayla's line was a strong line for medicine women of the others for the child picked up the knowledge very quickly as if she had the memories. Eul will have to wait for several more years but he used his time wisely having learned to use the throwing spear he was now working on a spear thrower, though he had not yet learned to ask for the tool.

The loss of Grev was deeply felt by not only the children of his mate who had followed him but by the hunters and Durc as well. Although younger than his sibling Brac, Durc had come to depend on the quiet assurance of Grev and often sought his opinion. Brac was not pleased to find himself second in command and Goov would not be surprised if he soon asked Durc to choose another. Having never wanted to be the leader even when such was possible when Broud was still alive, Brac seemed more interested in teaching the younger hunters to make sure they did not lack the skills he had when he was facing going on his first hunt. He was well suited for the job for like Durc, he demanded the complete attention of the boys and they were treated as they treated others. That Brac also lost patience with the boy Nug was surprising for of all the hunters Brac had the most patience.

Looking at the boy collecting firewood while the others practiced, the latest punishment from Durc, he could see he wanted to learn but did not want to learn from those of this clan. Jag had sent the boy to learn the spear thrower but at the rate he was going he would never become a man of the clan. Shaking his head he turned toward the caves and his quiet alcove so he could meditate on the problem.

Durc had seen Goov watching and wondered what he was thinking for at the moment he was planning on sending the boy Nug back to Jag with Brac and perhaps Eul. The attitude of the boy was beyond bearing but Durc wanted to waste no more time with him. Looking at the rest of the boys that arrived with him all be credits to the clans they came from and shortly they would all be good hunters who cared for their clan and their women. Nug seemed to care only for himself and not those around him he would one day have to rely on to eat and get skins for protection. Durc froze and looked at the boy who collected wood slowly while the others practiced. He was young but he acted as if he knew more than those who had tried to train him until they had given up, even Brac. Turning from the field he followed the mogul for he had an idea that might help everyone. He hated to admit defeat.

Jogging to catch up to the holy man images filled Durc's mind as he thought of the problem of Nug. When he reached Goov he matched his steps until the holy man took notice of him. For all that he was the leader and could order the Mogur, it was not the relationship they had, but one of respect and understanding. Durc did not know nor did he want to know the world of the spirits and Goov could hunt but seldom did he join the other hunters relying on his portion of the hunts which was always generous. "The boy Nug troubles you?"

Goov was always one to go right to the point and Durc appreciated it. "The boy will not learn, he can learn, but refuses to learn and he like many of the clan do not understand how others can

follow a deformed man. His thoughts do not bother me but his refusal to learn does. We had all heard his boast and I think that perhaps we might allow him to test himself.”

Goov did not like the sound of what Durc might be thinking. “How so?”

“There is snow still on the ground and I have not seen any sign Spring is near, I come to you to see if a storm is coming.”

“I do not feel one, but Ursus can cause a storm as he wishes.”

“The boy needs to realize that he needs others to survive. He claims he knows the spear and sling and though I have forbidden him to touch weapons because he will not act like he should, I am going to give him a knife, a spear and a sling and send him out alone. Storm or not he will have to understand that only those who are part of the clan can benefit from the clan.”

“He does collect wood.”

Durc snorted in derision, “Eyla collects more than he does and she is just past her walking year.”

“You are leader Durc but should this boy die in the attempt to prove himself there will be bad feelings among the clans.”

“He will not go out alone only think he is. I will take Agal out and scout to see what is still in the area and I will think. I want to be able to track easily incase he does get in trouble. If this does not work then when spring comes I will ask Brac and Eul to return him to his clan. He will lose face and perhaps will not be considered a man for quite a while until Jag’s anger cools, for Jag will know all.”

“I will talk with Ursus and see if a storm comes. If it does not come I will take the boy for a few days and see if I can find the problem. It has gone too long for it to be about how you look.”

Chapter 32

Goov took the bowl from Sag and drank the contents as he faced the skull of Ursus he had found that first year they had found the cave. Behind the skull which was now set on a small outcropping of rock that he and Sag had worked to increase the space on was a small fire that seemed to make the eyes glow as the light made its way through the various openings in the skull. As he felt the drink beginning to work he thought how well Sag had learned since his arrival. Even now that there was little change in his walk from others, Goov knew he still had pain on occasion when he worked the leg too much but true to his heritage, Sag made not comment but he had seen Uba go to his hearth several times late at night to place hot poultice on the leg. He was feeling old and knew that Sag still needed more training but then they all learned as they lived.

Forcing his mind to be blank, he allowed Ursus’ drink to take him to the spirit world and immediately felt the cold wind, but there was anger in the wind and as the blackness gave way to

white he could discern the tiny flakes and knew it to be snow. Seeing the wolf trotting through the storm as if it was not affected he followed and soon saw that the wolf followed a wild hog which was unusual for the hogs were known to move south out of the worse areas for snow or stay in their deep burrows during a storm since they had little protection against the cold and never were they alone. Even though the males only associated with the females in the spring to relieve themselves, the males usually stayed together for protection against larger predators and for warmth in the winter months. The Goov knew that this boar represented Nug whose totem was strong in him and would probably be proud of how the boy was acting except even the boar relied on others.

When the boar became aware of the wolf stalking him, he moved deeper into the woods even though the animal's eye sight is poor the boar is an animal of the forest while the wolf is adaptable to many environments. At the sound of the lion's roar, both animals stopped in their tracks and while the boar began to dig for a place to hide the wolf moved towards the sound of the lion and when the two faced each other they turned to where the boar continued to dig. Before either could get near a boar larger than any Goov could remember seeing attacked the smaller animals, throwing it into the air and charging again. Bleeding the smaller boar turned and ran from the larger only to be chased by the larger one until the small boar slipped down an embankment and landed on a thin shelf while the wolf and lion sat next to each other and watched from above.

The cold darkness that met his eyes when he finally awoke did not bother Goov for he was used to it. Thoughts of what he had seen pleased him and he was sure Durc would also be pleased when Goov explained the vision. Pleased to see that the area was put in order so that he had nothing to do, he wondered if he should select a younger boy so that when he made Sag Mogur he would already have an acolyte.

When he arrived at his hearth Orva was still awake and had hot tea and food waiting for him. He had never returned to his hearth since Brun mated him to Orva that she had not done so no matter the lateness of his return even if it was days later. He knew it was close to morning and she would get little sleep before she had to be moving about for there was still grains that could be collected and there was always a need of wood. Furs and food always needed care and he knew she was helping Ura and Uba making winter wraps for those in need. For so many years she had made his life easier and even though she had never successfully had a child, he was sure it was Ursus who wanted her to have her entire attention for his comfort and he appreciated it and made sure others knew of his esteem as was apparent by the fur she now wore made from three newborn red deer fawns that was all he had demanded as his portion on the last early spring hunt. Laying on their sleeping space was the entire fur from a mammoth that while heavy was always warm. She had cut pieces from it to make foot ware for him and herself which pleased him.

Looking at the leader's tent he saw that Durc was sleeping even though Uba was treating one of the children of the hearth for one thing or another as children always seemed to get injured or ill but it was all in the learning. Looking at the entrance he saw no lightening to the small amount of sky visible through the top of the mammoth hide that covered the entrance to break the wind and decided as soon as he finished eating he would sleep for a while.

Orva watched as Goov slipped into sleep noting for the first time the grizzled coloring of his hair and knew hers matched his for they were of an age. She was not going to lay down to sleep for there was not enough time and she could already see that Ura was up caring for the children while Uba worked on the painful injury that Ruj received when Nug had pushed the small boy out of his way. The youngest of Ura's children, even though she was now swelling once again with new life, had been stoic and had not told the others what had happened but Ura and she had seen it and Ura refused to say anything for her anger was hot and she feared what she might do but her pride in her son eased the anger as Uba worked on the injury. All the women remembered the actions of Broud and in their mind Nug was too similar to Broud in his attitude and actions to be comfortable. Although they would not tell Durc, all three women agreed that the best thing for the clan would be that Nug be returned to his home camp.

Durc watched from his bedspace, awaking as soon as Ura rose from beside him, as Uba treated Ruj. The women had not told him what happened but their actions spoke volume and though if asked he knew either would tell him what had happened but he was not sure Ura's son would. He was proud of the boy who even at this young age accepted the treatment from Uba, even as painful as they must be, without a sound or movement. This son was more clan than Agal in that his neck was shorter and he was unable to make the sounds that his two siblings could and already Agal was well versed in the language of the others and could converse effortlessly with Junko and Trunoi and though she would never talk with a man not of her hearth, he was sure that Eylal was just as proficient for her mother worked with her often. Rising he looked around the cave as the various hunters rose and started toward the rear of the cave in order to give the women space to make the morning meal and care for children before the day truly started. He knew that Goov has stayed long in his spirit chamber and he would not know what he had seen until later in the day but it made no difference. All three of the others were planning on returning to the Mamutoi. Junko wanted his mate to deliver her child among his people and Trunoi was promised and planned to join with his mate at the first matrimonial. He wanted them to take a message to Danug. As much as he would like to join them and see the Mamutoi again, he knew that the clan would never survive that kind of separation from him now.

Looking at Nug who continued to lay in his bed, Durc went to him and kicked him and pulled the furs that covered him. "You will fill the wood alcove this day. If I see you standing still I will drag you to do your task. You have until dark to fill it no matter how much the woman may use. Go." Durc watched the boy grab his outer fur and leave the cave then turned to Ura and Uba. "Have all the women collect wood from the alcove and put it in their hearths for their use if they have room. Uba take some to the opening to Goov's chamber as well as the men's chamber we will care for it from there." Both women nodded and watched as Durc left the hearth to go to the men's area so that food could be prepared. They would make food available for Nug but other than setting it next to the alcove they would not go out of their way to see to his needs any longer unless told to do so.

Chapter 33

He had never known such anger as he threw logs of wood into a pile, ignoring the biting cold wind that whipped around him. Durc had been right when he had heard him tell Set that Durc wanted to force the clan to accept those that were deformed. "The boys they are sending to

Vorn's cave should fight learning this way of the others, it is not our way. They need to stay true to the clan so if the others do attack we can fight them instead of walking away like we have in the past."

He had not heard what Set had said in return but he knew now that Durc was correct for the two men and the mate of the one man of the other were as accepted as any of those that were clan. Now that he had been here just over a year and still he would not do as they want him to do other than what he needed to do to survive. Seeing the anger and frustration in the man Durc's face he knew that come spring he would send him back to his own clan. He will explain to his mother's mate just how the deformed man treated him and then the whole of Durc's clan will lose face. He was a child of the clan and was proud of his heritage and no matter the women's words that Durc and his kind were not deformed but a mixture of clan and the others, they were not clan and as such they were the enemy.

Throwing more wood onto the pile he shook his head as he saw Durc's mate's oldest son leave the cave. Even the deformed children were accepted as if they were normal instead of deformed and better left for Ursus to take than weaken the clan. For a moment sadness filled him for the injury he had caused the smallest boy. He had been angry and had pushed the boy out of his way not seeing the sharpened rocks that the boy fell into slicing his skin and tearing at muscles. Of the three children the smallest was more clan than the others and almost acceptable in his looks, but more he could speak correctly without all the noise that his siblings used especially when speaking with those of the others. No that was a shame he would have to carry with him for all time and knowledge that he was allowing anger to take hold of him sit no better than what he had done to the small child. Taking a deep breath to control himself now he began to pull the hide filled with wood back to the cave.

After putting the wood into the small area used for that purpose at the entrance of the cave, he turned to go back out and stopped as the child Ruj stood in front of him. There was the calm in the child that rivaled the most tempered hunter and Nug waited to see what the child wanted. Instead of speaking the little boy took a corner of the hide and started for the entrance as if to help him. Stunned by such an act, Nug followed the boy wanting to see what he planned. He had spent little time around children younger than he was and knew little of them, unable to imagine why this child acted as if he wanted to help. Seeing the raw wounds on his little legs and the slight limp the child moved with, caused an ache that he was unfamiliar and uncomfortable with but he continued to follow the child.

Ura dropped the wood when she saw the emptied bedspace where her youngest son had been laying with strict orders from the medicine woman to remain until the Mogur had time to drive the evil spirits from the wounds she had worked so hard to clean and wrap. Next to the space was the poultice that had been wrapped around his little legs to help heal the tears caused by the fall when the boy Nug pushed him. Looking around the cave she saw no sign of the child and ran to the entrance but did not see him with the other children. Searching closely she panicked when she also did not see Nug in the camp and remembered that Durc had ordered him to collect wood to fill the alcove. Running toward the woods, she looked from the edge of the camp but could see nothing moving. All the children had been warned that they were never to be out of

sight of the camp when collecting wood for Ursus would always provide new wood from winds and storms that there was no need to go further unless accompanied by the women and a hunter.

Turning frantically she saw Durc coming from the men's entrance and ran to him unheeding of how she looked. Kneeling in front of her mate she vibrated with fear and Durc did not make her wait. She looked up and he could see the fear in her features, "Ruj is missing. The medicine woman Uba told him to stay in his bed space but he is not there or anywhere in camp and the boy Nug is also missing."

Ura almost leaned back at the sudden anger that flashed on Durc's features but it was quickly gone but Ura looked down knowing he would not have wanted her to see or acknowledge such a thing. "Return to your work Ura, we will find him."

Durc stood still for a moment wanting to control his emotions before he allowed them to rule his decisions.

"Send only one hunter but do not let him interfere unless needed."

Durc spun at the Mogur's voice not realizing he was awake. Seeing the serenity in his features, Durc turned to the men who had left the men's cave with him. "Mogur?"

"Send one hunter but do not allow him to interfere. Perhaps a child can do what a man can not."

"Loug. Find the boy Nug but do not allow him to see you and do not interfere with him unless there is danger. Rold go with him and bring back what is happening."

Chapter 34

Nug placed the boy on the log again as he gathered more wood from the tall mound of limbs that must have gotten stuck in the trees from a flood before he had come to the area. The boy tried to work but he was so young that all he could carry was the small pieces which were not worth returning with. Every time the child got up and hobbled to get more sticks, Nug could not help looking at the wounds on the small legs, wounds he had caused. Feeling the boy shiver Nug pulled his shoulder wrap off and put it around the boy and continued to work wanting to get back to the cave as quickly as possible. He could not place the cause of his fear but he could feel something was not right. Placing some more wood on the hide, he was unable to stand it any further and he picked up the child and placed him on the wood so that he could pull him back to the cave without his having to walk.

They had not talked with each other but as Nug worked he saw that although this child looked different from other clan children, he had shown a stoic manner of a man of the clan. It was obvious the child had clan memories still there was the look of something different, not clan. Seeing the child get off the log again, Nug dropped the logs he had gathered onto the skin and stopped the boy before he could get to far away. Pointing to the log he watched as the child returned to it and sat once again. Testing the weight of the skin he thought just a few more pieces would be enough for the load then he heard the sound and did not look in the direction it

came from he just grabbed the child and threw him into a nearby tree hoping the child could climb higher into the branches.

Grabbing a long branch, he looked in the direction the sound came from and when the boar came from the brush, it came at full speed. Without though Nug threw the heavy branch at the animal and grabbed the lower branch and pulled himself up just as the boar struck the tree nearly causing him to lose his hold. Grabbing Ruj he held him against the trunk and watched as the boar repeatedly struck the tree as if trying to dislodge it. The sight of his totem awed Nug as he watched the single minded attack of the animal but fear began to seep into him as well knowing that facing ones totem only came when signals and symbols a totem left to teach had been ignored. That his spirit totem was angry was obvious for he knew that in most cases the animal would have never attacked without reason.

The vibration of the tree was tremendous and Nug could see the blood beginning to flow from the wounds the boar gave himself by attacking the tree. The second animal came out of the woods and attacked the first body slamming him away from the tree. The unusual white stripe across the back startled Nug and his fear increased as he watched the two animal fight ferociously each tearing into the other with their razor like tusks. Squeals of pain and anger filled the forest and Nug could not tell if the shivering was from the child or himself as he held tightly to the trunk when both animals crashed into the tree.

How he wished that one of the hunters would come but since no one knew where they were, hunters knew better than to be anywhere near where boars were fighting. When the tree shook violently, Nug felt his hands slipped and repositioned them to make sure the child was secured between the trunk and himself no longer looking at the battle that was being fought below him. When the animal with the white stripe charged the first boar and sent him to the ground, the first animal was up quickly and finally retreated from the area. Expecting the stripped animal to follow, Nug looked down to see the boar looking directly at him before turning and leaving.

Know that boars often retraced their steps and returned to the sight of a fight, Nug stayed in the tree until the normal sounds of the forest returned. Making sure that Ruj was secure and holding the trunk, he jumped from his perch and searched the immediate area. There was blood from both animals everywhere and bits of skin ripped from an opponent with a tusk was in several places. Assured that they were safe for the moment, Nug reached up and Ruj jumped into his arms with complete trust. Quickly putting the wood that had been tossed back onto the skin, Nug placed Ruj on the top and started back to the cave, his heart still pounding from what he was sure was his totem come to life but he was unsure what it meant.

When he climbed the hill into the clearing in front of the cave, Nug was immediately surrounded by hunter and then Ura who grabbed Ruj and held him to her. Though she was silent, Durc could see her body shaking with relief. Turning to the Nug, there was nothing soft in his features. "Explain."

"The boy wanted to go with me. I did not know it was not allowed."

"You told no one."

“I did not feel the need.”

It took everything in Durc to keep from striking the boy but he kept himself in check and did not speak again until he was in control. “Then I tell you now, you do not take another with you unless it is approved by me. No go and take the wood to where it belongs.”

The hunters shaking their heads in confusion over the actions of this one boy returned to their activities allowing Durc to calm himself further. “Give the boy to me.”

Durc turned and looked at Goov whose face was as passive as if there was nothing strange in his request. “I do not have the authority to allow you to train him as an acolyte Mogur.”

“And I do not want an acolyte.” Durc turned and faced Goov so that he missed nothing. “Something happened while they were gone and though the boy was still disrespectful to you, it was less so than before. Something happened and we need to know what. I do not believe he will tell anyone else. Perhaps the son of your mate has changed something in him.”

Durc looked to where Ura held Ruj tightly while Uba worked on his leg. Turning back to Goov he only nodded.

Chapter 35

Goov followed Nug and watched as he put the wood he collected into the alcove but more he saw the muscles twitch in his shoulders so severely that he had to stop and lean against the wall of the cave desperate to control himself. Watching him take deep breaths to calm himself, Goov was uncertain why this young man was so upset and in distress while the child seemed unaffected by what had transpired in the woods. As the boy finished and he turned to go back out to collect more wood, he was surprised to see him turn toward the upper woods that was within calling distance from the training area.

Staying back out of sight, Goov watched as Nug collected wood from the edges of the woods but did not actually enter the shadows of the woods where the pieces of trees were larger pieces could be seen and though he looked at the pieces he did not enter the woods at all. Once again he followed him back to the cave on this time when he finished with placing the wood in the alcove, Goov approached him. “Come with me.”

Nug stood still unable to hide the fear etched on his features but Goov was pleased to see it was quickly masked. “Durc wanted me to fill the alcove with wood.”

“You will, but not now. Durc has given you to me to do what I want with you. Follow me and do not question me or any order I give to you again.”

Nug remained quiet knowing that Mogur Goov was considered the most powerful of the mogurs and many believed the The Morgur Creb spirit still remained and aided him. When Goov entered into his chamber located at the rear of the cave, Nug stopped again for he knew it was

forbidden for children to enter this area at all and even the hunters would not enter without a specific invitation. Only Durc entered the area without seeming to worry about the power wielded by the holy man. "Come." Goov saw him stopped and guessed the cause and silently wished all the children would heed the restriction from entering this area, but he had helped Uba heal many children and they, at least for a short time, seemed to forget that they are not allowed within the Mogur's alcove.

Entering the area of the skull, Goov motioned Nug to sit and began crushing roots and herbs in a wooden bowl. It was not long before Set arrived for his acolyte was well versed in making sure he knew of the Mogur's needs. "I will not need you for this Set. We will discuss what I am doing later."

Set looked at Nug and nodded before leaving.

Goov added water to the mixture and allowed stones to heat in the fire as he added more wood knowing what was to come. "What happened in the woods?" Nug looked at him and he could see the boy wanted to tell him but something was keeping him silent. "I cannot force you to tell me but I can see your need." As he expected Nug remained silent but he nearly vibrated with the need to tell someone of what happened and there was the need to know what had happened in case it might pose a danger to the rest of the clan which apparently Nug had no care of. Placing the cooking stones in the mixture, Goov stopped and tested the liquid several times until he was satisfied. Leaving the boy sitting alone on the Cave bear hide that covered the entire floor of the alcove except where the hearth held the fire. Pouring the mixture into two well used horn cups he handed one to Nug.

"The world of Ursus tells us much but it is sometimes difficult to see the right path that our totems want us to take. We have no knowledge of why you would fight what your leader has sent you to learn. Perhaps Ursus can make it clearer while we cannot. Drink this."

Fear was a living thing in Nug as he lifted the cup to his lips. His heart pumped erratically and it was difficult to draw air into his lungs as he took the first sip of the hot fluid not wanting the mogur who talked with the spirit world to tell his totem he was a coward. With his stomach roiling attempting to dislodge the fluid he drank, he could feel the moisture gathering on his palms and upper lip as he continued to look at the holy man who appeared to be as calm as usual with no fear of what might occur. Nug could not remember a time when someone considered a child had ever been taken by a mogur to the spirit world and he desperately hoped he was not the first.

The sound of a drum started but he could not turn his eyes away from the mogur's and so could not see where the sound was coming from but noticed his heart slowed to try and match the rhythm of the drum. Suddenly the face he had been looking at changed and instead of the mogur, Ursus himself sat in front of him and still he was not able to look away. The heat and smell of the breath from the most powerful animal totem wafted over him as if covering him with his heat. There was no looking from the mesmerizing black eyes that never seemed to blink as they watch him for any movement, as the rest of the cave seemed to fall away and he was once again in the woods just as he threw the small boy into the tree and quickly followed. Even

with the drum beat his heart pounded again in fear as his totem animal seemed bent on attacking him alone and even the appearance of the second animal did nothing to ease his fears since it appeared as if his totems were fighting each other and he did not know if the second animal killed the first if that meant he was no longer protected by his totem.

When the animals left he did not return to the camp as he actually had but instead his vision was filled with what appeared to be grey smoke and a great fear invades as he wondered if he was indeed in the realm of the spirit world for he could see nothing except the grey swirls. Just as suddenly as it appeared the grey smoke was gone and he was once again back at the last clan gathering behind the boulders watching as Durf and Set walked toward his position. He was not supposed to be anywhere near the hunters but was instead supposed to be with his mother who was supposed to bring him to Vorn for introduction to the deformed man that would one day lead Vorn's clan and he had heard the man of his hearth talk about how the mogurs had made it clear that they would back Vorn's choice taking the decision away from the leaders. The anger that was displayed in the privacy of their hearth made him realize that those of the clan still believed that the deformed man should have no status, not even the status of a woman.

Hearing Durf's angry voice made him look at the two men as they walked by him. "The leaders have become women allowing the mogur's to tell them what should be. Some of the leaders are even thinking of sending the sons of their mates to this deformed man to teach them the new weapons. I tell you set that your son should be leader of Vorn's clan not that deformed thing they call a man. He should not even be allowed to do women's work but take scraps as they are available. The boys they are thinking of sending to Vorn's cave should fight learning this way of the others, it is not our way. They need to stay true to the clan so if the others do attack we can fight them instead of walking away like we have in the past. Vorn and the deformed man invite the others and has even brought one here. I think it would help us more if this man of the others was dead so that his poisonous influence cannot infect others."

"He is too protected right now and as for Durc, he created the spear that flies and not the others. If Loug can learn to use this spear then any one can learn for that boy could not hunt at all no matter how we tried to teach him. I am ashamed he is the son of my mate for I had expected more from him. He should have stood with us and not Vorn and Durc."

"They are all damaged in their minds, even Grev who should have been leader even before Vorn. Vorn should have chosen him to follow but Grev is a coward and refuses to take his rightful place. I can see only that they will make cowards of those sent to them."

The grey smoke once again covered his vision but he felt exhausted and soon the grey was replaced with a soothing blackness where no thought was possible.

Chapter 36

He woke with fear slamming into him as he rose quickly ignoring the light headed feeling and hurtling himself against the wall, panting and looking about him as if he did not know where he was. It took minutes for the sights he was seeming to filter into his mind as the scene of the cave, normal, reassuring filled him as did the bedspace he had used since his arrival. He could

feel his heart slowing and breathing became easier still fear was upper most in his mind as he jumped up staggering at first and ran to where he had left the wood collecting hide. Rushing from the cave he noticed no one as he ran toward the woods to continue collecting wood needing to be alone.

Durc watched Nug rush from the cave with the hide and saw fear in his features and wondered if the boy even knew that a full day had passed since he had entered the Mogur's chamber. Watching him move out of sight he remembered the private meeting he had with Goov after he had returned the boy to Durc's hearth that evening. Motioning to the men's area, Durc had followed the Mogur, his curiosity getting the better of him even though he should have reprimanded Goov for the way in which he had almost ordered Durc to follow. Seeing that no others were in the area, Goov sat on one of the many stumps that had been brought in for seating and waited patiently for Durc to sit next to him.

"It seem that Nug saved your mate's son when two boars attacked in the woods."

"Goov, Ruj said that they were collecting wood when Nug suddenly stopped as if hearing something then put him in a tree and climbed up with him. He saw no animals."

"I need to speak with Ruj Durc."

Durc could not tell anything to Ura when he saw her concerned look as he lifted her youngest son in his arms. Unlike his older brother Ruj appeared to be more clan than the others but his thinking seemed more like those in Lion Camp than in his own cave. Unlike his other siblings he was unable to speak but could understand the language of the others well. Ura was insistent that all her children learn to communicate with the others even though Eyla could only do so in the presence of her mother or with the Junko's mate. He was very proud of the children of his mate and though he trained Brac and Grev's sons in leading the clan, it already seemed accepted by all the boys that Agal would follow him as leader. He wondered how long the other clans would even recognize them as clan especially if one of the best hunters leaves his own clan in order to one day mate with one many considered deformed.

When he put the child down in front of the Mogur, he like other children seemed taken aback to be in the presence of the holy man and pressed closer to Durc but Goov was Goov now and not the Mogur. His signs were slow and gentle as if speaking in a soft voice. "Ruj, I would hear of your adventure in the woods."

Ruj looked up at Durc and nodded as if he was making a grave decision. "Nug did not want to take me but I wanted to go with him not women. We collected much wood but he would not let me help too much. He froze as if he heard something but I did not hear anything but wanted to help. He took me and put me in a tree then quickly came into the tree and held me against the trunk. I think he was sick and told Uba, because he was shaking and kept looking down as if he was scared to be high. After a long time he jumped down and took me out of the tree and we came back. Durc was not happy with Nug but I wanted to go with him and he could not say no."

"Why could he not say no?"

“Because I followed him when he said no.”

Goov looked at Durc who picked the child up and returned him to his mother.

Chapter 37

When Durc returned he was certain that Goov was a confused and concerned as he was wondering if the boy Nug was dangerous to himself or others with his imaginings. Sitting across from Goov he could see that he was in a trance of some type and waited patiently until he saw the eyes open and for the first time he imagined he saw Creb in those eyes and fought to suppress a shiver.

“I did something that we do not normally do. I took the boy Nug on a spiritual journey. It is a risk with children for they cannot control their thoughts but Nug is near the time he would be going on his hunt if he had not fought against what Ursus planned for him. What Nug saw was real at least to him and perhaps had I been with him I would have seen the same as he. The spirits are not happy with him but as long as he is a child he has been allowed to fight his destiny as Ursus demand he follows. When I first search for the reason that he fought so hard I saw a boar being chased by a wolf and when it became aware of the wolf it ran faster through the woods until there was the sound of a cave lion. The boar tried to dig and hide while the wolf went to the cave lion and they both watched the boar digging until a larger boar arrived and attacked the smaller boar until the small boar slipped down a cliff. The wolf and lion did not interfere but continued to watch.”

Goov closed his eyes and once again he saw the cave lion so sharp as it stood next to the wolf. How had he forgotten such an image as when he had searched for totems and names for the new children of the clan. “The lion is Ruj and you are the wolf. We have been chasing after Nug to try to get him to perform but he has heard the words from those that hate you and believes them. He does not want to be anything but clan and he thinks that if he allows you to teach him weapons that are not clan, he will no longer be clan and will not be accepted by others. There were many who felt the same at the last gathering so I the blame does not belong to the boy.”

“And your idea Mogur?”

“Nug needs to see we are still clan even though we trade with the others. I believe what happened in the woods was his totem trying to tell him that this is so. We have to force him to participate in the training. I will take him to my hearth so that if his totem wants to leave him I can help.”

“I do not understand why the spirits would want to leave him because he wants to stay clan.”

“We are clan and he fights against us. You are the luck of this clan and favored of Ursus. He is not.”

“I am not pleased that totems spirits which might be evil are here because of him. What if he draws evil spirits to others?”

“I am certain that the spirits are not evil Durc. They are testing him and found him wanting. It is a man’s responsibility to care for his clan, women and children. His totem is a very strong totem and even though the males are with the females a short time they will defend their area strongly. Nug is defending nothing.”

“I have to think on this and may want to talk with you again Mogur. I think sending him back to his clan would be safer.”

“Perhaps but that may also anger the spirits.”

For the next three days Durc watched Nug closely, and while he did everything assigned to him, he did nothing more. While the hunters ignored him for they all thought him not worth their time, he saw that the shunning of the hunters hurt the boy but then it was as if he put on a hard shell around himself and continued in whatever task had been assigned to him. He was at the age that boys were considered for their hunt to make them a man but he was nowhere near ready. Durc refused to take him on a hunt until his attitude changed no matter his skills with any of the weapons. It was then that that thought came to him as he looked at the various hunters with the boys who actively sought their knowledge in using weapons and hunting techniques. Seeing Agal walk to his mother’s side and pick up a heavy log and place it on the fire he realized just how lacking Nug’s manners and thoughts of others needs were. He would have to see if perhaps that more than his lack of hunting knowledge was as much to blame for his totem’s appearance but thinking of the hunts they had when encountering boars he could not see that it would be a cause.

When the men met after eating that evening, Durc stopped the Mogur from starting his usual ceremony and waited until the Mogur sat once again next to his acolyte. “The boy Nug has fought learning since he arrived and nothing I have tried so far has shamed him to better himself. From this night, Nug will stay at the hearth of the Mogur, not to be trained but for safety. Each seven days a different hunter will take the boy Nug and training him but only in the clan spear and sling. No other weapon will be placed in his hands and he is still not to touch a weapon not made for a child. If he is rude and without manners he is to be sat on the ground and not allowed to move until he can remain still for half a sun. If he cannot complete that in one day the next day he will be returned to the area of his offence and he will start again. Each hunter here knows how to train the young it is obvious in those that will soon be ready for their manhood hunt. In the spring Nug will be taken on the hunts but only to watch while those his age prove they are men of the clan. Atta you will take Nug first.”

“Jun is returning to the mammoth hunters so that his mate can be among her people as it should be. He will stay with his mate, also as it should be. He will carry a message from me to their meeting for my brother Dug. I am asking for a hunter that can use all weapons and know the clan. Jun had been good for the clan but I want someone who we all can respect including Nug and other clans. It would be difficult to find such a man among the others but I ask it.”

Junko looked at Durc and knew he would talk with him later but could not figure out why he would want someone else in the camp when the boy obviously held all of the others in contempt. He could not think of who Danug could choose.

Chapter 38

Goov saw the weary look in Nug's eyes when he entered the cave after Sag had told him that the Mogur wanted him. When he finally stood before him as defiant as ever, Goov decided that for now he would not reprimand him instead he handed him a water small bag. "This is yours. Your responsibility. No woman will fill it, and no one will give you water should you run out. You are now of my hearth and I will not treat you like a child as Durc has but as one who refuses to act like a clan man and needs to learn the ways of the clan for he was poorly taught." Goov saw the bristling anger but was pleased that Nug was able to hold that anger in check. "One hunter will come to this hearth each morning to train you. If you do not train, you do not eat. You do not keep the water bag filled you do not drink. It is time you have responsibility."

"Orva is my mate and she will do nothing you say but will tell me should you treat her without respect. I will not treat you as kindly as Durc, if you cannot show manners you will be treated like an animals and sleep outside. There will be no place in the cave for you if you act like an animal for animals do not belong in the cave of a clan. Do you understand this?"

At his stiff nod, Goov also nodded and pointed to a depression that was close to the front of his hearth that Orva made to his specifications. The depression was very shallow and with little sweet grass from what she had used for their bed spaces when she placed fresh grass that morning. The furs in the space were worn and thin and though Nug would not freeze he would not be comfortable in the long cold nights that were soon coming. It was also the furthest point from the fire by which they both now sat next to. "Go, get your things from the hearth of the leader and return and place them there, then you can return to the task Durc gave to you."

Nug looked as though he wanted to ask a question but fear, anger and confusion fought in him and Goov was uncertain which was more powerful. Watch as Nug returned and placed his few belongings where he was told he returned to the front of the cave and slipped back outside.

Atta watched Nug and shook his head. He was not looking forward to training the young man for he had watched him since his arrival and knew there was something wrong and he would fight them no matter how he was approached. He remembered how Durc and Broc had helped him to learn to become a hunter even though both boys at the time had been younger than he and despite the fact that Brod had not wanted him to have his manhood hunt on the trip to the Clan gathering. The rest of those sent by other clans were learning the new weapons yet this boy was only to learn clan weapons and would eventually pose a danger to all those who hunted with him for even the worst hunter of the Durc's clan now used at least the throwing spear. Durc wanted only clan weapons taught for a reason and Atta trusted him but he did not trust the boy.

Watching as Irok studied what Bloc was trying to teach the others of his age, he knew when the time came for Durc to call for his manhood hunt Irok would do well, he would make a good man and good hunter for his clan and Aluk would be proud of his mate's son. The two boys were so

completely different and Atta wondered if perhaps the other hunters were right in their thoughts that perhaps this boy had been touch by some evil spirit before he had come to them. Shaking his head he went back to working on the spears he was making to train Nug.

Brac and Durc watched Bloc as he made a flint knife for his mother. The attention that the other boy give him was no less that several of the hunters who also watched covertly and having Omug continue his training was a good choice since now he had seen the efforts of two weapon makers. "He should hunt."

Durc looked at Brac who seldom gave any signs that he could make a decision, but his words only mirrored his own. He knew Brac would like nothing better than to give his position as second in command to another and Durc wished he had someone whom he could talk to about his own decisions. Grev's loss was still deeply felt for that reason for of all the hunters Grev understood the pressures and expectations Durc live with. "It would be a good time to get some females. Ura told Uba that she wished there was more fat stored. We will go out tomorrow even though most of the fat on animals will be less it will be more than if we wait until early spring. What is his best weapon?"

"The sling but he is very good with your throwing spear and he already knows about the tool and has started to make a spear thrower. He hides it from the others but I have seen him and Omug working on them. Bloc is better than Omug."

"I want Atta to bring the boy Mug to watch from a distance, also we will take Mulk as well, he also has earned the right."

"Mulk is good with the throwing spear, it is his beat weapon but he works hard with the sling and bolo. He does not yet work on a spear thrower for he has said that he needs to be a good hunter first. He will be a good hunt leader one day. He is patient and sees more than the rest that train him.

Chapter 39

Bloc and Mulk stood still and alone as the rest of the hunters still remained halfway up the hill. Those with spear throwers would make the kills should they fail soothe pressure that they would not cost the clan was not on their shoulders. Standing behind the leafless branches of a line of young hickory bushes, their breathing slow with their mouths open so they make as little noise as possible. Their weapons held in their relaxed grip as they wait for a small herd of aurochs headed this way. Already a few of the older cows have moved beyond the bank of pines below them where the wind had moved what little snow there had been and the bright sun kept the ground from freezing and the grass though yellow, hid greener shoots that they knew the women had collected several days before.

Both of them had been shocked when Durc had approached them the day before and told them that they would be hunting the next day. Grabbing Mulk, Bloc took him to where he had stored several weapons he had made for himself. Taking the four throwing spears he handed two to Mulk. "I have not been able to make weapons for the hunters but Durc said that making

weapons for myself was not the same. I know he looked the other way if he saw what I was working on. I know these are well made for my mother's mate showed me the correct way to make the throwing spears."

"These are your spears."

"There is not time to make you spears and Omug is a good weapons maker but these are new to him and I am sure of mine."

"I thank you Bloc. What if more than two are needed?"

"We are to get one animal each. You are good with the throwing spear. We will not fail Durc or Brac."

Bloc watching as more animals came into view, wondered why Durc would allow Nug along for the hunt. He was kept in the back of the group of hunters as if he was a woman, but the women were not needed on this hunt as they were not far from the cave and only he and Mulk would be hunting. Only if they failed would the other hunters get involved. There was plenty of meat stored but fresh meat was always welcome and if he and Mulk could get cows with calves, then the Mogur would also be pleased with them. He and Mulk had been told that they were hunting animals for fat for the women and he knew that a female carrying a young would have stored more fat for the winter and since the young would not be born until late spring much of that fat would be available to them. He remembered all the stories the old hunter Groob told and remembered that his first duty was to the clan not his own pride but pride he had plenty of for he knew that his mother's mate had been taken by Ursus. The story of the bear ceremony was told often for it showed that Ursus was pleased with their clan. What others said no longer mattered for Ursus approved of Durc and because of Durc their home was the best cave of all the clans no matter how the other clans wanted to reduce their status.

Bloc froze not even daring to breath as the large cow came from behind the pines. On her side were three white streaks as if a predator had once gotten hold of her but could not hold her for a meal. All three marks were identical and even as if Ursus himself had placed them there for Bloc to see. The eagle totem mark, his totem. Barely moving his hand he touched Mulk's arm and in his peripheral vision saw the slight nod. The cow belonged to Bloc and he would have to choose another animal quickly.

At the second nod both hunters raised their spears slowly watching each movement of the animals below them. This is what they had trained so long for, what they were meant to be. At Bloc's nod both released their first spears. Neither needed a second as two animals fell but better yet the herd spooked only around those that fell as they returned to their meandering giving wide berth to the fallen. Turning to look at Durc they saw him nod and not until then did they move from their position. Nodding back the two hunters rushed to the downed animals and avoiding the lethal horns on the still thrashing animals they quickly sliced the necks to allow the others to bleed then gave thanks to Ursus for allowing them the kills that proved that they were men of the clan.

When the two new men of the clan began celebrating after they had cut the animal's necks, Atta motioned Nug to follow him away from the hunt area. Children did not need to see any more of a hunt unless they were with their mothers. Having left him with Ovra, Atta returned to the hunters to celebrate the addition of two more hunters for the clan. There was a lot to do before the celebration that would occur. He did not tell Orva or his mate Cana of the success or failure of the hunt that was for Durc to tell the medicine woman and his mate. When he reached the top of the hill he watched as the two hunters now pulled their kills on travois toward him. The travois were tools for men and although they would not have their manhood ceremonies until this night, to the other hunters they were men.

When they arrived back at the cave, Uba, Iza and Goov waited for the hunters. Placing the travois in front of the two women the two new hunters returned to the other hunters as Durc stepped forward. "Mogur, we will need a ceremony for two new hunters of the clan." When Goov nodded the rest of the hunters turned to go to the men's area but they would enter through the men's entrance and not walk through the main cave.

Chapter 40

Buna was in her glory as she removed two new leather wraps that would be given to the two new men of the clan by the Mogur who waited for the clothes she had made after one of the summer hunts knowing that her adopted son and the boy Mulk would sooner than later be taken on a hunt. Though she would not tell the others, her promise to Hub was at least partially complete there was still her youngest son Rev who was the age of her youngest Brun and her daughter Duva who was the same age as her own daughter Ebra. Both her children were of Brun's line and the Mogur wanted her and Brac to remember their heritage for one day the leadership of the clan might fall to one of her sons or their mate's sons. The women had already been talking of why Durc would choose Bloc and Mulk to go on this hunt when Ura's son Agal was older and was held in high esteem by the other hunters, but it was not her place to ask and she allowed the thought to vanish.

Ura could not let it pass for her son's mood was dark as he paced the boundary of their hearth. "You know Durc has his reasons."

"I should have gone on this hunt. He knows I am the best and he knows that I already know the spear thrower."

"This is not something that I know of Agal but I know that Durc knows you are capable. Before the celebration talk with him, he will not hold his thoughts with you, he never has."

Agal stopped and looked at his mother and knew she was right. He sat on one of the stumps Durc brought into the hearth for Ura's and Uba's use and waited until the men began to come from the rear cave area. As soon as he saw Durc he approached him but knew better than to interrupt having seen the sight look he gave and knew Durc had seen him.

Durc knew why the son of his mate wanted to talk with him and was pleased to see him exert some patience when he had not in the same situation. He would talk to him but wanting to see how important the issue was to him, he continued to talk with Goov. He could see the questioning in Goov's eyes but knew he would not interfere. Watching the Mogur and his acolyte enter their part of the cave he finally turned his attention to Agal.

"Come." Not bothering with an outer wrap nor allowing Agal the time to get one for himself he walked out onto the rocks they had placed two years before that made a porch so that to women had a sturdy place to work. Looking over the valley, he felt a sense of pride that this was their home and would be in the foreseeable future. "I was like you wanting to be a hunter before it was time. The decisions I make you will have to make one day. Bloc is younger but the need for him is greater than the need of you to be a hunter. I need a tool maker that understands all the weapons we use. Omag is a good weapons maker but he is not Grev, Bloc was taught by Grev. Mulk is older, he needs to be a hunter. You will be a good hunter but I need you to be a good leader. Amo will be a woman soon and you will need a mate, there is time."

When he was finished Durc turned and returned to the cave.

Agal stood and stared at the valley just as Durc had done but he did not see what was below him as his mind whorled with all that Durc had said and what he did not say. Shame filled him for as his mother had said Durc had his reason and they were the best for the clan while his thoughts were for himself. He had all these years to learn at his side and at the first opportunity he had thought of himself. He knew that the clan needed Bloc as a weapons maker for his flint working alone even though as a child he could only make tools and not weapons, they were superior and the women thought so highly of them that they often set them out so that others could see that they had one of his tools. Mulk was the oldest of those being trained as hunters and he would be a good asset to his clan who would welcome him back with the knowledge he had. Still there was Nug who was also older than he even though he acted more like a child than someone who would normally have been considered soon to be a man.

Turning back to the cave and the feast that was being prepared for the new hunters, Agal thought again of the small cave on the hill behind the cave. He had placed his throwing spears and the spear thrower he had made out of site of the hunters and the women. Children were allowed to play and train with those weapons given them but not weapons that would be used by hunter. Both he and Bloc had worked hard on their separate weapons and while Bloc hid his within the cave, Agal wanted a safer place for he wanted to make the spear thrower. The small cave was also a place he could go to in order to think. Now he knew that perhaps he should have thought of how he could have helped the cave and not himself.

Chapter 41

The cave was dark except for the small central fire. The women and children were excited as this was one of the few times they were included in the ceremonies of the men. Nug sat at the front of the crowd of women and children with Orva the Mogur's mate who sat next to the leader's mate and the leader's adopted mother and with them sat the children of the leader's

mate. They youngest son looked at him but Nug could not tell what the child was thinking, the oldest paid attention to the stories being told of the history of this clan by Brac. When the story had finished with Durc becoming leader, the chamber quieted except for those small rustling sounds made by any collection of people.

Their skin painted with alternating black and yellow, their eyes made larger by the application of white chalk, the two new hunters entered the center of the group and moved slowly around the fire in perfect synchronization until they both stopped, frozen in the middle of a step. As if on que but still together each moved their bodies as if they were the aurochs they had hunted, moving slow and eating from the sparse grass they exposed by digging with their hooves. Again together they grasped their throwing spears slow to raise them and froze again. This time out of sync as Bloc once again acted like the auroch but as he moved three white stripes appeared on his side and the women gasped knowing what the mark meant. Mulk remained stationary until Bloc once again became the hunter and slowly the two men raised their spears and made a move as if they threw them causing the women to lean back out of the way of the weapons.

Nug felt the excitement of the hunt for he had seen the hunt and could actually vision what the men were displaying for the women. Both men moving as they did made his heart pound just as it had when he watched the actual hunt. Twisting his head almost painfully at the gasp from the women and older children, the cave bear seemed to grow as it growled and stepped next to the fire then calling Mulk's name. There was obvious fear and excitement as the new hunter stepped to the image of Ursus. A knife was raised and the blade gleamed in the firelight as it was brought down to quickly cut a V followed by a line the waved behind it, the bleeding sign of the snow leopard. Nug could feel each cut into his own flesh and even looked down to see if his chest was bleeding. The wounds were quickly covered with thick black paste which slowed the bleeding and seeped into the wound to permanently marking Mulk as a hunter of the clan.

After Mulk sat the growl of Bloc's name was heard and Nug watched a the hunter stood proud and brave as three lines were cut into his upper chest, the sign of the eagle was also quickly covered but Nug could imagine the pain of the wounds as if those slices were made into his own chest. Ursus disappeared as quickly as he had appeared and the celebration began as the two new hunters danced in the center and was joined by several of the men then all was quiet again as the men left the central cave to the men's area and the women began to put the children in their sleeping areas.

Since he was still considered a child he was sent to his own bedspace at the mogur's hearth and watched as the medicine woman gave the women something to drink. What followed he knew he should not watch but he was mesmerized by the change in the women as they danced and thrashed, screamed and cried out as if in pain only to join the dance once again until all the woman laid down and slept.

The need to be with the other men pulled on him and across the cave he could see that the boy Agal had also been awake, but he could not tell if his stares at the entrance to the men's area had wavered to watch the women or not. When he saw him straighten his shoulders Nug looked and saw that the men were coming from their area ignoring the women and finding their own sleeping space where they lay down. Seeing the exhaustion in the Mogur, Nug wondered how

the man continued to deal with the spirit world when it was obvious that it took so much out of him. Looking at the other men he saw the same exhaustion of the leader's features and on the hunt leader's face. These three men more than any other had the most responsibility than any other in the clan and for the first time since his arrival, Nug could see that all he had been told by the other boys and the men who had tried to train him that no matter how much these men wanted not to be responsible for so many.

Thoughts of Jag, his leader and his mother's mate, he knew the same look was on his features many times especially when hunting had been poor. There was a chance that he would be leader of his clan and he had nothing to show for his time with this clan. He was older than Bloc yet Bloc was a man and he was still a child. Shaking his head not knowing where his thoughts were leading, Nug closed his eyes to sleep thinking back on all that had happened since his arrival.

Chapter 42

The black boar struck the tree over and over, its red eyes looking up and staring at the boy in the tree as saliva drips from its jaws anticipating its next meal. Each strike shook the tree and the boy holding onto the trunk for his life. The deep grunting seemed to vibrate in his head as if the animal was trying to talk with him. He could feel the skin on his arms tearing as he tightens his hold with each strike on the trunk. There was no memory of how he had gotten in the tree and as he looked around the frozen landscape he could see no other trees and he knew it was not normal for boars to be out in the open where they can become the prey.

Just when he thought his hold would no longer last against the assault on the tree a large strangely colored boar. For some reason it seemed familiar and the paralyzing fear seemed to lessen as the large boar raced toward the tree. The sound of the larger boar striking the side of the one attacking the tree seemed to vibrate through the white wilderness. If he could he would have put his hands over his ears as the sound of the battle squeals pierced his mind as the two animals fought and he knew he had seen this sight before. He did not know why he wanted the animal with the unusual white markings across its back to be successful in defeating the other animal. There was no stopping the sound of fear that escaped him when both animals crashed into the tree threatening to push it over and he clutched tightly hoping to stay within the tree.

The snow around the tree soon turned to red with the bleeding from wounds both animals now carried as they faced each other again and again, charging and slashing with the long tusks that shredded the opponents hide. It was soon apparent that the larger boar with the white stripes, though he was injured, was not trying to kill the black boar but keep him from striking the tree. With a final attempt at the tree the black boar finally began to back away while still keeping a watch on the other boar.

Looking down at the strange boar he saw that instead of the usual red rimmed black eyes the eyes seemed large and a soft brown, also the animal's legs seemed straighter which gave the impression that the animal was bigger because of his height. This was not a normal animal, looking to where the other animal left the clearing, he saw the flash of black and tried to signal to the boar below him that the other animal was returning. As if in slow motion the large boar

seemed not to pay any attention to the charging black one until the last minute when he stepped aside and the black animal crashed into the tree and he could feel his hands slip from around the trunk of the tree and his feet slipped from the branch throwing him into the air.

Nug sat upright panting and could feel the sweat that covered his body cooling in the air with the furs pushed away from him. Looking around his breath nearly left his body as he saw the Mogur looking at him as if he could see what had happened in his dream. Closing his eyes he took a deep breath and bent to grab the small water bag from under the furs that the Mogur had given him and drank deeply. Looking at the Mogur again the fear receded and the Mogur nodded.

“You will have many decisions to make soon.” Laying back down next to his mate it seemed that he was immediately asleep. Trying to catch his breath, Nug felt like he wanted to go outside and walk but he knew walking at night especially in the winter was not a good decision. Laying back down he looked at the ceiling of the cave not wanting to return to sleep.

Chapter 43

Agal stood with his head bowed while Durc finished his meal. There were no words he could tell the man of his hearth that he understood and was sorry for his actions in the past moon cycle. Even when the Mogur joined Durc, Agal remained silent and still waiting patiently for acknowledgement even when Goov gave him a questioning look.

Durc looked at the Mogur then at Agal and knew that whatever the holy man had to say was not for the ears of a child. Catching himself he did not sigh in frustration but he knew what Agal wanted to say but he also needed to allow him to say it. Nodding at the boy, who even though he was looking down, would have seen the movement he gave permission for him to speak.

“I ask the leader Durc to allow me to learn from him so that if Ursus task me to lead the clan I can do it so that Ursus would be proud and feel safe with this clan.”

Durc could see the amusement in the Mogur’s features and it pleased him that the son of his mate understood their conversation. “You may stay for now.” Rethinking his decision not to discuss what the Mogur had to say without the boy listening. Turning to Goov he nodded seeing the concern now in his features.

“I will tell this in front of the boy, we need to push Nug more. He slept little last night and I think his totem returned.”

Durc was not pleased by this news and could not understand why the boy’s totem would assail him to the point of causing fear. Looking at the entrance when he felt a slight chill he watched as Ura and Uba left the cave knowing that Uba wanted to get some roots from the new storage area and Ura wanted to bring hides to begin treating some for clothing for Spring. Other women would also want hides for their own uses and he had given the control of the storage area to Ura to parcel out not only the hides but the food as well. Only Uba could take what she wanted when she wanted for that was her right as medicine woman.

It was only seconds when the two women rushed back into the cave and moved quickly towards him. He did not need them to tell him anything for neither woman would have acted so unless there was something to fear. Grabbing his spear thrower and sling he did not look at the other hunters knowing that they too were getting their weapons and following him but he stopped when she signaled one word "Spirit". Moving past the wind barrier, he and Goov ignored the biting wind that blew ice and snow into their face. Durc could feel his hunters behind him as he and Goov stepped forward and looked over the hill where the entrance to the storage area was. He saw the movement first and watched as the nearly invisible invader moved slowly up the hill looking down to where it walked not paying attention to any threat that it might be walking into.

Durc relaxed his stance as he saw that the apparition was in fact a man, even hunched with fatigue he was too tall for clan, a man that could only be one of the others. Turning to see the hunters relaxed as he was but still held their weapons so that they could attack the intruder should there be need. He could tell that whoever was moving toward them was having a difficult time walking through the soft snow even with what appeared to be snowshoes like the Mamutoi wore. That thought stilled him as he started down the hill, putting his hand up to stop the other hunters from following just in case he was wrong.

Durc moved slowly not wanting to fall and make himself a target in case he was wrong, but he watch the person continue upwards as he moved closer to them. Even before reaching him, Durc could hear his raspy breathing and each step was slow and measured almost as if he was resting before moving to the next step. Moving faster Durc reached the person and stopped him from moving more. The man bent over as if stopping was on his mind. His body heaving as if he could not catch his breath and he did not straighten when Durc pushed off the hood to his parka hoping to see who it was. Pulling the man upright, Durc was shocked. "Frebec?"

Frebec hearing his name in Mamutoi opened his eyes fully and smiled at the one he had been looking for since the middle of the summer. "I found you."

"Come I will help you. It is not much further."

Frebec could only nod as he took Durc's help and started once again.

Chapter 44

The women of the clan disappeared except for Ura, Uba and Iza came to the leader's hearth and stared at the man of the others while Durc and Ura brushed off the snow from his parka and helped him to remove it. The hunters watched as the man of the others was uncovered and his white skin and white hair made many shake their heads knowing he was probably too cold to survive. Durc was startled by the sight for he remembered Frebec's dark hair and to see such a change in color in so few of years shocking. Junko finally approached the hearth when he saw who it was but waited until Durc gave him permission to enter the hearth area. He too was mystified as to what had happened for he had seen Frebec only the year before and though he had some grey it was not this complete lack of color in his hair. Durc seeing that the women had

everything under control let them care for the man since Ura could translate for Uba anything Frebec had to say.

“Is that Frebec, Durc?”

“Yes.”

“Why would he travel in the winter?”

“It is something that will have to wait until the medicine woman assures us he is well, then I will talk to him.”

Junko heard that Durc wanted to talk with Frebec by himself and knew that he would not be allowed to get near the man until Durc was sure he knew all the news Frebec had to give to him. When Ura came to sit in front of Durc, both men wondered what could have happened in so short of time and Durc quickly signaled that Ura could speak.

“Frebec says the boy Ralev is in a cave below.”

Durc put on his outer wrap and started for the entrance of the cave calling to Brac and Atta to join him. In the years they had been in the area, they spent time investigating their world so that they knew where every cave, waterway and stand of trees existed. There were three small caves in the valley wall that would have been a good place to hole up during the storm. If the two were in it then why had Frebec left the boy to travel in the storm? “Loug bring triv.” The hunter grabbed the making for a travois wondering why the leader would need such a thing but he made no comment. The four men left the cave and move along the ridge where the wind blew most of the snow off the ground allowing for easier footing without having to travel through the deepening snow.

Durc thought about the strange looking little boy who though pale had some features of clan such as the broad nose and heavier than normal brows but he was other and something else. He did not look like most of the other just like the man whose totem was used to create him was different from the others but the same. Ranec was darker than even clan men but his nose was more like those of the other Mamutoi than Ralev’s but similar enough that it was obvious whose spirit was used. Ralev’s light eyes bothered Durc when he had first seen the child and he wondered what the rest of his clan would think when they saw the child.

When they reached the valley there was no way to evade the deep snow and Durc and the others plowed through the drifts using throwing spears to make sure they did not sink into the river that should be frozen now but the ice might still be weak and they wanted no one to fall into the water no matter how shallow and become wet. They were becoming exhausted fighting the wind filled with snow and ice and the deep snow they travel through and each knew that they had no choice but to continue on to reach one of the caves on the other side of the valley. They had checked the storage cave and found nothing nor did they find anything in the small depression they often used when caught in a sudden summer storm which meant the boy could only be across the valley and so they trudged on.

As they neared the point of the hills that made of the opposite side of the valley, all the men breathed deeply and smelled smoke. It was faint but there and the men moved toward the stronger smell until they saw a small wisp of smoke coming from one of the smaller caves. Durc was surprised to see the front of the cave had depressions in the snow as if the previous snow had been trampled down and the fresh snow had not yet covered it in. Over the entry were areas that showed melting and refreezing this had to be the cave. Entering cautiously, Durc noticed first the smell of wet furs then the smell of burned wood and fire, there was only a small glow in the center of the cave where a fire had been but was now reduced to embers that were cooling. Signaling to the men behind him, Durc advanced until he nearly tripped on a form lying on the dirt floor. Touching the form he felt the wet fur and pulling he turned over the form and could barely make out the features. This was no longer a child but the features were too familiar and he knew this was Ralev, had so many year passed since he was with Danug and the Mamutoi? His skin was chilled and when Atta entered with a torch he went to what was left of the fire and pressed it into the glowing coals until the dried grass caught and the small cave was bathed in light.

Seeing a travois in the corner Durc went to it and pulled the hide covering off and then started to pull the wet clothes from the unconscious youngster. "Loug get wood for the fire and we will stay here to rest until morning." Loug left quickly and just as quickly returned and Durc used the wood to get the fire going once again using the widow wood fir the bottom of pines first then added a larger wet log that the fire would dry soon enough to begin burning. Taking a second fur from the travois he gave it to Atta to cover the entrance. Checking Ralev again Durc wondered if they should try to make it back to the cave. It was already passed midday but he did not know how long Ralev had been in this condition. The cave was warming but the boy, who was now taller than he was and was probably even taller than both Junko and Frebec, needed Uba.

Making a decision he pulled the rest of the boy's clothes off and started wrapping him in furs from the travois as he told Loug and Brac to make the travois ready. They would come back later for the supplies the two had brought with them.

Chapter 45

Durc made sure all the men ate and drank water as they sat around the fire they would leave burning in case they had to turn back, Loug and Brac now had Ralev secured to the travois and ready for the trip back to the cave. Now that the cave was warm, Durc could feel the burning of Ralev's skin and knew he must have fallen into the river at a weak section. Looking at the entrance he could see that the clouds were breaking up and even if the snow was not falling the wind blew the new snow around and the sun would not help them as if would make seeing in the fresh snow difficult. Leaving the others to carry the travois, Durc was the first to leave the small cave and as he did so, he pulled down the hide and added it to what was already covering Ralev.

They retraced their steps as well as they could, depending on the landmarks above on the slope rather than on tracks they may have made on their trek down and across. Each man would take turns leading and dragging or carrying the travois depending on the conditions. For now they needed to carry it for the snow was too deep to drag it without it sinking into the soft powder.

He stopped the men as often as he dared, not because they were tired but to make sure they drank water and ate some of the dried meat each of them carried to keep their hydration and strength up. When they neared where Durc was sure the river was he moved slowly as he poked into the powder testing the way. When he heard the crack after sinking the spear shaft he looked up and thought he had moved too far east which meant he was near the bend of the river where it would be deep but had rapids above it and was less likely to hold heavy ice. Moving west he continued his testing until he felt solid ice and began to move across the area. The men moved in single file behind him and with the travois being held by Brac and Loug the weight was also distributed making it safer as they moved across the frozen waterway.

Brac slipped once on the ice but the heavy snow allowed him to regain his balance quickly and they continued. Once across the men changed duties and Durc and Atta took the travois and followed Brac who took the lead position. The hardest part came too early for Durc as the slope began to rise and he was once again in the lead. Looking for areas with the least amount of snow the travois was able to be dragged instead of carried allowing those pulling to have one hand free to use their spears to hold them steady. As the sun began to sink in the west, Durc was pleased when the wind faded at the same time although there was only half a moon the brightness reflected enough to make it look like a cloudy day instead of full night.

Turning diagonally, Durc headed the shortest route to the cave even knowing they might hit thicker snow. Cold was seeping through his body and he knew the men felt it as well and he wondered if this had been a good choice to return to the cave before morning but it was too late for second guessing now.

Taking the travois Durc allowed Atta to take the lead and he was followed by Brac while Loug stayed behind the travois in case it slipped. As he doggedly move upwards, Durc realized that these three men other than Goov were the one he depended on and could count on the most and was glad they were with him now. There was only the sound of a sudden gush of wind from lungs as Atta slipped and started tumbling down the hill toward the valley. Brac remained where he was and tested the soil while Loug turned and moved quickly after Atta. When Durc and Brac saw Atta finally stand after he had come to a stop shaking the snow from his body. When Loug reached him the two men made it slowly back up the steeper part of the hill. "Ice" was all Atta said as he once again took the lead and moved to a path that went directly up the hill.

When they finally reached ground that was more level, Durc once again called for them to stop. "But the cave is just a short distance."

"And we are all tired Brac and need to rest because there may be a need when we return to the cave." The men hunched down and sat on their heels as they drank water and ate dried meat waiting for Durc to decide to move on. When Durc felt they had rested enough they changed once again with him leading with Brac and Loug carrying the travois through the increasing thicker snow. Since if they fell now they would not slid down the hill, Atta joined him in front to help make a path for the two men that followed. Just as they past the third cave which many still considered the woman's cave Durc saw people come from the cave and knew that someone had been watching for them. Eul and Sag took the travois and Goov stood next to Durc but his features gave none of his thoughts away.

“The man Frebec is well?”

“Uba said the man of the other was exhausted but found no injuries. This one?”

“A child of the others. Near a man. He is the adopted son of my brother according to Junk.”

“It is good they came for Nug is very flustered with all the attention the one is receiving. I think he believed that you went after a child of the clan. This will bring things to a head with him I think.”

“Good or bad?” But Goov did not answer him.

Chapter 46

Durc was glad to hand over the ill boy to Uba and Goov who quickly took charge of removing the furs and checking out her patient. Seeing that Frebec was asleep he did not want to wake him to find out what had happened that these two would come unannounced to the Clan. Though he would not show it fear began to creep into his thoughts, but surely Junko would have heard word should there be a tragedy in Lion Camp. He could think of nothing else that would have made Frebec leave the Lion Camp. Although Frebec went on hunts his talent was in debating for the Lion Camp in trades and in the politics that happened between the camps. Knowing how he had reacted when Ayla arrived at Lion camp, Durc while thinking him a member of Lion Camp was not close enough to him to know what reasons could have taken him out of his comfort. For if anything else, Frebec liked his comfort in knowing where his position was within the camp and having Fralie take care of him and sooth his fear for which he had many.

Looking about the cave he knew that he would soon have to give the new hunters their own hearth. The hearths of his clan were wide spread and he was not sure who he would mate with Bloc so the two new hunters could share a hearth and continue to eat at Brac's hearth, since in the summer Mulk would return to his clan a man of the Clan. Having made that decision he went to Brac to tell him that he could assign the two men that area closest to the wood storage area so that they can be one of the first to defend the cave. Turning and seeing Nug looking into his hearth, he stared at the boy until he looked down and away for he was being exceptionally rude. With the cave calming down for the night, he would have to think of which hunter to assign to Nug so that he can be trained whether he wanted that training or not. Turning back to the happenings in his hearth, Durc saw that Frebec was awake and looking at him.

Walking to him he held out his hand and helped him to stand. “Ralev?”

“It is up to Uba, Goov and Ursus. Come.” Looking at Ura he nodded and knew that she would provide food that would be placed at the entrance to the men's area. Touching Agal, he knew the son of his mate would follow him without anything else being said.

Durc wondered who had built up the fire in the men's area for it was warm and he steered Frebec to one of the stumps covered with a fur. “Tell me Frebec?”

“I came to get away from Lion Camp and the death there.” Seeing the shocked look on Durc face before he could hide it, Frebec corrected himself. “No, that is not all true. Nezzie went to the mother first and most of us thought that even though Talut has been gone many years she only stayed to help Folara.” Durc knew that the sister of his mother’s mate was now the mate to Danug and that she had taken the responsibility for the three children of Ranec’s mate and another orphan girl child. Danug and Folara were devastated but then Tulie and Barzec went to their beds and we knew it was some type of illness. Then Fralie and Crisavec became ill then the rest of the children. We all tried to help Sethut but then all the children were ill and only a few of the adults seemed to remain well. Reesie was the next to die but I was so busy fighting for Fralie and Crisavec’s lives I paid no attention. It seemed just as Crisavec started to get better Fralie kept getting worse and nothing we tried made a difference. I was ashamed for when she died, I ran from the camp and kept running as if I could run from the pain. The next thing I remember was waking back at Lion Camp and seven days had passed. Four adults and four children were lost before the illness could be stopped. Tulie, Barzec, Fralie and Ludeg, and we lost Reesie, Folara’s Willut, Tronie’s Hartal, and Latie’s new daughter Marlie who she named after a previous leader of Wolf camp. I thought of all that Ayla knew when she first came to Lion Camp and thought if I could find your clan maybe the medicine woman could teach me what might have saved them.”

Durc closed his eyes for he had great respect for the woman Tulie and her mate. He could not remember Frebec’s mate and he did not know about the fourth name he had given. But to lose so many children was heart breaking no matter what people suffered the loss. He knew that pain for the second daughter Ura had delivered had sickened suddenly and died quickly even before her first year had passed. Knowing that Uba would be stricken if he asked her to talk with Frebec, especially about a medicine woman’s knowledge and knew he could not ask it of her. Right now Frebec needed to recover from his trip. “And Ralev?”

“Ralev thought that one day he would mate with Reesie and I think Reesie had the same idea. In a couple years for Ralev wanted to make sure he was a good enough hunter and provider for her and I think she was pleased by the wait as well for there was so much she wanted to learn. They were always together and there was a special bond between them that everyone noticed. When I left to find you I told no one, Ralev tried to follow me but I sent him back each time he caught up to me. I thought he had given up until I was attacked by some hungry wolves south of Elk camp that looked like they were starving. When the first one fell and Ralev charged with his sling I was able to pull mine and we drove them off. We were close enough to the peninsula and I did not want to take the time to send him back even to Elk Camp. I should have.”

“We were moving across the valley when we saw the smoke and knew it was some kind of camp and then Ralev ran ahead of me and fell through the ice. I got him to the cave and started a fire but by morning the fever started and I knew I had to get help. You should not have brought him here Durc, what if he is carrying the sickness.”

“This is the son of my mate Ura who you know.” Durc touched Agal’s shoulder. “He will make sure you get food. Rest here and I will return.”

Chapter 47

Fear ate at Durc's belly as he returned to his hearth. There were his mate Ura, her daughter Eyla, her youngest son Ruj as well as Uba and Goov. This was the heart of his world and he knew if these two brought a killing sickness to his clan he would kill them without thought. "Uba, the man Frebec says that the cave they come from had a killing sickness that killed adults and children."

He saw fear jump into her features then determination, she was medicine woman and she would allow no one to die if she could help it. "This woman would need to know how the others died to know if this man carries the sickness to us."

"They started with being tired" Frebec had recognized most of what the medicine woman signal and spoke in Mamutoi for Durc to translate even though he moved his hands and body to speak. Uba did not look at the man of the others but only to Durc for to look at the man without permission would give him authority and Durc had not set this man's status. "They had a fever but not until near the end and those that burned hot and quick did not die those that the fever built over days we could not break it. Though Nezzie was not ill the others vomited and scat ran black like old blood and smelled very bad."

Ura waited until Durc was finished and shook her head. "He did not mention the chest and this one has noise in the chest. I do not think he has what the camp of the others had but a sickness from being tired, cold and falling into the river. Sometimes they come back sometimes they do not and Ursus takes them. I will care for this man with Iza and we will try to save him."

"Iza he is still very young no matter his size. The boy is very important to my brother Danug." The medicine woman nodded her understanding. Uba had told her all about what had happened when she and Durc had left the clan in search of Ayla and knew how important the man names Dug was to Durc.

Durc took Frebec back to the men's area and was pleased to see that Agal had made a bedspace and put a bowl of food on one of the stumps for the man. With water nearby for him, Durc waited until he finished eating and was pleased when Junko came in to join them. When Frebec finished he looked at Junko and shook his head not willing to retell the story and Junko was not willing to press the issue knowing Durc would tell him later. Junko could not ever remember Frebec being so still for the man seemed filled with nervous energy no matter what was happening and always was looking to see where he fit in an assembly. It was as if the life had gone out of him. He knew the boy Ralev was becoming a fine carver and many of his things had been brought to trade with Durc's clan. Ura had been pleased by the gift of a large carved ivory spoon that could withstand the heat of the fire that he had asked Ralev to make for him for all the care and food she had given him. Most of the men now had knives that had handles made by Ralev though it had taken a long time for the men to accept the new knives, the ones given to women for slicing meat were quickly put to use and the men soon followed seeing how quickly the knives made by Danug made a job complete for the women. Frebec finally laid on the furs and closed his eyes, he was so tired and now that there were others around to help with Ralev, he felt the tension leave him and slept.

“Come I will tell you of what Frebec has said and we will talk.”

As Durc told Junko of all that had happened at Lion Camp, he watched those in his cave but when his eyes saw Eyla as she made her way back to the hearth with what looked like a poultice his heart almost stopped. It was an answer for his brother but he knew that no one would understand such a decision. Looking at the front of the cave where Eul and Bloc worked on flint, he wondered if Eul who had been so patient would stand for such a decision not that it would have stopped Durc. He shook his head and knew that Eyla was too young for such a journey, besides did she know as much as Ayla did when she left the clan. Looking at the daughter of his mate he knew that she was as talented as Iza who would one day be medicine woman of the clan and had been taught since even before she could walk. She also had memories which Ayla never had according to Uba. Looking at the dirt floor he knew it was not a decision he could make right now and Frebec would have to stay at least until the summer before he could return with Junko.

Chapter 48

For three days Uba, Iza and Eyla worked on the ill man of the other until finally sweat broke out on his pale body and they fought to keep him clean and dry. Now with morning still a few hours away and only Durc was awake and moving about the cave Uba looked into the strange face and even stranger eyes of the boy/man or the others she had cared for and promised herself she would not lose. There was a profound sadness in them but no fear as she had expected when he woke and saw the face of those around him. This one had seen clan before, not the deformed clan like Durc but full clan such as her and Goov. His sign for water was in the silent formal language and was well done and though his movements were weak she understood them and was surprised since the man Junko took many months to learn to talk correctly. Helping the young man drink she went and got Durc. As soon as Ralev saw Durc tears formed and he looked away in shame that he could not control them.

“Ralev, you are safe here and Frebec is here as well.” Durc’s strange accent hit a cord in Ralev’s memory and he turned back to the man of the clan who had faced the most powerful people of the Mamutoi and had made them understand that the Clan were humans just as the Mamutoi.

“I couldn’t stay.” I heard Frebec talking to the Place where we buried everyone telling them that he was coming here to find a way to keep the deaths from happening again. I had to come. What if something happened to Frebec and he didn’t make it. It is always better with two that is what Danug said.” A deep racking cough stopped his words and Durc sat back to allow Uba to give something to him to quiet the cough.

“We will talk later Ralev but now you need to heal and then when you are better we will talk.” When Ralev nodded Durc moved away from the ill boy and left the hearth.

When Durc entered the men’s area he stopped and watched as Frebec carried on a conversation with Goov. His movements were sure and precise and Durc was stunned for he did not know that Frebec knew how to use the ceremonial language so well. Goov was still watching the man

intently and Durc could see that Frebec was telling him the same story as he spoke of previously. Since he was calmer in Goov's presence he gave more details and when he told of Danug nearly losing his mate, Durc wondered how his brother could stand the pain and weight of leadership he was surly experiencing now. He had not met the woman but knew of her through Junko and the strength she showed as well as the love she shared with the entire Lion Camp. Junko was positive that she was the reason Nezzie did not follow Talut when he died. As much as the loss of the others were surely devastating, the loss of the woman would have had a greater effect. Walking to them, Frebec continued until he was finished before acknowledging Durc's presence.

"Goov."

Goov did not speak to Durc but to Frebec. "You speak well for one of the other. Better than Junk who has been with us many years."

"I learn by watching and I watched Durc and his mate closely when they were with Lion Camp and learned more from Danug and Folara who learned from Durc and Ayla."

"Why did you come here?"

Frebec told him just as he told Durc and Durc almost smiled by the shocked expression in the holy man's eyes. "You know Uba cannot do such a thing. She would not do such a thing it is against everything she knows."

"I know." Frebec lowered his head but then raised it quickly. "But I can watch."

"Then you would be rude."

"Mogur, I will teach him clan ways and he will learn and learn quickly." Goov nodded at Durc's statement but he had seen the need and stubbornness in the man's eyes and body language. He would not give up his quest easily.

When Agal brought food to the two men, Durc motioned him to stay. "You are new to the clan Frebec," Durc addressed him in the Mamutoi language which Agal knew well, "and you will need to become a man of the clan for anyone to take you seriously. I know you are good with the throwing spear and the spear thrower but here to be a man you must kill only with the throwing spear then make your own spear thrower before you can use it to hunt with us."

"You do not have one who makes weapons for you? Ralev has been making the spear throwers for the Lion Camp and others since his return from Cedar camp."

"It will be the same for him when he is well. We will not hunt for a while for now that the heavy snows have begun they will only let up for short periods. You will practice with Agal and work with him and he will teach you clan ways. I will correct you and when you are wrong for Agal is still a child and cannot do such. I correct you to make you better not to embarrass you. Do you understand?"

“Yes.”

“Agal go and bring Atta to me.”

Chapter 49

Atta looked down as much as he wanted to stare at Durc questioning his order that he train the man of the other with Agal and Nug. The particulars were not important but that it was obvious that the boy Nug would rail against even being near a man of the others and everyone knew his feelings about Durc and his family. Why would Durc do this when it made no sense?

Durc did not need to see Atta's eyes to know his thoughts his body language said it all. “You will begin tomorrow when Bec has had time to rest from his journey.” Frebec made no challenge to the Clan name Durc had given him knowing that most of the clan people would not be able to say his name. “Goov will watch and I will know what happens. Bec is a hunter of the others and a good hunter but he will have to prove himself to the rest of our hunters. Perhaps when the snow eases I will take him and Agal on a hunt.”

“Nug?”

“Nug needs to learn if he is ever to be leader that to do what is best for the clan may not be easy and may make his belly burn. It is a lesson he refuses but one he must learn. Use Agal and Bec, they will understand.”

Atta looked at the boy who was carrying wood to all the hearths for the women and the medicine woman. He saw him look down and stare at the ill man that the medicine woman worked hard to keep with them even though his skin was still so pale it was as if a beacon shone from him and many of the hunters feared the pale eyes. “The ill one?”

“We will wait until he is well for I still must speak with him.” Atta nodded and left the men's area thinking of all he needed to do. Agal would be no problem and would probably be helpful since he knew the language of the others and he would be able to pay more attention to Nug. The boy caused more problems than any of the others but Durc was determined to make him a hunter. Durc followed him and went to Brac to designate an area near Junko for a hearth for Frebec and Ralev. Changing his mind he turned back to his hearth and called Ura to him.

By Afternoon, Ura had two bed spaces added to Junko's hearth and Brac and Loug carried Ralev to his new space. Uba was not happy at first since she had wanted the boy to remain longer in her close care though she said nothing as she followed her patient. When they laid Ralev down and left, Ralev immediately tried to sit up but was stopped once again by the strange clan woman who seemed to be with him constantly. “You will stay covered.” It was the order of a medicine woman and as such appropriate especially since Durc called him a child even though he was taller than even the man of the other that had been with him. Ralev nodded and wrapped one of the furs that covered him around his shoulders and chest and then sat up with the woman's help.

Closing his eyes to try and recover from feeling as if he would lose consciousness Ralev looked across the cave and saw hate in the eyes of the clan man or boy who had brought wood for the medicine woman. He could not imagine why someone he had never met would have such hate but he refused to look away. Hearing from Danug and Folara that the staring the man did was rude by clan standards and seeing the quick signals from the medicine woman who seemed exasperated it was not the first breach he had made, but even so Ralev was not going to look away first. He was the son of a leader of the Mamutoi and even if he was a guest he was the guest of the leader and he was pleased when the boy angrily looked away first.

“That was not polite.”

At the sound of Frebec’s voice the medicine woman quickly left the hearth but was replaced by Ura who handed for to both of the men and retreated without a word even though Frebec smiled at her in greeting. “No it was not but the medicine woman yelled at him not me so I figured he was in the wrong.”

“How do you feel?”

“Like Danug is sitting on my chest after he beat me.”

“Since Danug never laid a hand on you I cannot imagine how you would know how that would feel.” Frebec’s smiled but then his feature became serious. “You should never have come Ralev.”

“I had to just as I told you before, my reasons have not changed.”

Chapter 50

Durc, though he did not stare, watched at the two Mamutoi men talk and could see just talking exhausted the younger. Having to explain to Uba that other leaked water from their eyes when they were in great pain had made Uba more attentive to Ralev but he could not explain that the pain Ralev was feeling was in his mind and heart not his body. Even he could tell that the boy was still weak but Durc would have to get him up and moving so the other men would not think him weak. Having seen the stare from Nug and the hate in that stare and wondered why this boy hated someone he did not know, even way he seemed to hate anyone who was different in any way. Pleased to see that not only had Orva reprimanded the boy but Goov had as well. It did nothing for how the boy felt but Durc had seen Broud in that look and he was determined that if he could not break the boy of his bad habits he would leave his clan but he would not make it alive to his own.

Turning to Agal as he came and stood next to him Durc saw the concern in his eyes. “Tell me.”

“The man Bec is to train with me. I would like to spend time with him. He is different from Junk as is the other. I want to learn from them.”

“It is a good thing to learn of others. I would but you in his care for I trust him that much but it would not be good for you. You may learn from then but you must stay in this hearth.”

“I would tell you something.”

“You may speak.”

Agal looked around and saw that his mother and siblings had left the hearth. He had said nothing to Durc before because he was not sure what he had seen but now that Nug would also be training with him he wanted Durc to know. “The boy Nug, I did not mean to stare but I did, he prayed to his totem. He was told that if he learned the way of the others or from you that he would no longer be clan and would lose his totem. He hates that he was chosen to come and possibly lose his totem. He fears this more than he fears you.”

Durc looked at Ura’s son and thought of what he was saying. This idea was not something Nug learned from Jag but he wondered who had such power over the boy to get him to believe such a thing. “It is never a good thing to watch someone pray to their totem but you have given me much to think of and what you did benefits the clan. It is good, but keep these thought to yourself for now.”

Looking around the cave Durc thought of what he learned from Goov and from Agal and knew that Jag expected his son to learn the weapons that he had taught him with the last Clan gathering. How could he think he would not be clan if his father was clan and knew the flying spear. Looking around the cave he saw Goov enter into his special chambers and knew now was not the time to get the Mogur to give him some guidance.

Nug reviled in the feel of the clan spear in his hands. He had charged the target several times and the spear had become impeded he had attacked so ferociously. He smirked when he was done and the man of the others and the boy Agal held the thin spears of the others. They required no strength or skill to throw the stick even though he had seen those of the clan that used it return every time with meat from the hunt but he was sure that when it came down to it a clan spear was needed for the kill. He had watch all those that came with him practice with the throwing spear and he admitted that in a target it went through the leather but he could not see it being effective when an animal was moving and alive. He had seen the hunt but now he was positive that even though the thin spear stopped the two animals on the hunt, he was taken away before the end. Now with the heavy spear in his hand he felt powerful and knew that after he left the area a clan spear was used to kill both animals. When it was his turn again, he attacked as before knowing that if he did well the hunters would force the deformed man to take him on a hunt.

After seven days Brac took over training the three and was please to find the man of the others well versed in their language and skilled with the throwing spear. None of the hunters used clan spears any more for they had learned quickly that using the new weapons assured that their mates and families would be well fed during the winter even if it extended past the usual time when the melts came. Agal worked hard to make sure he could hit the moving target every time and often

stayed to practice with his sling. The man Bec also stayed for he felt his skill with the sling was lacking and wanted to improve.

Watching the boy Nug attack the target, an old auroch hide past its usefulness, he shook his head realizing that Nug would never survive if his prey animal was able to respond in any way. He was amazed how his view had changed in that they had all hunted with the heavy spear at one time and now the boys were learning the Throwing spear and doing it well. When training for the spear was over, Nug had no interest in the sling for in his mind it was a woman's weapon. He remembered his mother's mate had thought the same thing but Vorn had made all the hunters learn the sling which had fed the cave nearly as often as the spears no matter the type. He had made Nug sit and watch the others practice and now saw that as Bec struck the moving target again and again, with Agal matching him it was becoming a contest and other hunters became interested and soon all the hunters were present, each wagering on which would miss first.

Nug could not believe some of the hunters thought the man of the others could beat someone of the clan even if they were deformed, yet they did, even though they were using slings of the clan and not the others. Each time the man of the others struck the target the boy Agal matched him. He could not help himself as he hoped that Agal beat the man of the others. None of the hunters interfered and when Durc came into the cave of men all became quiet and Nug did not understand the men who would give such reverence to a deformed man. When Durc nodded the competition continued and the two struck the swinging stone again and again. Nug was stunned when Durc called a halt and grabbing an axe that had been held by Atta, he went to the stone and began to strike it. When he walked away the swinging stone target was half its original size, stepping back to his original position, he once again nodded.

Each of the two competitor were given stones collected by others as Durc changed the shape of the stone and he was pleased to see that the stones were also smaller making the competition even harder. Agal was the first to try with the new stone and target and sighed with relief when he heard the stone strike the target. Frebec stood in the same position and looked at the target which he could barely see clearly, and he was not happy about the smaller stones. Beginning to spin the sling he began to relax as he watched the target and he was able to time it then released the stone, nearly smiling when the thunk of the stone hitting stone sounded. Once again they each took turns trying to hit the target and even Nug felt the excitement to see who would miss first. For each ten hits, Durc added something to make it that much harder. Seeing both sweating with their efforts, Durc denied them water to refresh themselves first, then to each he added the weight of carrying other weapons, then he added everything a man would carry when he went on an extended hunt.

Both we weary and all the men could see that their arms were shaking with their efforts but neither would give up. Finally Agal missed and Durc could see the disappointment in his hunter's faces and he put a hand up. "Bec you must strike the target to win." Immediately the hunters looked at the man of the others but when Frebec looked into Durc's face he knew. Walking up to the spot he placed a stone in the sling and began to spin that leather tightening his muscles and throwing. There was no thunk of stone on stone, he had missed and was glad. Turning he slapped Agal on the back and smiled to congratulate him but the boy jumped back and pointed a spear at him.

Chapter 51

Frebec did not need Durc to translate what had occurred he had heard it enough from Danug and Durc himself when he was at Lion Camp and knew what he had done wrong. His smile faded immediately and with his hands at his sides he explained directly to Agal. "This man of the Others would not hurt the son of the mate of Durc. This man only wanted Agal to know that he is proud to have been in such a contest and know that my skills have improved enough to be able to join Agal in a contest such as this and grateful that you have allowed me to meet you skill." Frebec saw Agal's abrupt lowering of the spear and his attempt to smile. Like his parents the smile looked more like a grimace than a smile but Frebec understood and so had the hunters around them.

"Brac, the snow is less this day. Tomorrow we will take Agal and Frebec on a hunt." The hunters were shocked for the snow falling outside was blowing as hard as it had for the last several day and knew that even should it ease there would be another storm following quickly. It was dangerous to hunt now but most of the hunters knew that not that long ago they had been required to hunt in this type of weather because they could only get one animal at a time. Now there was less need to go out in dangerous weather. "Brac, Nug will go to watch." Durc looked at the boy still sitting on the ground because he refused to use an old man's weapon.

Frebec shivered even though he had so much more clothing than the hunters around him he was freezing in the cold wind. The men of the clan even Durc who was only half clan seemed to ignore the biting cold. They remained still when Durc stopped which made Frebec feel even colder but he remained still as all the others for he knew that this was essentially his manhood hunt for the clan. The boy Agal was as still as the others but Frebec was sure the excitement helped in keeping him warm for he was as stoic as the hunters around him.

At the sound the hunting party froze and all thoughts of the cold left Frebec as the echo moved through the small canyon they had entered. The snow was not as deep and he knew animals would use it as protection from the storms. A mist formed ahead and he had thought earlier that it must mean that heated springs lay ahead and thought of the warmth the pools would provide should they be able to stop near them. The sound even drove that thought out knowing that ahead of them was bison. Although most herds made their way to the plains, where the snow blew with the constant wind, it allowed the grasslands to hold little of the moisture except in holes and depressions that filled the steppes. He did not think any of the animals would stay within the forest and valleys that surrounded Durc's cave but apparently this group had stay for whatever reason.

The moved even slower and made their way into the closed canyon and as they reached a sharp turn they could see why the animals remained. The large area in the boxed in canyon was warm enough that fog covered the ground but they could see that not only had the bison remained but herds of various deer, horses, and even several woolly rhinos were present where the grass was still lush and green from the heat of the stream that ran from one side to the other. There were small trees in the center with larger trees at the edge of the clearing but too far for them to use as cover.

Durc had told them that it was up to them to choose what they wanted to hunt so that if they found one type animal they could choose to continue one to find another. Here there was a variety to choose from but to be successful Frebec knew that those closest to them would be best for there would be plenty of area for the rest of the animals to run from the sight of the hunt. Touching Agal's shoulder he pointed to a small group of bison that had wandered away from the larger group. Agal nodded and signaled to Durc that they had chosen.

Still hiding behind leafless brush that hid them, Durc handed Frebec a throwing spear and Frebec smiled for Durc knew that he had not hunted with a throwing spear since he learned to use the spear thrower. Then was Durc's clan way, only those who had constructed their own spear thrower could use the weapon and Frebec knew that Durc would accept the Spear thrower he had carried with him. If not Ralev would help him construct one quickly. He and Agal moved slowly to get well within range of the small group, stopping completely when one of the cows lifted its head to look around. Thankful for the snow covering them and the dark fur which made them look like several of the large boulders in the area, Frebec waited until the cow resumed eating before once again moving.

Looking down when Agal touched his shoulder, the boy pointed to one of the cows which was either well fed from the green forage or well along in her pregnancy compared with the others in the herd. They both stood slowly so they would not knock off the snow that covered their fur then allowing the younger man go first he watched as he threw the spear straight and true. The animal bawled once and fell struggling to get up. Before the rest ran Frebec loosed his own spear to hit a younger male and though the animal did not fall immediately it stumbled a short distance away which allowed Frebec to advance and capturing the horns and twisting the animals head he was able to quickly cut the veins in the neck and push the animal to its side. Turning back he saw that Agal had already cut the neck of his animal and began to cut the belly so that that which was not usable or needed would remain for scavengers and they would only have to take those parts of the animals they wanted.

The rest of the hunting party got the travois ready for use but the two animals were cared for by the new hunters. Frebec had not felt such exhilaration during a hunt in a very long time and for the first time since he lost Fralie he felt alive and for the first time he wished he had told those of Lion Camp where he was going.

Chapter 52

Frebec could not think of anything that hurt him as much as the cuts on his chest that he knew he could not touch or even acknowledge. He had almost laughed when the Mogur, who had scared him almost enough to make his shame himself, announced that his clan totem was a boar. He knew that boars often went after things again and again until they either died or conquered it and he knew the holy man had been correct in his choice of totem animals. At the time of the cut there had been little pain and he was glad he had not received the cuts that Agal received to denote his wolf totem. They were now hunting brothers and Frebec was glad for he liked the Ura's son and thought he would be a fine leader after Durc. Now however with all the excitement over and the re-enactment of the hunt behind him the pain was making itself known.

Thinking of the dance to show how the hunt went made his face heat up for he had always used words before but the telling was more like a dance to show the women and others who had not joined them how the hunt had happened. He was sure Agal's movements were understood while he felt stiff and awkward still he had finished and there was little made of his performance which he was glad. Now lying down next to Ralev he tried to relax.

Fear and confusion still filled him as it had when the Mogur had announced that the totem to the man of the other was the boar. His totem now also belonged to the man of the others as a hunter of the clan. Visions of his dream filled his mind of the strange colored boar that had saved him from the normal colored boar but he could not understand the message that his totem was trying to tell him. Surly his totem was the normal colored boar, same, not different, normal. If that was the case why had his totem been attacking him if he was staying true to being clan. He was clan. No one could change that, no matter what they tried to do he would stay clan. Even after seeing that the man of the others and Agal had not needed the clan spear to kill the bison. That the hunters gave great respect for the man of the others after he had walked to the young bull who was still on its feet and sliced the throat which had killed it without showing any fear of the animal at all. It was something that had to be done but he knew most men of the clan would not have wanted the dangerous task.

Knowing that the leader Durc made the hunt leader Brac take him on the hunt was only to show him that in a very short time a man of the others could become a man of the clan while he remained a child, made no difference. If he was a child, then he was a child of the clan. Watching the men of the others he saw the wince and knew that the man was feeling the pain of the cut but unlike the men of the clan he showed his pain, he was weak. His totem much be confused with the presence of the others in the cave of a clan, it could be the only reason.

Goov watched Nug from the darkened entrance to his alcove and saw the confusion. He had been stunned himself when the white boar appeared again and again as he searched for a totem for the man of the others. He had expected the mammoth or some other animal but not a boar. Knowing of Nug's dreams he wondered if perhaps all he had suffered was because Ursus was testing him to see if he was worth for his uses for it was plain to the Mogur that Ursus had a plan for this man. Durc had thought he had named the boar as a means to teach Nug but he should have known better that the spirits were not to be used by men. The spirits used men not the other way around and perhaps he had realized that at the end. Knowing his plans to eventually take the boy Ral on a hunt, Goov had search for a totem for him as well. It too had been as shocking as the boar had been for the man. He would search again for it had to be wrong.

Seeing the confused look on Nug's features he was like an open book, another lesson that he failed to learn. Never should a man allow another to know their thoughts. There was too much that Nug refused to learn and if he did not learn soon, then the hunters of his clan would never accept him. Shaking his head he stood and went deeper into the sacred area that held the skull of Ursus to see if perhaps he could receive some guidance.

The rest of the winter was quiet only because of the severity of the storms which Frebec said were worse than what he had experienced with the Mamutoi mainly because of the volume of snow that fell. It was difficult to keep open a path to where the meat and other foods were stored for the winter and most were thankful for Durc's insistence that Nug be responsible for keeping the firewood alcove filled prior to the storms for they used only what was needed and during small breaks in the weather the young hunters and older male children were able to go out and supplement the wood supply with the help of the women. The men made sure the paths remained clear and protected those bringing in what small amount of wood was found.

Ralev helped in this endeavor only after explaining to the medicine woman that he felt better and that the color of his skin was normal. Thankful that Durc and Ura backed up this claim the medicine woman finally allowed him to leave the cave but only if he wore added furs that she provided. Frebec knew that Ralev wanted out for another reason and when he returned it was obvious that he had collected green wood fallen from the weight of the snow on limbs, but those that had questioned what he was doing with shakes of their head or questioning glances were surprised when Ralev presented Uba with several wooden cooking tools including a spoon. At first she questioned the items until Ralev demonstrated them to her. On the handles of each tool was the symbolic carving of her clan totem the red deer. When she had seen the carvings she had not wanted to touch them but Goov seeing them had examined them and though he was not happy with the depiction of a spirit totem he assured her that they were not dangerous since they were made by one of the Others just as the drawing on the walls of the cave had been drawn.

As the men and boys practiced in the men's area, Ralev learned quickly that until he was a man of the clan he could not make a weapon so he spent his time carving various items for those in the clan. He had been working on a piece of ivory for many weeks but allowed no one to see what he was doing and though they all acted as if what this boy did was of no account, there were sly glances whenever he was working on his project but he wrapped all but the area he worked on with a leather wrap to keep it hidden. Frebec was not sure what he was working on either but he was sure when it was time, known only to Ralev, he would reveal the project.

Frebec spent a lot of his time trying to watch the medicine woman but he had to be careful for he had seen her catch him and become agitated. Also spending time with Agal and Ura's daughter Eyla made him miss the children of his hearth but they were old enough that they did not need him. He wondered if he was even needed by Lion Camp at all for he could not even save his own mate and her child. Shaking his head to clear his thoughts of Lion Camp, Frebec walked out into the storm. The snow was falling heavily but at least the wind had died down for a while as he looked toward the north. He had known all along why he had come but he never thought he would miss Lion Camp so thoroughly. Ralev seemed to take being with the Clan as if it was just another place to live but Frebec knew he would not be satisfied until he returned home with answers.

Agal left the cave to stand next to Bec having seen something come over his features and found the man of the others staring to the North where he knew the Mamutoi man had come from just like Junko. "You miss your home?"

Frebec turned shocked but the guttural but clear words spoken by the young man. “You speak Mamutoi!”

“Yes I speak the tongue of the Mammoth hunters as does my sibling Eyla.”

Frebec laughed for other than just after he arrived and Durc wanted answers he had heard no one speak not even Junko and his mate who for some reason stayed away from him and Ralev. It did not matter to him so he did not press it. “Why would you learn my language?”

“If Ursus demands it I will one day be leader of this clan and Junko has brought much to trade with that has increased our status with the other clans. If I am to continue this then I must be like Durc and know the language of the others.”

“The boy Nug looks older than you are but he is still considered a child”

“Nug does not wish to learn the ways of the others and he is not alone. It was difficult for this clan to learn the throwing spear and spear thrower but they had Durc to learn from, even the sling is used more by this clan than any other because Vorn demanded it. Learning new weapons has taken many years and still some cannot learn the spear thrower but are adequate with the throwing spear because they have benefitted from the successful hunts. The other clans do not have Durc or Junko and they all rejected Ayla when she was clan until they were forced to accept her as a clan medicine woman. It is told in the stories of this clan that only because of The Mogur Creb was she made medicine woman of the clan so that she could make Iza’s drink. Still the leaders and others did not want this. Nug thinks he will not be clan if he learns, but it is more he is not learning those things that are clan and that his clan will need one day if Ursus chooses him to be leader.”

“That is sad. Knowledge is power and we cannot have enough power.” Frebec cocked his head toward the entrance and went back into the cave and knew that Agal followed him.

Chapter 54

The signs of spring were slow to come this year according to Junko who now that Frebec had received his totem and was considered a hunter of the clan visited often with him and Ralev. “I had hope to leave by now, but there is still time before it would be too dangerous for Selinne to go back to Elk Camp. I do want to get there before she is too large and Trunoi will be going with us to help.”

“I am surprised that your mate was able to survive well within the clan structure, I remember Ayla saying how difficult it was.”

“Because this clan is where Ayla came from and the fact that Durc was with the Mamutoi made it easier. The hunters are always telling me she makes a good clan woman but she is very ugly.”

Frebec laughed then looked serious. “When or if you get to the summer meeting tell Danug and Folara where Ralev and I are, and tell them we are fine. I did not tell them I was leaving or where I was going and I know that Ralev did not tell anyone either.”

“I will Frebec. Why don’t you and Ralev travel back with us?”

“There are things I have to do and I think Ralev needs this time away as well. We are safe with Durc’s clan and will be well as you can attest.”

“I think that Danug and Folara will understand.” In his heart Junko did not think they would understand but it was not his place to say. He had his mate and he could not imagine how Frebec was feeling especially after losing a child as well. Then all of Lion Camp must be mourning their losses.

With the days noticeably longer, even though there was still a sharp chill in the air, the women began going out more to collect welcomed new green shoots that they added to the diet and the two medicine women were out collecting to increase their stores and often to Eyla with them. It amazed Frebec that this child which had been born in Lion Camp would soon be old enough to be a woman of the clan. Suddenly he felt old and tired. There was nothing he could learn from the clan that would have saved Fralie, Mother how he missed her. When he noticed Durc standing next to him he jumped startled for he had been lost in his thoughts.

“You know by now that the medicine women will not share their knowledge with you. It is their knowledge and not for men, not even the Mogur. When the snow is completely out of the valley, Junko will return home, I ask that you stay with us until they return. Goov thinks that you have a part to play here and he has grown nearly as powerful as Creb so I will not say he is wrong. Mamut and Goov are a lot alike in their knowledge of things that change the world of the spirits and I do not understand it and do not want to know that world. Still I have many decisions to make before the summer heat and I hope you will stay.”

“And Ralev? What does Mogur say about Ralev?”

“He says that his totem is confused. I do not know what that means but I think it may be that it is he is not like you and the other Mamutoi. He is Ranec but not, Mamutoi but not. He seems comfortable and most of the hunters are afraid of his color as if the spirits have made his skin like a ghost. Ura understands, but Uba looks back in her memories and is trying to find a cure.” Durc handed Frebec a stone jar. “Uba said this will keep him from burning his skin.” Frebec smelled it and was surprised to find it smelled similar to the paste that Setback made for Ralev for the same reason.

“I would tell you that I am lost, sad, but I am comfortable with your clan.”

Durc nodded his understanding and walked away. He had never gotten to know Frebec well while he was with the Mamutoi and he realized that had been a mistake. Different from Junko and Trunoi as he could be, where they were noisy and seemed restless, Frebec was silent, sad and

could sit still for hours. He did not remember that he had been that way at Lion Camp but he was that way now. Perhaps if he stayed he could learn more of the man and it would be good.

Chapter 55

Eul pushed him to the ground again to sit and watch until he could control the anger that threatened to overcome him. Turning from the boy now sitting in the mud he looked across the practice field to where the women were collecting fruits and other eatables and among them was Eyla. Thinking of the other hunters who had been given the job of trying to train the boy Nug, he was pushed to the end of his endurance knowing that the boy hated Eyla and having to see the hate flare whenever he saw the girl. The boy knew nothing of Eyla who worked hard with those tasks most girls her age was given, but she also learned from the medicine woman. He had heard many times of the woman of the other Ayla who was mother to Durc and since it was obvious that it was Durc's totem that created the girl he had to wonder if she had the memories of the medicine woman of the others just as the other hunter thought. Even before being given the task of training Nug, he had pushed him to the ground and made him stay motionless for the rude comments he had made to and about Eyla.

Eul bristles at the man of other as well not liking that he watches Eyla and spoke to her several times even when he had not received permission from either Durc or Ura. Only the fact that Eyla seemed to enjoy talking to the man in the language of the others kept him silent thus far. He liked this man of the others who unlike Junk was quiet and watched what was happening around him. Except for where Eyla was concerned he was polite and asked questions when he did not know the way of the clan and seldom did he require reminding. In the spring hunts, he had proved to be a good hunter moving with unusual quietness that the others were not known for, still he should not be spending so much time with Eyla.

“Why is Eul looking as if he could take my head off?”

Eyla looked at Eul who had once again pulled Nug from the mud and began to teach him the sling. “Eul will be my mate when I become a woman. He has given up his own clan to join with Durc's clan for this to be. He is a good man and a great hunter.”

“But you are still a child.”

“Not for much longer, then I will be mated to Eul which is good for he will be a good mate to me.”

“It just seems like you are so young.”

“Not so young, Amo one summer older and Ura says she will be a woman very soon then she will be given as a mate to Agal.

Frebec shook his head and watched around again since he was to guard the women as they collected. He missed Junko, his mate Selinne and Trunoi for they had left as soon as the snow melted hoping that the spring warmth would follow them. Frebec also knew it was good for him

that they left for he was able to dig deeper into the clan way. Until he came he did not realize how much the men of the clan protected and cared for their women, now realizing just how strange it was that the clan had allowed Ayla to hunt at all. Women seemed to have no desire to even touch a weapon let alone use one, thus when they went out to gather at least one man had to go with them to protect them. Around the cave within sight of the other hunters it was not such an issue but the women wanted to collect roots and other plant material by a pool created by the widening of the river below and with bears and other animals out hunting a situation could become dangerous quickly. Even so they collected as they moved never missing an opportunity to collect something of use. Having to remind himself over and over not to help them was difficult but at least Durc designated the travois a man's instrument so he could carry the poles and leather platform rolled around the poles so he could make one should the women require it.

As they moved down the slope Frebec looked at the training field and saw that Eul was once again pressing Nug to the ground and wondered if perhaps he could help. As he and the women moved into the valley, he was again awed by the lush habitat and wondered as he had before why the people who had obviously lived in the caves prior to the clan left. The area was wonderfully rich in food plants, animals, and items that could be used for so many items in trading. The black rocks that filled the area around the south side of the lake could be used for trading as the clan had with salt and decided to talk to Durc about them. Their beautiful smooth face which reflected its surroundings belied the danger of the sharp edges. As he watch the surroundings he could see some of the animals that ran at their approach hide with in the thick lush forest the filled the western edge of the pond.

When he looked east he saw the movement and stiffened. Durc had not told him of any hunters leaving but the movement was too familiar it was clan. Touching Ura knowing she could speak and get the other women's attention, he looked at her startled face and smiled. "Get the women going toward the cave and tell Durc there is a strange man coming."

Startled Ura looked where Frebec had been looking and saw the same thing he had seen and quickly got the women together and started up the sloop toward the cave. The women were silent as they moved and when he saw them keep to the tree line and out of sight he turned his attention back to the man and saw that there were two.

Moving into a crouch Frebec headed toward a pile of stones that he could hide behind and took out his sling and piled small stones next to him just in case. Even though it was still chilly, he could feel the sweat begin to form cooling him even more but he stayed motionless. Nearly yelping with a hand touched his shoulder he was startled to see four of the hunters he had not even heard approach standing behind him. Taking a deep breath he pointed to the visitors.

Durc almost growled the name "Durf"

Chapter 56

The hunters with Frebec watched as Durc signaled how he wanted the intruder approached. It was apparent to Frebec that this man was either not welcomed or not trusted. Durc looked at Frebec who was dressed as a hunter of the clan and decided against sending him back to the

cave. Knowing from the Mogur who was responsible for Nug's attitude Durc was not above using the man of the others to make a statement.

Durf thought of all the time they would have to travel to make it back to Jag's clan before winter all because he had questioned Jag's need to teach the other hunters the weapon from the deformed man. There was no doubt that some of the other hunter thought as he did that to use a weapon the deformed man made should not be used, it was not clan. They had all spoken at the council of men and even the Mogur questioned Jag, but Jag was leader and too many of the other hunter sided with him and the Mogur had acquiesced. Now he was going to bring back the son of Jag's mate to teach the clan the weapon of the other. Jag's insistence that he not return until Nug had shown him his expertise with the weapon had sat like a sour horsetail root on his stomach. His mate will deliver her son while he was traipsing around playing nurse maid to the next leader.

The sight of the man of the other standing before him, stopped Durf in his tracks as he looked around for others for they were never alone. Seeing none, Durf lifted his spear happy to rid the world of the infection the others represented to his world. Pain exploded in his arm and the spear fell to the ground and Durf could not stop the growl of anger that came from all the pent up anger he had seeing the sling, the clan sling, the man of the others carried but before he could charge, four others rose from the bushes around him pointing spears, and he recognized the deformed man.

"Why are you here?"

"I came for Nug. He is to take his knowledge to his clan."

"The boy Nug has no knowledge. Nug will not learn. Nug would remain a child." All of the hunters and even Frebec saw the anger rise in the man's features, but Durc continued. "This leader has high respect for Jag and it is sorrow that the child of his mate does not have the ability to learn. Jag would do better to choose another to follow him."

"I am not to leave until the boy Nug shows me he has learned what Jag sent him to learn."

"This leader", Durc wanted to drill into Durf that he was the leader and when he says Nug will leave, Nug will leave not matter what Jag has said. "This leader will give the boy Nug until the summer to learn to hunt with the clan spear."

"The boy was sent to learn the weapon of the other." His motions made it obvious that had he not been speaking the silent language know to all clan he would be screaming his anger and all the hunters pointed their spears at Durf, lowering them only with a signal from Durc.

"The boy refuses to learn the new weapon and will not use a sling. Mogur Goov thinks he may be deformed in his thoughts."

"The boy Nug was already killing the rats of grain before he was sent to the leader Durc."

“Then he has lost this knowledge. If he does not learn, you will leave with him at the end of the summer.”

“We will be caught in the winter.”

“It will be up to me if you stay longer.” Durc did not wait for an answer but turned and headed up the hill toward the cave. The rest of the hunters waited until Durf followed before brining up the rear.

Durf knew now just how far Durc’s clan had fallen away from Clan traditions. That there was a man of the others dressed as a hunter of the clan and using a clan weapon did not sit well and of a man of the others could learn a clan weapon why had Nug not been able to learn the lessons he was supposed to learn. His anger finally in check he continued to follow the deformed man even though he thought of turning and returning to Jag and informing him that the son of his mate was not ready to return. Now he would have to stay with this clan until the boy learned. That he had not been taken on a hunt he could not believe, he was certainly old enough. As he walked into the clearing he saw the hunter Atta pushing Nug to the ground and telling him that he was rude and unable to learn. The anger nearly broke loose again seeing the son of Jag’s mate sitting on the ground while the others that had been sent at the same time not only were obviously hunters now or were well skilled in the new weapon. Even the deformed son of Durc’s mate threw the small spear with accuracy to his a moving target that Brac pointed to. Neg’s son Mulk was obviously a hunter and it was obvious that Irok was as skilled as the deformed son of Durc’s mate.

Atta once again pulled Nug to his feet and pointed to the clan spear lying on the ground. Picking it up he once again charged the target that was still moving and missed, seeing the failure Atta grabbed the boy by the shoulder and handed him a leather cloth and pointed to the woods. Durf had to look away embarrassed by the display thinking that perhaps Durc was correct maybe he could not learn then he saw the look Nug gave to his instructor and he knew the boy was doing it on purpose.

Chapter 57

Durc watch the new comer with close eyes wondering why Jag would send a hunter with obvious dislikes of anything having to do with the others. Durf was known as a good hunter but had problems controlling his anger the same as the man of his hearth had before him. Looking at Nug who entered with yet another load of wood, he shook his head and wondered if perhaps Durf’s presence with spur the boy into at least trying but he was wary about the continued anger that Durf displayed in his features and he was not sure it was safe to allow the boy Nug alone in the presence of the hunter. Brac had seemed to determine that the new comer needed his own training and put the visitor in the hearth next to Frebec and Ralev. When Durf had seen Ralev it took almost everything he had not to run from the cave, but Durc gave him credit he stayed and ate the food Ura provided, but his eyes never left Ralev’s.

Ralev ate the food that the Girl Amo brought and ate with gusto trying to keep a smile from lighting his face at the look of horror on the new clan hunter’s face. Since he was still

considered a child he would be able to look at the man without too many heads turning but he knew if he did he would not be able to control the laughter. Taking a peek at Frebec he could see that Frebec was having as hard of time as he was. Finishing his meal he took Frebec's bowl and returned them to the leader's hearth quietly accepting the lotion application that the medicine woman applied before returning to Frebec's side.

"If anyone or anything wanted to catch me they would never be able to hold onto me, I am so slick with whatever she made today to slather on me." Ralev's words were soft but it was enough noise to get the clan's man attention back onto him.

"She is sure she can cure you from looking like a spirit. When you were first brought here she thought you so deathly sick that it stole the color from your skin, now she is sure that the illness caused you to be permanently pale."

"She is sweet and I just let her put on me what she wants but I hope she never tries whatever that green stuff was, it smelled terrible." Frebec frowned at the thought of Ralev returning to the hearth with a pale green paste that looked made of mostly fat with some type of herbs, but the smell was so bad he had spent the night in the men's area and made Ralev bath in the stream before returning the next day. At least this time he smelled like hazelnut which was much preferable.

When Frebec noticed the man's staring into his hearth but did not stare back knowing how much of a taboo it was for clan to looking into the privacy of a hearth. He did notice that the boy Nug looked toward the hunter often and seemed excited by his presence. The man had not seemed happy that Nug had not learned the lessons he had been sent to learn, but perhaps there was more between the two than he knew. He saw Durc nod at him and looked directly at him stunned that he had been watching for any sign from Durc just as the other hunters did. For a moment he froze and thought back then relaxed knowing he had done the same with Talut and Danug. "I am going to talk with Durc, is there anything you need?"

"No, I am going to try and finish the ivory because Ura said that Durc and the Mogur are planning a hunt and she thinks that Durc will ask Brac to include me with the hunters."

Frebec nodded and went towards the leader's hearth but Durc met him outside its limits and walked towards the men's area of the cave and was surprise to see it empty except for Goov. Concerned he joined them and sat when Durc pointed to a log.

"Goov wishes to speak with you about the boy Ralev."

"I would know how the boy came to be."

Frebec knew this had to do about what ever had gone wrong when the Mogur had searched for Ralev's totem. Taking a deep breath Frebec recalled the story he had heard so many time he knew it by heart. Ranec's story of how Wymez had traveled to the other side of the big sea and found a mate with a black skinned woman and how the people of her camp turned on them and their escape to the sea and her subsequent death and Wymez's return to Lion Camp with Ranec.

He told them of how Nezzie had adopted the boy and how he had grown into a master carver. He tried to explain the idea of red feet to the holy man and was thankful that he said nothing but nodded for him to continue. After Ayla left the Lion Camp, something she said to Ranec made him go to Tricie and they later mated. It was obvious that Ralev is from Ranec's spirit except for the light skin."

"I thank you for your words Bek."

Frebec nodded and left the area confused as to why Durc had not told the story since he had heard it when he was in Lion Camp.

"It is more than what you could tell me Durc. There are memories of such people, but the memories are of people who are vicious and kill and eat even their own kind. The boy may be from these people and Ursus took his color so that we know he is not like them. I searched again and Ursus has given me the same answer. You will have to take the boy on a hunt or his totem many become angry at being kept from hunting."

"Brac wants to go to the steppes and get either bison or auroch for Buna said that the women need more large hides."

"It is a good animal to hunt but use caution."

"You see something?"

"Ursus will not reveal all but shows me only a small time but I have a feeling."

"I will protect him."

Chapter 58

For an early spring day it was sultry on the steps and the hunters were all on edge especially when they saw a small pride of cave lions basking in the shade what was left of a kill a short distance away awaiting their pleasure. The cubs growled and pulled at the remains while the few adult females watched but none could see a male. Durc moved cautiously where lard herds of animals were starting to gather to begin their migration. As soon as all the young were born the herds would begin to move with the greening of the grasses that was capable of feeding the hordes of animals that depended of the steppes.

Durc looked at the slight reddish tinge to Ralev's skin and wished he had allowed Uba to put one of her creams on him for he would surely burn from the sun this day but giving him credit he showed no sign of discomfort but the odor would alert the animals they hunted. Once the hunt was over he would tell Ralev to put on the cream and hope he was not injured.

Ralev hoped they found something soon and even knowing that this was important to the clan to prove that he was a man, his interest was more focused on the piece of ivory wrapped in wet leather. Having hunted before with Danug and Folara, he had practice with the other young clan men so that he could prove himself quickly and have done with it. Hunting had never been

important to him but he knew if he was to remain with the clan any length of time this was something he had to do besides, it gave him an opening. He saw the movement and stopped knowing the hunters behind him had done the same. Ahead the graceful head of an antelope was frozen as if it sensed their presence. Crouching below the top of the grasses, he made his way slowly having been told by Brac that he would lead the hunters until he found the animal which would give itself to him.

There was no wasted movement as Ralev moved just close enough to make a killing strike as the throwing spear was raised and released so quickly that only a few of the hunters realized what had happened. Ralev walked to the animal and quickly cut its throat and grabbing the thin rear legs lifted into a tree branch until the hocks caught in the branches so that the animal would bleed completely, then he hunched down and waited until the rest joined him. The newcomer Durf and Nug were the only ones that showed no joy at Ralev's accomplishment, those the clan hunters were reserved their touches told him that they were proud of his accomplishment he could not say the same for the other two. He knew as well as the others that with a clan spear it would require the boy Mug to run and animal down in order to spear it but it would take the entire clan. With the throwing spear, Ralev was able to hunt and kill his animal without the help of the other hunters.

"You did well son of Danug who is my brother. Now put the paste from the medicine woman on your skin or my brother will think I do not honor him."

"The red of my skin is normal and I would not want to cost the clan in the hunt." It was what a man of the clan would say, but Durc was sure that neither Nug nor Durf would think such a thought.

"It is good but we will not return this night. I would send you and Bek to the cave so the women know all is well."

Ralev knew better than to argue with the leader and would not embarrass Durc by doing so in front of the stranger. Nug was still considered a child and Ralev Discounted his presence. Frebec handed the travois frame to Loug and with the antelope slung over Ralev's shoulders they retraced their steps back to the cave.

Durf walked to Durc and stood in front of him demanding to know why Nug was not allowed to hunt. "He is clan not one of the others but you do not allow him to hunt."

"Nug will not learn the throwing spear, he will only learn clan spear. He needs the rest of the hunters to hunt with the clan spear. The man Ralev needed no other hunter, he made his kill alone. Bloc made his own kill, Mulk made his own kill, Agal made his own kill. Nug cannot make his own kill, he will not learn the weapon that allows this and we are hunting more than one animal. We will bring many animals for the women to care for. This clan does not starve." Durc looked around and saw a single bison. The animal was obviously old and ill but with the new grass he would get a new lease on life until one of the predators of the plains eliminated him. Durc pointed to the animal and Durf looked where the leader pointed. "Nug can have that animal. Nug."

Nug ran forward and wished that Durf had kept quiet. “Nug, Durf think that you should be allowed to hunt. You will hunt that animal now.”

Nug took his clan spear and turned toward the bull which seemed enormous. He had only gone a few steps when he turned to see the other hunters were not following, turning he looked at Durf who nodded at him. Fear flared in his gut as he made his way toward the animal that seemed to grow the closer he got. Sweat poured down his arms and back and slipped into his eyes stinging but he continued on. When the animal shifted its position he stopped, holding the heavy spear at the ready in case the animal charged, he watched the animal take the same position as if it was with the rest of its herd.

The animal’s head was down but Nug knew that it could still see him and knew his every move as he neared the animal. The sides of the animal showed the rapid breathing, thinking of Agal’s hunt and the rapid end to the ghost boy’s hunt he knew this would be his only chance to prove that being clan was better. Tightening his hold on his spear he reveled in the heft of it and began to move with purpose. If the clan would not help him he would make the kill on his own even if he had to chase the animal until it was exhausted and ready for the final blow. Anger of all he had suffered filled him and he would show all those that took the weapons of the others that he was still Clan, would always be clan.

When the animal fainted to one side as if he would run Nug stopped all movement and just watch. He could feel the excitement start to build as if he was strong and nothing could go wrong with this hunt. The animal shook its head but remained in the same position and Nug began to move slowly toward his target but began to move to the side for to attack this animal head on with horns longer than he was tall was futile. As if discerning his intent the animal spun again to face him and Nug continued for it looked as if the animal had no intention in moving anywhere. Just a little closer.

The hit came from behind him sending him to the ground, his mouth immediately filled with dirt and he struggled against the unknown until a hand with longer than normal fingers closed over his mouth and he felt the body slide off his back and he lifted his head to see the boy of the others looking at him. Anger flared hot as he pulled his knife but Ralev’s hand was stronger than he thought it would be as it stopped him.

“Look.” Ralev motioned and released him hand, pointing toward the bison and Nug lifted his face just as a cave lion grabbed the neck of the bull and two jump and clamped onto the haunches while a third grabbed the belly of the animal slashing with long claws and opening the tender hide there. The deep roar vibrated throughout the area and the two boys and the hunters turned to look at the large cat with black intermittent mane as it walked leisurely toward the lionesses who now had the bull on the ground.

Chapter 59

Ralev looked at the grasses at his feet not able to look Durc in the face but up enough to see the angry movements of his hands as he told him that he not only endangered himself but Nug as

well for the lionesses could have turned on them just as easily as they had killed the bull. Durc looked at the boy and wondered why he had come back when he had been told to return to the cave. He had wanted to teach both Nug and Durf a lesson that was now lost. Anger burned in him for being disobeyed but stronger was the fear that he had felt when Ralev had rushed by him heading for Nug and he had reacted to slowly to stop him. Frebec stood next to him still panting from chasing the boy from where ever they had come from and Durc knew Frebec was as angry as he was.

“Why.” Not only did Durc sign the word but said it in Mamutoi as well.

“I had to.” The signal was as clear as the words. “Something inside told me I had to come back. It was almost painful until I turned around.”

Durc immediately stopped and looked at the pale boy who had just become a man and now perhaps something more. Had he needed to make the kill so that the Mogur could finally settle on his totem. Perhaps he needed to make the kill for Ursus to use him and that worried him more than the fact that he had rushed into a dangerous situation. Looking at where the large cats were tearing into the bull he wondered if that is what Goov had warned him about. He had thought the first set of cave lions had been what the warning had been about but now he wondered.

Turning from the hunt, Durc started back to the cave. They would hunt another day for too many things had gone wrong this day to continue and he wanted, no needed to talk with Goov. Though he paid no attention to them he knew the rest of the hunters followed and was not surprised to see Brac come up to walk beside him.

“He saved the Boy Nug”

“Yes.”

When they arrived where the lions had been earlier, they found only the hide and skeleton of their evening kill remained for the scavengers which were making short work of it. Having gone past the area Durc stopped and looked back. The heat of the day the lions should not have been hunting, it was too hot and they did not look as if they had been starving at all. Durc looked back and remembered that there had not been a male with this group but had been with the second. Was this something he needed to tell Goov?

“You needed a man of the others who is obviously weak to save you. You disgrace Jag. You are not worthy to follow him. You were sent to learn the weapon of Durc but you know nothing while the others will take their knowledge back to their clan you will take nothing.”

“They use the weapons of the others I use a weapon of the clan. I am clan not others.” His fist struck quickly and he hit the ground hard. Durf lifted the clan spear he carried and just as suddenly it left his hand and he grabbed his shoulder as if it hurt.

Durf looked toward the direction the stone came from and saw the man of the others with his sling twirling as if he was ready to throw another stone then he grabbed the stone in the sling and pressed it into a fold in his wrap. "Leave the boy."

"You are not clan. Go away. He is of my clan and I will discipline him as I see fit. Leave man of the others before you are dead."

"If you strike the boy again you will not return to your clan."

Chapter 60

Goov looked at Ralev and at the way Frebec stared at Durf. What ever happened on the hunt it was not good even though Ralev carried an antelope over his shoulders. With the sun nearly pass the cliffs, the announcement that the hunters were returning was a shock to many for they had planned to be gone at least two days. The women calmed immediately when they saw that an antelope had been taken and the hunt a success but as the hunters neared the tension in the group immediately transmitted to the women. Ura, though it was not her place, took the antelope from Ralev to prepare it, since he had no mother with the clan if was appropriate but not required of her. Durc turned at the entrance and headed for the men's entrance and instructed the rest of the hunters to go into the cave. The discouraging look in Frebec's and Ralev's face was such that Goov wondered if they had broken some taboo.

Not one to stand on ceremony Goov followed Durc and stood at the entrance watching the leader pace from one part of the cave to the other deep in thought with his hands clenched into fists which was the only sign that it was anger he was trying to control. "Durc, there is much you have to tell me." Durc looked at the holy man but remained silent trying to gather his thought to make sense of them. How could he explain all that had happened? "Delaying it will not make it easier."

Stopping his pacing Durc looked at Goov and wondered if he already knew. "Much happened. It is confused in my mind. I sent a boy nearly to his death because I allowed my anger to rule my reason."

Goov wondered if that was why Ralev looked the way he did. "Tell me from the start, it is always easier to tell it in order."

Durc did not see how but he told Goov all that had happened in the order it had happened. Goov looked through the opening and looked at the boy Ralev and knew he needed more information. The incident with Nug was only interesting because of Ralev's apparent need to return to the hunters and affect the apparent outcome. Frebec's attitude did not seem to fit the situation and wondered what was happening there but knew that it was not important now. "It seems as Ursus used your anger to show us what we needed to know. I need to talk with Bek again. You told me of the Mogur of the others, Mut. I would know more."

“What would you know?”

“How Mut is related to Rav.”

“I do not know.”

“Bek knows.”

Durc nodded and once again brought Frebec to the cave for the men and Frebec thinking he would be reprimanded for striking a hunter was again surprised that the man Goov wanted more information on Ralev.

“Your Mogur, Mut, is related to Rav?”

Frebec thought back to the associations and wondered if perhaps Folara’s people way of naming association might not be a good idea so that they could make familial connections better. It is long ago but I know his cousin was mother to Manuv and I believe but I am not sure I think his daughter of his youth was Talut and Tulie’s mother’s mother. Wymez is the man of Ranec’s hearth but I think another cousin was Nezzie’s mother’s mother.” Frebec thought and worried that he might give Goov the wrong information that was apparently important.

“Cousin? What is this.”

Frebec looked at Durc and thought how to explain it. “Durc’s adopted mother is Uba?” Goov and Durc both nodded. “Iza is Uba’s Daughter?” Again the men nodded. “They are siblings so their children are cousins.” Frebec sighed in relief when Goov nodded.

“Durc we must have a manhood ceremony for Rav but not until tomorrow night when the sun falls.”

Durc nodded and watched as Goov went to his private cave.

Chapter 61

Ralev looked out across the valley and wondered if the feelings he felt were the fear that Agal teased him of or was something else bothering him. He had been unable to work on the ivory since his return for the hunt and what had happened after played again and again in his mind. Where he had expected rage from the boy Nug all he received was a curious stare even with the man Durf assaulted him in trying discipline Nug, there was no anger directed toward him and he knew from Danug and Folara’s stories that the hunt was the most important part of man growing up, but he had interfered with Nug’s hunt when it had not been his concern. He had never wanted to cause anger in Durc but he knew he had not only angered him, he had also disappointed the leader and that had never been his intention.

Shaking his head he sat and placed his head in his hands. The vision had been so real and the need to turn around so overwhelming that he had become sick to his stomach every time he tried

to continue back to the cave. Now all he felt was empty and foolish. The women were preparing a celebration of his successful hunt but where they had been animated when preparing a feast for Agal, now they were subdued and talked to each other very little. His actions had caused this and he was sure after the ceremony Durc would ask him to leave and there was so much more he wanted to learn.

He started when the medicine woman Uba suddenly appeared and knelt in front of him. Even though he had not had the ceremony that announced him to be a man, Ralev knew that Uba was giving him the respect that women gave to men of the clan though he did not deserve it. Knowing the signal to give he touched her shoulder.

“this medicine woman would be honored if the man Rav would allow her to prepare him for the ceremony tonight.”

Stunned he had no other thought than that he was supposed to show up this evening and the rest gathered for whatever was planned. Now that he thought of it those returning from the hunt had disappeared for a short while and wondered if the clan prepared for ceremonies like the Mamutoi or what did they do to prepare someone for such a ceremony. “This man would be honored that the medicine woman of Durc’s clan would feel that this man was worthy of her time and attention.”

Uba thought she now knew why Durc felt the need to smile but she knew that it was not something she could do but it pleased her that Rav felt as he did. Standing she went back to the cave and could hear Rave following her. She had waited and listened but no one seemed to be talking about preparing the boy to become a man, not even the man Bek who was responsible for Rav thought to have one of the women prepare him. Standing by the pool away from the cave that the women used to clean the leathers and treat the hides from the hunts, Uba took the hide wrap from Rav much to his embarrassment but ignored his antics of trying to hide his body from her. Making him kneel, she took a large bowl of urine that had been sitting several days she poured it over him and then made him stand still when he tried to go to the pool. A second bowl filled with water and horsetail ferns she poured it over his head slowly and scrubbed it into his scalp and again motioned for him to remain still.

The odors alone made Ralev sick but the itching feel to his skin as the two liquids dried was almost worse. When she picked up a third bowl he almost groaned but smelled the crushed soap root and sighed instead. Scrubbing him from head to toe, making him stand to clean his legs, she finally motioned to the pool and Ralev gratefully went into the water and rinsed his body and hair until he could no longer smell the offending liquids. Satisfied finally he left the water and at her command knelt on a clean piece of leather. She wrapped him in a new leather wrap adjusting it so that several of the folds could hold items he might need. Wrapping his feet in circular leather that was then tied around his feet he felt cleaner than he had since he arrived. Motioning for him to stand, Ralev stood and as he would have for Folar or Nezzie he bent and kissed her cheek in thanks. Uba looked wide eyed at him and touched her cheek then rushed away.

Frebec looked at Ralev’s wet hair and clean clothing he closed his eyes for he had not thought to ask one of the women to prepare him for the ceremony. Durc had told him to get him and now

looking perhaps, he hoped, that Durc had asked one of the women. "It's time Ralev." Ralev nodded and followed Frebec going over in his mind the other ceremonies he had witnessed and what he thought was expected.

Chapter 62

The cave was gloomy after the brightness of the afternoon sun, but it took only a short time for Ralev's sight to adjust. He looked toward where Nug sat with the mate to the Mogur knowing that surely Nug hated him for interfering with his hunt and preventing him from having this very ceremony himself, but there was no hate but he was unsure what he saw in Nug's features but it was not anger.

Nug had been grateful that the boy of the other had interfered with his hunt only after he had seen the lionesses attack the animal he had been moving toward. Why, he had returned and followed them so that what happened occurred he did not know, but while he was being held down he had seen the foot prints of the boar on the ground and all fight left him and he knew then that his totem had not left him but had used a man of the others to save his life and then have the other one stop Durc's attack. Since their return he had been unable to talk with the Mogur but was happy when the mate of the Mogur had taken him from the group to help her with what was needed. For the first time he was glad that he could help her for it kept him near the Mogur's hearth and he desperately wanted to talk with the holy man. He was sure his totem was trying to tell him something but he was confused by the signals his totem was sending to him.

Seeing Rav move slowly toward the front where the mate to the leader would serve him his meal from the animal he had killed in his hunt, he had to wonder if the over whelming feeling Rav talked about to Durc was Nug's own totem making him return. He waited and when he saw Rav put his bowl aside he approached the leader and stood waiting to be allowed to speak.

Durc saw Nug approach and could not imagine why he would approach him at such a time but knew his curiosity could not be satisfied unless he allowed the boy to speak. "Nug."

"This boy would speak to the man Rav alone."

Durc could not remember Nug ever speaking politely since his arrival but was not sure he trusted him. Turning to Rav, he could see in his face that he still felt shame for his actions when there was no need. Perhaps he should have talked to him before now but he had not thought of it until Nug came forward. "Rav?"

"I would speak to Nug."

The two went to the side of the cave where they could be alone but within sight of the rest of the clan and Nug wasted no time. "It is almost time for the hunt dance and I do not think you know how to do this. I would help the man Rav to show the women and other hunters his easy kill and when he saved this worthless boy from the cave lions."

Rav was shocked for this was not the boy who was belligerent to everyone in the cave. “Why would you do this?”

“I would learn your flying weapon from you, but not so others can see. I will not change how I act with the other hunters but I would learn from you the weapon of the others.”

Ralev knew how hard it was for Nug to say these things to him for he had felt the same when he told Folara that he wanted to carve and not work flint as Wymez wanted him to learn. “I would ask an additional favor of Nug.” Nug nodded and Ralev went to his hearth and brought the ivory to when Nug remained and opened it slightly so that only he could see what was inside. “I carved this for the Mogur, but I do not know if such a thing would be accepted or when I should give it to him.”

Nug looked at the ivory shocked and knew it was a perfect gift for the Mogur and would eventually probably increase his power even more. “Carry this with you during the dance. When the dance is complete set it at the feet of the Mogur. Then return to stand next to the leader and allow the Mogur to make the decision to keep it secret or to show the clan what you have given him. Now I will tell you how we will go through the dance as it should be.”

When Nug entered the firelight holding a thick stick Durc almost stood and railed against him for his presumption to add himself to the hunt dance for Rav but Goov stopped him with the touch on his arm. The attitude on Nug’s face was one everyone recognized as Rav entered the firelight holding a thin stick and they watched as Nug shook his head and hefted his thick stick. Rav ignored him and crouched as if he spotted prey and circled the fire as he stops and throws the thin stick where no one sat then went out of the fire light and returned as if carrying his prey only to leave again. Nug crouched with his thick stick as if on a hunt and made the noise and moved his arms as if he was the bison but limped to show it was sick or injured then continued to stalk. Just when he was ready to lift his fake spear, Rav appeared and talked him to the ground and the sound of a cave lion filled the cave and the women screamed.

Ralev immediately stood and looked at Frebec thinking he was the only one who could have made the sound among these people but was confused when he saw the slight shake of his head and the his confused look. When he looked to the leader, Durc was staring at Agal with almost a smile on his face. Satisfied he knew where the sound came from that stopped all movement among the spectators, Ralev pulled the bundle of leather from his back and stepped in front of the Mogur and laid it at his feet.

Chapter 63

Goov looked at the parcel and knew it contained the ivory that Rav had been working on for a very long time. Such an expense of time was not something the clan understood except for those that made weapons for the men or when the women were making bowls or other items. If he accepted the item it would mean there was a debt but he was not sure this man of the others knew this despite his knowledge of the clan and the clan language. Finally he picked the leather wrapped ivory up knowing that whatever Rav gave to him would be worth the price. Knowing the rest of the clan was a curious as he was, he unwrapped the item for all to see.

The tip of the tusk was the length of his lower arm and was the densest and heaviest part of a mammoth tusk. Each line was carved deep and each set of lines was tinted in a different color to separate them from each other but the pattern of the colors seemed to rotate around the ivory as if telling a story. Each set of lines was the stylized rendition of the clan's totem marks and while the powerful male totems were large and bold, the smaller female totem marks were muted in their coloring as if the application of the color was done fewer times than the male marks. The top most mark and the darkest of them was the four curved lines of the same length with a shorter line parallel to the four, the mark of the cave bear. Goov knew this was a gift made especially for him and settled him in his decision for what he must do this night. Ursus had used the talent of this man of the others to make his wishes known.

Goov looked at Rav and nodded pulling one of the largest cave bear claws taken from the female whose skull rested in the sacred place of the cave. Standing he took the new amulet Uba and made for Rav and placed the claw within it. Turning he left the gathering and allowed the jubilation to begin so that the new hunter could be congratulated.

Durc was the first to congratulate Rav but he quickly moved to Nug. "I will remember your actions tonight. You hide much but I think I have misjudged you. We will talk in the morning."

With a flash from the fire everyone took their seats once again. "Rav" Ralev shivered at the sound of his name vibrating throughout the cave but remained where he sat until Frebec pushed him making him stand as he watched the appearance of the large bear as it crawled through the opening of the Mogur's special area of the cave to stand and growl with Set standing behind him. "Come." It was an order and though he did not want to approach the apparition he could feel his feet move forward. When he stood in front of the bear he could smell that this was not a living bear and he settled a little still worried about what was to come. The children born to the clan knew from a very young age what their totem would be and the boys would know what to expect now, but Ralev did not. He could think of no animal that suited him well.

Almost stepping back when the Mogur raised his arms, increasing the size of the bear, Ralev fought to stay still. Set stepped forward with a small bowl and the Mogur, using one of the claws on the bear skin, dipped his finger in the bowl and then drew a line from between his eyes to the tip of his nose. "The man is named Rav." He could hear the rest of the clan repeat the name that the Mogur had announced and this all was quiet again. Suddenly the Mogur held a knife, and even expecting it Ralev trembled with the thought of it piercing his skin. The first touch of the flint on his left shoulder surprised him for it felt warm and though he felt the cuts the pain did not explode in his body until a black paste was smeared over the wounds and he was turned to face the crowd. "Your clan totem is the cave lion, for he recognizes the trials you have had in the past and those you will face."

There was a gasp among the other hunters for it was a totem they had least expected the Mogur to see. When the knife was raised a second time Durc tried to stand but the Mogur put his hand out to stop his movements as the knife descended and Ralev was glad that the pain in the other shoulder outweighed the pain the new cuts created until again the black thick paste was pressed into the new wounds and when turned him once again there was a gasp from all. "Ursus himself has called this man of the others either for his purposes here or at his home camp among the

others, Ursus has not revealed. Rav is a hunter of the clan and is now my acolyte as long as he remains with the clan.”

“No!”

Durf stood and charged toward the Mogur and Ralev but before he could get too close the hunters rose and formed a ring around the two men with Durc standing in front of them. “He is other. He cannot know the secrets of the clan. Even as a deformed man you know this is wrong.”

“My clan bows to the wishes of Ursus. It is not for me to know the ways of the spirit world. This Mogur is first among Mogurs. He is strongest in the spirit world even more than your Mogur who has been in power many years. Do you know the ways of the spirit world Durf?”

“I am not Mogur.”

“Then in the morning return to your clan and tell them what happened here. You will find they already know. They know but fear the others for they see an end to the clan that they will not tell us. I know for I have been to the others and see how they live. The boy Ralev will return to the Mammoth hunters and Ursus will travel with him. Do you know Ursus’ mind and his plans?”

“No. This is wrong and I will leave and will take Nug with me so that he is not infected by this clan.”

“Nug will leave when he learns what he was sent to learn and not before.”

“He is my responsibility.”

“He was given to me by Jag and I will send him back to Jag when he has learned what Jag has sent him to learn.”

Durf turned and pulled his things from the hearth given to him by Durc and left the cave. Durc watched as the rest of the hunters took their mates and returned to their hearths but Durc remained where he was until he felt Goov behind him. “You make excitement Goov.”

“No Ursus as you say. I do not know why this is so but I believe you are right that he will return to the others soon. I will protect him until he leaves.” Durc nodded and turned and looked at the holy man and saw the stress of his office clearly on his face.

“We will both protect him and Nug for I do not trust that Durf has left for good.”

Chapter 64

“No Nug. You are too stiff. You need to relax.” You will learn, I promise.” They both looked at the throwing spear which had landed only a few feet in front of them.

“It did not look so hard.”

“If you would learn the sling then this and the spear thrower would be easier to learn.”

“It is for old men.”

“No it is a weapon that can keep you alive and feed you if there are no big animals. If you have a spear and are attacked by a pack of wolves or hyenas you use your spear and kill one. Now you have no weapon. With a sling you have a bag of weapons. You may not kill a wolf or hyena but you can make them turn to a weaker prey.”

“You have spoken well. I will think on it.”

Ralev was surprised by the apparent and complete change in Nug’s attitude as he was by his continued attempts to learn the throwing spear. He knew from Nug of his conversation with Durc the morning after the ceremony and wondered if that was some of the reason.

“Nug, I want you to understand. All the hunters of this clan will protect you from Durc. Clan or Others they will keep you with us. The leader of your clan sent you to learn the throwing spear and the spear thrower. Last night was the first time I saw strength in you. It is a strength that you need to succeed here and with your clan. If you wish to learn the throwing spear I will tell who ever you wish to teach you.”

“I have asked the hunter Rav to teach me. I did not want the others to know.”

“Why?”

“I would lose face.”

“You lose no face to do what your leader wants you to do. You lose face by being rude and not obeying your leader.”

“I understand many things have changed since I came, but I am not other I am clan.”

“Yes you are clan, so is everyone here. Clan is who we are, who you are inside. No one can take that from you. No matter what you learn, you are still clan.”

Ralev was glad that Nug had told Durc for he would have hated to go behind the leader’s back, but he would have kept his word to Nug. Watching Nug again he shook his head wondering what he was doing wrong that he could not learn. Kicking a large stone he stopped and watched as it rolled away. Picking the stone up he placed it in front of Nug and began gathering more of similar size and weight. Nug watched as Ralev collected stones that were too large for a sling and placing them in front of him and wondered why. He remained silent confused and not wanting to appear so in front of Rav.

When Ralev seemed satisfied he looked at the pile of stones and then at Nug. “Nug when you use your clan spear you use all your strength to stab it into the animal you hunt.” Nug nodded. “Put the spear down.” Nug did so and took the stone that Rav gave to him looking strangely at the hunter. “Throw the rock Nug.”

Nug shrugged and threw the rock and was surprised when the rock landed so much further than the spear had landed and looked questioningly at Rav who only handed him another stone. He threw it again only harder and the rock nearly hit the target. Rav did not have to hand him the next one as he picked up stone after stone and started to aim at the target and was pleased when he heard the thunk of the wood. After he hit the target three times in a row Rav kept him from picking up a stone and handed him the spear.

“Now throw like the rocks.”

Nug was shocked when the spear reached well beyond the target and took up a second one and tried again. Although it still did not reach the target it was closer.

“That’s it Nug. Keep throwing like that and soon you will not only hit that target but when I move it away you will still hit it.”

“Good. Rav I will learn the sling.”

Chapter 65

Nug pulled the net with the rest of the men and older boy allowing the women to capture the fish as they collected near the shore. Being inland, Nug had never been involved in fishing that supplied so much fish at one time. The women of his clan used traps made by their tool maker and though they caught fish year round never had they caught more than enough to make a meal for the entire clan. Sometimes they used salt traded for during the clan gatherings but it was precious and more often times they dried the fish for winter use. Those women not collecting in the narrow portion of the net collected mussels, clams and other crustaceans that have Nug’s mouth watering thinking of the feast that was surely to come in the evening from the bounty they collected in a single day.

Seeing the rest of the men step away from the net as it was emptied so as not to cause too much stress on the fibers, Nug waited patiently until it was his turn to release his section of the net. His thoughts turned to the throwing spear he and Rav had been working on for the past days. He had worked all summer to learn the throwing spear and the sling and knew in his heart that if the leader Durc took him on a hunt he would be able to kill an animal by himself. Such a thought never occurred to most men of the clan but in Durc’s clan it was normal for each of the men to get a kill during a hunt. They did not have to go out every day to hunt and had gone on a hunt for winter stores before coming to the sea so that Irok could make his hunt. Unlike the other hunts Irok would be part of the hunt group but his spears had been stained with bloodroot making his spear orange in appearance. All had been successful and it took many days for the women to get the meat prepared and ready for storage and begin working on the hides that were

not placed in the cave where the temperature was below freezing even in the middle of summer. The sight of frozen meat that could be thawed and then cooked as fresh meat was so different from the dried meat that most clan used for the summer. Some of the meat was dried and the fish would be dried as well, but unlike other clans the women took the meat from the fish and rolled it in salt they had gathered and it would be placed with the meat in the frozen chamber.

Staying at the sea for seven days the women were able to work on collecting salt from boiling the sea water away and collect the dried powder and granules. Stored in dried stomachs and bladders they would be kept by the medicine woman in a cool but dry area for trading and their own uses. Salted fish was stored in baskets and fiber braided lines hung with drying fish that was protected with smoky fires to keep insects from feasting. For all his actions since he arrived he saw nothing, no actions that were not clan. The women were good clan women, hard working and attentive to the needs of their mates and the other men. The men worked just as hard maintaining the stairway to the wide beach area that allowed everyone to move to and from the sea easily. Durc and several other men often went to where the river met the sea and using spear throwers were able to get very large fish which waited at the mouth of the river for the onslaught of smaller fish moving to the sea. There was much jubilation when the men speared a large female sturgeon that was filled with eggs. What had taken the men minutes to bring to shore, took the women hours to process but the wait was worth it as the men were treated several times to the raw black eggs that filled the abdomen of the fish. Some was stored with salt but most was placed on mats in the sun to dry.

For the first time since his arrival, Nug studied Durc and could see little difference, other than his appearance, from Jag. They were both good leaders who listened to the words of their hunters but when they made a decision it was final. Never had he seen Durc ask his hunters to do something that he himself did not help with or that he had not done in the past. He was careful with his hunters and his women and all the children respected and feared him as it should be. Nug knew that he had been more than patient with him and his attitude and knew if he was ever going to be a good leader he should have been learning from Durc instead of fighting him. This clan was first with the best hunters, the fastest runners, the first among Mogurs, the first among the medicine women, the best story tellers and though they had lost their flint worker and weapons maker Grev they had the son of his mate Bloc who was very good and would probably be first one day.

Bringing himself back to the net he worked on with the women and other children to make sure all breaks were repaired, he did not see Durc approach until he noticed that everyone had stop working. It was a sign of respect and he had stopped at the same time but had not seen Durc coming until he looked up to see why the work had ceased. “Nug, Loug, Rav, and Brac has told me it is time that you were taken on a hunt. When we return to the cave we will plan a hunt to the east and you will go with us. Bloc will give you two spears that are stained for you to use.”

“This boy is grateful for the chance to prove himself worthy.” Durc nodded and turned from him. He was the last to hunt and he deserved the delay. Only Irok took as long because the sling proved difficult for him to learn. Nug knew that all the practicing he had done away from the cave would prove to be a benefit for Durc demanded that a to be a hunter of this clan a man had

to kill first with a sling then with the spear. Only then would they be worthy of learning the stick that threw spears.

Chapter 66

Nug was pleased that he was able to provide the meal for the hunters. They had left the cave as they always had with Durc leading with Brac at his side but on the third day when they had reached the steppes Durc had put him in the front of the hunters with Rav telling him the meal for the evening would either be fresh or the dried meat that the women packed for the hunters. His meaning was clear and he pulled his sling from where he stored it with a small pouch of stones that he and Rav had collected before leaving the cave area. "You never know in your travels where good sized stones could be found. Streams might be sand or too deep to use. Here we know what is available and when you travel if you find a good place for stones collect some for yourself."

The two rabbits were easy kills but it had taken two stones to bring down the giant hamster for the first had only crippled it. Having learned cooking for all his time with Durc's mate and the mate of the Mogur, he quickly cleaned and spitted the animals when they stopped for the day. He was pleased with the aroma that came from the cooking meat and did not mind as the men took what they wanted. The first part of being considered a hunter of Durc's clan had been surprisingly easy and Nug took heart that the hunt to come would hopefully be the same.

When they started out in the morning they could see herds of animals as far as they could see but Durc, who had once again taken the lead, seemed to have a specific place in mind. Since reaching the steppes, Durc had sent a runner ahead of the group but they were never out of sight. When Atta rushed back toward the group everyone stopped and waited for there was a possibility of danger ahead. Atta, Durc and Brac talked with each other but their signs were hidden for the most part until Durc turned and called Nug to join him. Fear slammed into Nug as he approached the leader and his second but was eased when all three crouched and invited him to join them.

"We know why we have not seen Durf. Jag and what appears to be all his hunters are coming this way and they are not hunting for they could have hunted closer to their home cave. Druf told Jag something to anger him for he appears to be pressing his hunters to be quick. I will go and see what they want."

"Durc I would speak." Nug looked down knowing he should not have spoken but he nodded to the boy. "Durf tells untruths. This I know now. I would speak to the mate of my mother and I will return. I do not want any hurt because of me."

"Brac have the hunters waiting on this side of the hill. Watch for my signal. I will take Nug with me."

When Atta and Brac nodded, Durc stood and Nug stood with him. For the first time Nug realized how tall Durc actually was compared with the other men around him and he felt safe.

No matter what lay ahead he would be safe with Durc with him. When they crested the hill, Nug was astonished that Jag had with him twelve hunters with him meaning he only left one or two at the cave to protect the women. Instead of his second in command, Jag had Durf walking next to him and Nug could see that Durf continued his lying. When he saw Durf tell Jag that Durc had intentionally not allowed him to learn the throwing spear, anger began to burn in him and without thought he pulled back his arm and threw his spear.

Durc looked at Nug then watched as the spear landed with a thud in front of Durf. All the men looked up, their spears ready, but of the group only Jag was armed with a throwing spear. As if he was not afraid Durc walked down the hill toward the group of hunters and stood in front of Jag completely ignoring Durf. “Jag it is good to see you. Aluk must have shamed you since he no longer leads your hunters. The son of him mate Irok has been a good hunter.”

“What of the son of my mate?” Durc could see the anger and wondered what Durf told Jag but he would not ask.

“The son of you mate is here and on his manhood hunt when we saw you and your hunters. Will you join us?”

“Durf says Nug cannot use the flying spear.”

“I did not throw the red spear.”

Jag looked at the red spear still stuck in the ground in front of Durf and watched as Nug came forward and pulled the spear out and held it as if it was the most precious thing he owned. “We will talk Durc.” Durc watched as the rest of the hunters lowered their spears but with a roar Durf lifted his own heavy clan spear and rushed toward Durc. In his anger he did not see Nug step in front of the leader as he ran onto the spear that Nug held.

Two hunters came forward and pulled the man from the spear that Nug never released as he held up the attacking man and stared into his eyes until the light left them. “Clan do not attack clan.” Nug’s words seemed to hang in the air and Durc tried not to show the pride he had in the boy. For all his actions since his arrival, he had apparently learned more of the lessons than Durc knew, but it was Jag who spoke.

“You are right son of my mate. Clan does not attack clan. Durf said the leader Durc would not release you to return to your clan and he had taught you nothing of how to hunt.” Nug looked down at the ground at these words.

“Durc tried to teach me but I was rude and would not learn but the leader Durc continued to try and teach me. I would be honored if Jag would join Durc so that I could prove I am worthy to be a hunter.”

Jag only grunted and followed Durc as he turned toward the remainder of his hunters over the hill.

Chapter 67

Durc and Nug had become used to Ralev's appearance and thought nothing of it until the excitement that spread through Jag's hunters. Like the rest of the hunters Ralev was bare chested with a wrap around his loins and wrapped leather around his feet. That he had little facial hair and what was there was pale and fine, unlike the coarse dark hair of the men of the clan. Nothing was said until they began to blame his presence to the reason Durf was dead. "He is a Mogur to the others but has not been trained. He will return to the others in the spring but until then Goov teaches him and learns from him."

It was Jag who responded for the rest of his hunters. "He has not color and has two tattoos of the clan. Why does he wear the mark of Ursus?"

"Goov spent many months talking with Ursus about what he saw but when he saved Nug's life after being told to return to the cave, Goov told me that Ursus had spoken too clearly to ignore. I do not understand the spirits, but I did not want to anger Ursus and the other spirits that protect us."

Durc knew that like most leaders and hunters of the clan they knew little about the spirit world and what they did not they were not comfortable with so he could almost see the men relaxing since they would not have to deal with him for long. "Atta, go back to the cave and bring the Mogur. Have Rav make a marker for Goov to find Durf." Atta nodded and when to Ralev and then started trotting toward the west. The men from Jag's clan moved subtly away to give a wide berth to Ralev as he moved by and Durc saw the slight smile that quickly disappeared when he looked over the hill. With no questions he began to build a cairn to mark where Goov needed to care for Durf.

"We are going to head North from here." Durc pointed north and in the distance was a large black area that moved slowly across the plains. "We go for buffalo."

"We will join you. Nug?"

"Nug will have the first throw then the rest will use their weapons. He will only have once chance. If his throw is successful he has another spear that he can use."

Jag looked at Durc's hunters and saw that more than half carried not only the throwing spears but across their back hung the spear throwing sticks and a quiver with several small spears in them. For all he came in anger, he was glad he was there for he would see the throwing sticks in a real hunt.

The two groups stayed for the night while Ralev kept watch on the hill during the night which seemed to calm the men of Jag's clan. Twice Nug went to offer to give his friend a break to get something to eat, but Ralev held his hands out to stop Nug refusing to allow him closer knowing that Goov would skin him if he allowed anyone near the body. He knew enough from watching the Mamuti to know a body's spirit needed guidance to leave the world of the living or they could do some damage. Thankfully the clan of Durc now used Travois so that the women

were not needed and the men would be in less danger than a woman especially if one was blessed.

Ralev watched the hunters leave and glad for the first time that he was not joining them. He knew the men of the new clan feared him and fearful men could not be trusted. Durc had left supplies for him and once the group was out of sight he stood from his position and moved the food and water bag alone with his bedding back to the site where he had spent the night. Laying down to sleep for the few hours before the heat of the sun would make it impossible to be cool he thought of what he should do should scavengers arrive. He knew it would take the runner at least two days to return to the cave and it could take as much as seven for the Mogur to return with the runner.

Chapter 68

Jag knew that his hunters were at a disadvantage but he also knew that many, especially Durf had complained that he was using a weapon of the other. They continued to cling to their heavy spears and Jag could not blame them. They had always been able to provide food for the clan and though they had lost hunters from injuries, they had been few. Many had become curious when Ulg had been saved from the charge of a snow leopard with the throwing spear that Jag had used to protect his hunter but none had wanted to learn to use the weapon. Now they would hunt with Durc's clan whose hunters were all equipped with the throwing spear and some even had the spear throwing stick. Knowing the hunters would not accept the tale of Durc developing the throwing stick, and that would have been worse since they all considered him deformed and that the leaders and mogurs had gone against clan tradition and allowed a deformed man to be leader of a clan.

Durc saw the men of Jag's clan looking at the spears being carried by his hunters and was proud of those hunters that they paid no attention to the clan spears being carried by the other clan. Only Nug looked at the spear and he saw confusion on his face. "It is your decision but you know that your kill must be your kill."

That Durc had brought him to the front of the hunters had pleased him but he was also grateful that he seemed to understand his thoughts. "I have tried the clan spear I will use the throwing spear." Durc grunted approval and saw that Jag also approved his mate's son's decision.

It was nearly sunset when they reached the area where the bison grazed and although it had looked like one giant herd from afar as they stood on a slight rise they could see that it was in fact many smaller herds. The sight of so many young worried Durc for he knew even if he could not see them that predators would be in the area. Knowing the kinds of things Jag would have been told by Durf he wanted to take the chance that Nug had been paying attention on all the hunts he was taken on but only allowed to observe.

"This is your hunt but understand that we need the meat and the hides. What would you plan?"

Nug could not believe that Durc would allow him to make such a decision and knew that whatever happened would be because of that decision. Not wanting Jag to believe anything that Durc told him he looked out at the animals in front of him. Durc never pressured him for a decision but Jag seemed not to be excited that Durc trusted him enough. Looking at one of the few trees in the area he knew that animals would gather under it as the heat of the day began. There was a stream running along the bottom of the hill which would act like a slight barrier and the rock formations would help keep the animals close to the hill if they ran in that direction.

“I would move toward the tree as the animals moved away from it and wait until they returned in the heat of the day. The younger males will be on the outside while the females will get the shade. If I can kill one of the young males from the opposite direction it might force the herd to run this way. Those with spear throwers and flying spear can get their kills as the pass between the stream and the rocks. Those that cross the stream and move this direction can be killed by Jag’s hunters and some of Jag’s hunters can be down from those with spear throwers and flying spears and kill the injured.”

Durc looked over the situation and thought that Nug learned more than he thought. It was a good plan but none could guess which way the herds would move after the first kill. As long as he got his kill they would be able to go after other animals. The women and set would have left the cave by now and would be on their way to the meeting place, they had time.

“It is a good plan. I will go with you, Brac will arrange the other hunters and Jag can arrange his hunters.” Looking at Jag who nodded, Brac also nodded knowing that more was at stake that Nug’s manhood hunt and he was not sure this was the correct way to accomplish what Durc obviously wanted to accomplish. He remained quiet knowing he had given up that right at the last clan gathering.

Durc did not load his spear thrower but kept it slung over his shoulder with the quiver of spears and instead watched and followed Nug. Surprised by the fact that he had learned and kept hidden all the hunters had taught him, he moved with slow stealth as he closed below the trees to bushes that would hide them come daylight and shade them some as the sun rose. Time did not matter and Durc like other men of the clan knew the hunt and the procurement of food was more important than any discomfort they might experience. Seeing the clan spear on the heights Durc knew that the rest of the hunters were in position. Success or failure Nug’s plan for the situation was good and one he might have tried.

Nug relaxed when he saw the clan spear slowly rise and placed himself in a position that he would be able to hold for hours if needed. With the sun heating the plains quickly it was not long before the heat and insects became nearly intolerable. Brac’s admonishment of remaining still while he was training the boys to be hunters played over and over in his mind. He had watched as Durc and the rest of the hunters remained motionless for hours as they studied their prey and wait until they were in the perfect position for the hunt to begin. He almost sighed with relief when the first cow with a calf came toward the tree. Hornless, the females were no less aggressive than the males who sported horns that could reach greater than Durc’s height. As the cows gathered they chased away the younger bulls who were also not welcomed around another

smaller tree where bulls began to gather. As he had hoped, Nug watched as the younger bulls stayed near the females trying to get some of the shade.

At the soft touch on his shoulder he barely nodded, gripping tightly onto his spear, he relaxed his grip and thought of the stones he had thrown and stood and allowed the spear to fly. Since they had not been expecting danger the bulls head had not been lowered and the spear slipped cleanly into the front chest of one of the males as he dropped suddenly spooking the animals around it. Nug screamed and was joined by Durc who using a sling hit one of the females in the center of the herd. Bawling from pain and fear she quickly moved out of the herd and began to run taking those around the tree with her and were soon followed by the other bulls.

Brac was astounded that the plan had worked and the herd ran toward their position. Knowing that the group of animals would turn as soon as they stood he waited for the last possible minute to give the signal. The men rose and released their throwing spears and spears from the spear thrower and the animals for the most part dropped where they were hit or took very few steps. Those animals that did not stop were chased and killed by the men of Jag's clan. Seeing Jag's pleased expression Brac grunted pleased. "Nug thought the hunt out well." Not expecting an answer he went below with his hunters to gut the animals and prepare to take them to where the women would be.

Chapter 69

As much as he hated to watch Ralev now faced where Durf's body lay swelling in the relentlessly heat of the sun. Twice he had chased hyenas and foxes away from the sight and there were now several dead vultures around the body which had only increased the flock of the black birds with red featherless heads flying above. Beside him was a small mound of stones and beside it a mound of larger stones. He did not know what he was going to do during the night and worried about what taboos of the clan he was already breaking but he could not stand the thought of the scavengers attacking the body. He knew what Durf had done but to him he could not see that it deserved death and wondered what had happened.

The sound made him spin from the sight of the body he had watched since the morning after the clans had left and was not looking for relief for many days and was shocked to see people of the clan coming through the shimmering heat of the steppes. Wiping his eyes from the sweat that poured from him he saw Goov leading the few hunters that had been left with the clan and behind them the women. Thinking only of stopping the women from getting near the body he left the post he had placed himself in and ran to the oncoming group. Stopping in front of the Mogur he bent his head in respect then looked into his eyes knowing that was the way of the clan hunter. "Goov there has been death and it may not be safe for the women to be near."

He saw humor in the Mogurs features and signaled Atta to that the woman to where the hunters had gone down the slope and make camp. When he saw that Atta was complying he looked at Rav. "Why are you not with the hunters?"

“We met Jag’s clan and his hunters were uncomfortable with me. Durc wanted me to watch the body but I did not know what the clan would do. There are many dead bird and I kept the hyenas and others away from him. It is Durf.”

“Durf took his own life by running onto Nug’s spear. It is a weak death. He was a hunter and we will give him the burial of a hunter.” Ralev almost sighed when he saw Set coming forward and was glad that the acolyte would know what to do.

“I thank you for caring for the body of the hunter but you cannot come with us.” Rav nodded fighting to keep the severity of his expression when inside he whooped with relief.

“Go to the stream and clean yourself before going to the women. It will make them feel better and Iza has orders from Uba for your care.”

Ralev could not stop the groan that escaped as he left the Mogur and headed to the small stream that would probably be gone by the time summer arrived. Using fine sand he washed himself and was glad when the cool water touched his skin. Even with all Uba potions and creams he still burned but he knew to put on his leggings when he sat on the hill where the sun could bake him and there was no shade near where he thought he needed to be except on the other side of the hill and he was not willing to go there with the chance of missing the Mogur.

Iza did not even allow him to dress as she began to cover his body in one of the more awfully smelling creams that Uba used. Knowing that they were quicker when he stayed motionless he stood still until she was finished they quickly dressed and went to where the other hunters gathered. Though he knew he smelled terribly, none of the clan hunters moved away from him and he relaxed until Eyla came to him with something to drink but he smiled at the girl and took the offered drink thinking to throw it out as soon as she left knowing from the other hunters that this was acceptable practice even though most were caught. Eyla never left but watched him intently until he finished the tea and was surprised that it tasted wonderful. Handing the cup back to her, he watched as returned to Iza’s side to help the women begin a meal.

“Rav do not stare.” Ralev immediately turned away knowing he was being rude and saw that once again the man Nar looked at him with anger.

Turning to Atta who reprimanded him Ralev tried to explain. “I do not understand Atta. She is little yet knows and does so much. Children of the others, especially females, do not work so hard.”

“If the children do not work how do they learn?”

“We teach them when they want to learn. They help often with the work but often get in the way. Clan children do not get in the way.” The hunter Nar seemed to calm which pleased Ralev immensely.

“I have heard that the others do not have memories. Eyla only has to be reminded and she knows even though she is deformed. I have heard Durc say that he believes the woman Ayla was a medicine woman of the others and that is why Eyla has medicine woman memories.”

“The woman Ayla is considered to be first among the medicine women of the others called Zelandonii.”

“What Zel?”

“It is another clan like Durc’s Clan and Jag’s Clan. Others call themselves different. I am Mamutoi others who hunt mammoth. Zel are others who hunt far to the west.”

At Atta’s grunt Ralev knew the conversation was over and he thought Atta understood.

Chapter 70

It was near dark when Goov and Set came from over the hill and Ralev knew from the fine dirt that covered them and the red of their hands that they had buried Durf. Relieved that he would no have to have anything more to do with the body he looked to where the hunters had left hoping they would return soon. Looking away he saw that Frebec was working with Alok as the young hunter was attempting to make a spear thrower. He like others that knew the spear thrower had been told not to interfere with those that do not know as they had to learn on their own how to make a spear thrower before they use one in a hunt. From the looks of Alok’s attempt this would not make a satisfactory spear thrower.

The women fed the men from the small animals they had killed with slings and they traveled knowing there was no reason to hunt for the group since the hunters would surely be successful. Turning back to the North, Ralev wondered how all those at Lion Camp were doing and wondered how long Frebec would stay with the clan before he is satisfied that nothing could be done for those they lost.

“Soon Ralev.” Ralev looked up at Frebec surprised that he had not heard him approach so lost in his thought.

“I miss them Frebec.”

“I do as well. It was pain that brought me here and now it is pain of separation from all that I hold dear that will send me back.”

“But what have you learned?”

“That even if Ayla had been at Lion Camp that they still would have died.”

“I miss Lion Camp so much Frebec, and know there will always be a hole in my heart for I wanted to spent the rest of my life with Reesie. I want to return to Lion Camp.”

“I will tell Durc and Junko.” Frebec patted Ralev on his shoulder and looked at disgust at the greasy paste that came off Ralev’s shoulder and onto his hand.” Ralev smiled at the look and knew that Frebec’s over reaction was a fake.

In the morning the women were sedate as they went about the business of caring for the men until Atta spotted the hunters. The woman immediately went to their packs taking out everything they would need to care for the results of the hunt even as Frebec and Ralev helped two other hunters putting up a structure the women would use to dry the meat. The remaining hunters went toward the hunting party. It did not take long for the men to arrive at the camp. While most of the women left immediately to care for the animals, Iza and Eyla brought food and water to the returning hunters even those of Jag’s clan. When they were sure the men were cared for they joined the rest of the women.

As night fell Jag went to where Durc and Goov sat and sat in front of them both. “I am pleased that Durc was sent to Ursus, he was a good hunter. It was a mistake on his part that cost his life but it is good to know a hunter of the clan is with Ursus. I ask the Mogur to make the manhood ceremony for the son of my mate. There is no reason from us to travel to Durc’s cave but I would see this done.” As much as Durc wanted to argue against it for he knew what Jag was planning even though Jag said nothing. With witnesses to his kill and praises from the other hunters Goov had no argument against doing as Jag ask of him.

“I will have my mate prepare him and Durc must tell him what is to come.” At Jag’s nod he moved away from them and Goov like Durc knew what Jag planned. “He plans well are you ready to answer his request?”

“I do not know what that request will be yet Mogur.”

No sooner had Jag left than the two were faced with Frebec and Ralev. “Durc, you have been good to Ralev and I, but it is time for use to return to Lion Camp.”

Durc closed his eye only for a moment he had not planned this to happen so soon. “Bec I ask that you return to the cave and let us talk there.”

“I will do that for I want to say good by to all I have as friends.”

Durc only nodded. “Your decision was made long ago why would you not tell him?”

“I have not talked with Eyla, Ura or Eul.”

“Do you trust Eul?”

“With Eyla, Yes.”

Chapter 71

The excitement in the women was immediate as Iza and Orva spread the word of the ceremony that would take place. Not wanting Durc to be less in the eyes of the other clan members, the women worked at various jobs to include collecting fresh greens and bulbs for the feast. Knowing that the hunters of Jag's clan would not want them included, Frebec and Ralev sat off to the side until Orva came to stand next to Ralev waiting for him to acknowledge her presence.

Curious Ralev touched her shoulder but looked about to make sure she would not be seen talking with him for he was very aware that the new hunters were unsure and edgy about his presence. "The man Nug wishes to speak to the hunter Rav." Stunned Ralev turned to Frebec to see what he thought.

"I think you might want to go see what he wants. He would not have made this kill if it had not been for you."

Ralev remembered that Nug had helped him with his telling of his hunt and wondered if perhaps since it was his turn he also had the same fear. When he arrived he knew it was not fear that was the reason Nug had asked for him. "Nug?"

"I will not be untruthful to Jag who is my mother's mate. I would have you dance with me for this hunt happens because of you."

"I am honored that you would ask me, but the men of Jag's clan are uncomfortable with me around."

"I care not for their comfort, truth is truth. This is something you have taught me. It is something they need to see as well. Now I will show you how I need you."

Unlike in the cave, lighting for the Mogur was difficult to control and most ignored the glowing fire as men talked of the hunt and women talked of the inclusion in the ceremony. Ralev was noticed as soon as he entered the fire light and many of Jag's clan were not happy that he was included in Nug's hunt presentation. Durc saw the anger in Jag's feature but motioned him to wait. When Nug entered into the light he carried a quiver that held a throwing spear but his hands were empty until Ralev bent down as if he picked up a rock and handed it to him and told him to throw. He repeated it several times then grabbed the spear and handed it to Nug before leaving the circle of light.

Nug crouched and moved his head as if he was searching around a bush, looking at Durc several times before he saw the slight nod then stood ran several feet and threw the spear over the heads of those watching causing them to bend their head even though there was no way the spear would have touched them. As he started to go to retrieve his spear, his name was growled deeply and he stood straight and turned to where the image of a cave bear stood for all to see. Without flinching he walked proudly to the Mogur and knowing what to do turned toward the crowd. No one saw any movement as two slightly curved marks were made in his chest and the black paste was rubbed into it. Nug stood proudly a man of the clan.

Chapter 72

“The hunter Nug will return with me and teach the hunters of his clan to use the throwing spear.”

“If that is what Jag wants.”

Jag had not expected Durc to give in so quickly and looked at the other young hunters that would remain to learn the other weapon of the others but the presence of three men of the others especially the one so white he glowed made many of his hunters doubt that Jag could learn more from the leader Durc. As much as he wanted the son of his mate to learn the stick that throws spears he would not leave him with the men of the others that might have spirits of the others that might attack Nug. With nothing else to do, Jag turned and started toward his cave.

Nug stood shocked that Jag was leaving and wanted him to go with him and knew that if he stayed he would learn the spear thrower and as he readied to argue he felt the hand on his shoulder and looked into Durc’s face.

“Do not return to the way you were. Your leader has made his decision. You have seen many made. In the time for the Clan Gathering, if you have a spear thrower made and spears, I will teach you to use them. This is a promise from me.”

Nug nodded and turned toward where the other hunters of his cave were leaving but as he left, Rav and Agal each handed him extra throwing spears. Nodding at each so that they knew of his appreciation he followed Jag.

The hunters stayed until Iza told Durc that the meat and hides were ready to return to the cave. Durc was not pleased that he felt defeated at Nug’s loss but knew that Jag was not the only one uncomfortable with the men of the other’s presence. Nug had made great strides after Ralev rescued him and he could now only wonder what would happen when he returned to his cave.

As everyone returned to the cave, plans were made for another trip to the sea but Durc knew that Frebec wanted to leave even though he had made it nearly impossible for him to talk about it he knew he would have to left him go. Taking Ura out of the cave with him, he took her to the dirst cave that Vorn had investigated when he had first arrived in the valley. It was a special place that they could go to so that they could keep the words of the others fresh in their mind and to teach that language to their children. It was also a place that they went when Durc needed solitude and peace away from the trials of being leader. Ura immediately wanted to start a fire but he stopped her and not wanting others to understand he spoke to here in the language of the mammoth hunters.

“Ura, I am mating Eylal with Eul.” He saw her hurt and shocked expression knowing she was going to tell him that it was too soon, that Eylal was not a woman. “I know that Eylal is not yet a woman but she will need Eul’s protection for I am sending her to Danug.”

“Why would you do such a thing?”

“Because Sethut has a need and Eyla can learn from him as well. Eul will learn from Danug who will be his leader when he is with the others. We are clan Ura, but we are also part of Lion Camp. Here I will let you speak your mind but after we leave this cave I will not.”

“She is so young Durc. It is so dangerous.”

“She will be with Eul, Ralev and Frebec. She will be well. I will talk with Eul and he will know that he will not be her mate until she becomes a woman. Eul will protect her well and I have no fears.”

“I will never see her again.”

“I will tell Eul that he and Eyla will return the winter before the clan gathering. She will go with us Ura.”

Ura knew there would no chance to change Durc mind and lowered her head. Unlike most clan men, Durc often sought her thoughts but in this her thoughts would be ignored.

Epilog

Eul looked at Durc stunned but nothing showed on his face. Having expected to wait at least another year for the girl Eyla to be ready to be a mate, the leader was now telling him that he would mate with the girl now but not touch her until she is a woman. That was shocking enough but he was sending the child to the others and if he chose not to go, he would not see her for many summers. Eyla had been bringing him food since his arrival and now when she was on the edge of being a woman her mother's mate was sending her to an unknown, at least unknown to the child. He knew that she could communicate in the other's language but he was not sure he wanted her placed into such a dangerous situation but he had no power to stop Durc from sending her no matter his choice. Looking at the golden girl that helped her mother making a meal for the evening, Eul knew he could not allow her away from the safety of his protection. There was no choice, he had to go with the men of the others and live among them until the leader of the others Danug released him to return to the clan so he nodded slowly.

“Dug is good man, great leader among the others and my brother. He knows well the ways of the clan and he will be your leader until he tells you it is time to return for the clan gathering. Tell him he has three summers no more. Eyla must return for the clan gathering. This is not an easy task you take Eul. Some of the others will think you are an animal. It is not so with Lion Camp. No matter what the others do, you will not attack them but allow Danug to protect you. It is difficult but you are strong in the ways of the spear thrower, the sling, and the throwing spear. You will do well. I will send messages through Junko and you will know all that happens here through him.”

“When?”

“I go to talk to the man of the other Bec and I have told Goov that you must be mated to Eyla this night but that Eyla will stay with her mother until you leave.”

“I will allow no danger to threaten her.”

“You have my trust.”

Frebec looked at Durc as if he had lost all reason. “You want me to take the daughter of your hearth and a clan man to Lion Camp?”

“Eyla will give you what you seek Frebec clan medicine knowledge. I cannot send an unmated female with you to the camp of the others. Eul will protect her from all and Lion Camp will protect him. He is a good hunter and works well with flint but Danug can make him better.”
“But Durc she is a child.”

“She will not be a child for long. Soon she will be a woman and when that happens she will already have her mate. Danug and Folara will understand. Junko says that Danug’s woman knows the clan well and will know what Eyla needs. I ask that Folara keep her until Eyla becomes a woman.”

“That will not be a problem Durc. I would like to leave in the next few days and we will reach the Summer Meeting which is at Wolf Camp which is North of Lion Camp.”

“I do not know Wolf Camp.”

“Wolf Camp’s leaders supported Danug so that you could talk to the leaders and the mamuti. They also supported Lion Camp when Ayla wanted to burry Rydag. None will dare cross Wolf Camp, Auroch Camp, Elk Camp and Lion Camp combined. Cedar Camp will also back Lion Camp if they make the Summer Meeting.”

“You will take my gifts to the leaders when you go?”

“I will take whatever you give to me.”

“Goov thinks the boy Rav needs to talk with Mamut Sethut. He sees power in him.”

“I will tell him, but it is up to Ralev if he wants to learn.” Durc nodded and left Frebec knowing he had to talk with one more person.

Eyla looked down so that Durc would not see the excitement in her eyes. Not only was she to be mated with the hunter Eul who was so strong yet gentle she was also going back to the place where she was born. The thought of meeting all the people her mother and Durc had talked about as she was taught the language of the others thrilled her and she could not wait to meet Lion Camp. She was also glad that Eul would be traveling with her and the men of Lion Camp and she knew he would protect her no matter what they encountered. Furtively she looked around the small cave where they had spent so many hours as a family. Suddenly a sadness filled her but she kept motionless.”

“I would hear your thoughts Eyla. I will allow you to speak freely here.”

“It pleases me that you and Goov think I can do this for the clan. I am grateful that the leader would send the excellent hunter with me to protect me. I am pleased to have the hunter Eul as my mate, it is what I had hoped for a very long time.”

The entire cave stood at the top of the hill watching the travelers as they moved toward the mouth of the valley. Each had their own thought whether it was relief that the leader had not chosen them to go, regret that they would not be making the journey, anger that the decision was made, and sadness for the same reason. It was not known except perhaps to the Mogur whether they would see any of them again but there was that possibility and the stories they would tell would be wonderful to hear if they ever returned. Durc looked at Ura’s daughter with her bright hair and wondered if he would see her again. He would never tell any of the second thoughts he was having as he watched her and her traveling companions move out of sight. He felt Ura’s hand brush his slightly and knew she had forgiven him for separating her daughter from her. He only hoped that his promise that she would return came true.