

## Methuselah's Daughter: Part 2

### Destiny's Road

*Thanks to the human heart by which we live,*

*Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,*

*To me the meanest flower that blows can give*

*Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.*

*(William Wordsworth, 1770–1850)*

## Prelude

*Wisconsin Territory, November 1835 CE*

Darkness was falling rapidly upon us, but the Kelly's kept moving, trying to make up lost time. I had the impression Tom knew of a good campsite and was willing to travel a while in darkness to reach it. That they had declined to spend the night at the cabin in favor of covering more ground spoke volumes. I stayed silent, having screamed and wept myself hoarse the first hour of the journey. I was stiff and sore from being tied to the mule and my mind was nearly numb from the shock of what had transpired. I was very angry, but I knew these chivalrous fools all believed they were doing what was right.

I knew my ire was futile, but it was hard to control. I also cursed myself for failing to recognize that as well as I knew Jeremy he still had no true understanding of my nature. He felt me unique but still a woman and his civilized instincts drove him to put my welfare firmly before his own. Now I was far from him and in the hands of well-meaning men who knew even less of me. Worse, we had ridden at least four hours and not at any moderate pace. As it stood I would need more than a day to walk back.

Would he wait that long? He was convinced he was dying, and in the hands of any other caretaker he would have been correct. Would he still fight? Or would he take the liquor for comfort and sleep as the fire guttered out, letting the cold of the night finish what the fever had begun? Did I have even half a day?

"I'd like to sit up," I finally said.

"We're near to camp, ma'am," Will said, "quicker to get there and set you down than to stop and..."

He broke off because his father had brought us to a halt and young Will obviously never questioned his father. In a moment the both of them were helping me down from the back of the mule. Tom quickly cut the bonds from my wrists and ankles. He could hardly look me in the face. I knew his shame was not for having taken me away against my will, but for having lashed me to a pack-mule like some criminal.

I stretched in silence, stamping my feet to restore sensation to them. Tom gestured toward his horse and waited for me politely. As I rubbed my wrists and looked about, refusing to meet their eyes, I wondered what they would do if I were to simply begin walking back to the cabin. But the darkness was upon us and the clouds were thick and impenetrable. I knew Tom Kelly was traveling solely by his gut and his knowledge of this trail. To walk without the stars to guide me would be foolish in the extreme, even for me. I knew I would need daylight. After a moment I mutely nodded. Tom mounted his horse and I allowed him to take me up behind him in his saddle as we set out again.

My mind was already calculating, my rage barely held in check.

We reached the campsite in fairly short order, a clearing to the side of the trail with a stone fire pit and a well built north-facing stone wall sufficient for a serviceable lean-to. Tom Kelly helped me

down from the saddle then set about making a fire while his son unrolled a large tarpaulin of leather and set poles against the wall, taking them from a pile stacked there for just that purpose. Within minutes he had the shelter constructed, driving iron spikes into the ground with a mallet to secure the cover in place.

I turned and gazed back upon the way we had come. My fears refused to be held in check and I wondered—what was he doing now? Would he endure another night? He was a God-fearing man, despite the faults he admitted. Would he eschew deliberate surrender, or would he choose a quick and more comfortable end? The answers were back down that path. I had to believe he would choose to survive another night, that he would fight. The alternative was unbearable.

The Kelly's were kind men and sought to draw me into conversation, but I remained mute and avoided their eyes. They offered food, jerky and warmed beans, and I did eat, being unwilling to refuse that simple hospitality. Within slightly more than an hour of arriving we were settling down to sleep, the two of them facing the east end of the shelter so that I might be closer to the fire's warmth. They knew my pain and respected it. They deserved better than what I contemplated.

I lay awake, listening as their breathing settled and they dropped off to sleep, my mind racing with plans, rage, and fear. Were there sufficient moonlight I might well have killed them in their sleep and left, but the thick clouds made the night near black. So I lay quietly, considering how I would make my escape. I had my pistol in my pack, and the pig knife Jeremy had fashioned for me, and they would be helpless before me. Killing them now would be the simplest way to proceed and I found myself slipping my knife from my pack and carefully rising to a crouch.

But what would Jeremy think?

Somewhat to my surprise that unbidden thought froze me. The knowledge of what Jeremy would think brought a deep, sickening pain to my chest. Try as I might I could not drive the thought away. I began to have an argument in my head with Jeremy. I grew furious with him. Such an obstinate, frustrating man, he would not listen to reason! But he would never buy his life with such coin, nor would he have a single life, even one willingly given, sacrificed on his account. Why else had he sent me from him?

Foolish man. Foolish, frustrating man.

But did he need to know? My eyes slid back toward the sleeping men, the flickering fire throwing shadows against the tent wall. I had kept my greatest secret from him for over four years, so why not this secret as well? I rose again to a half-crouch. In the long reach of my life I had learned to lie better than any man or woman who had ever lived.

But in my mind's eye I saw him staring at me, staring *through* me in that unsettling way he had. With some frustration I realized I would not be capable of keeping that secret, not that secret, not from *him*. Murder stains the inner canvas of even one such as I, even after everything, and the thought that I might perhaps save his life at the cost of not just his love but his respect and trust.... My heart nearly burst with the frustration of it.

It was unbearable. Selfish desire screamed at me to take the most convenient path, but I knew with cold certainty that I could never lie to him, that he would see through me should I try. I found myself in the wrenching position of risking his death that I might avoid his disapproval. I could have laughed at my predicament were it not so tragic.

Silently I lay back down. As I did so I began to see that I was being somewhat foolish. I had allowed my thirst for revenge and the simple logic of the easy path get the better of me. Most men, particularly honorable men such as these Americans were, could easily be intimidated by a forceful woman, so long as she started from a position of strength and was careful to keep the upper hand. I had allowed myself to be surprised, largely because my fears for Jeremy had driven careful contemplation from my head.

Another thought, unbidden but undeniable, came to me, “Should I find Jeremy dead, I will find these men and have my revenge then.”

With that, the thought of killing them suddenly ceased to control me. By telling myself there would be time for such cold-blooded plotting later, it became very easy to know what to do. I smiled to myself as I began to see how simple this would be. I needed merely to turn the tables. It would require great stealth, but I knew it would almost certainly work. On the off chance they rushed me, I could tell Jeremy honestly that they gave me no choice. He still might not forgive me, but he would not hate me, and I would at least know I had done my best even if he should choose to send me away.

Dawn arrived some hours later and I heard the younger Kelly begin to awaken. As he began to stir, I quickly pulled down the tent wall he had strung against the lean-to yesterday, then ran a few steps and smoothly mounted the horse I had prepared. I quickly shouldered one of the two muskets I had loaded, took careful aim, and waited. I allowed myself a silent smile as he bellowed a loud oath at the sudden inrush of cold air—and a louder one when he discovered that while he had slept in the night I had managed to reach under his thick blankets and, without waking him, tied his left wrist behind his back by a short length of rope to his right ankle. I had used a clever knot that only tightened (and thus would only be felt) when he began to yank on it. He would be able to sleep comfortably but not to stand without removing the rope. As he cursed and fell over in the sudden morning cold, his father also stirred and gave a yelp, finding himself similarly half-tied. At that moment I fired the weapon, aiming between the two of them, then dropped the musket to the ground.

To my surprise the horse bucked, I had assumed the animal was trained not to start at gunfire and I fought to bring the gelding under control. While keeping my eyes on the men and pulling out the second musket, I successfully managed to get the horse’s feet back on the ground just as I leveled the second gun.

The horse’s bucking now seemed all to the good; the image we presented as I came down and took aim at them, rifled musket in one hand and the reins in my other, must have been rather dramatic. In any case it had the desired effect. Both men were in half-crouches, frozen and staring at me, their mouths agape, the sound of the shot that had whizzed between their heads still ringing in their ears.

Shooting from horseback was even easier than using a bow, I thought to myself with some amusement. Then I spoke in a firm, clear voice.

“Gentlemen! My first shot was between both your heads and was no accident. My second shot shall also be no accident, but will embed itself into the belly of the first man to move to stop me. I am returning to my husband and I will not be denied. Do I make myself clear?”

The tableau remained frozen for a moment, both men on their knees, and me on the shivering appaloosa as we listened to the breeze whistle in our ears. The son looked to his father. The father

looked around and noticed the obvious: while they had slept I had not only managed to half-tie the both of them, but I had taken every weapon in the camp and left them helpless, all without causing either of them to so much as stir. Finally he licked his lips and spoke, obviously trying to buy time to think.

“Now Mizzus McAllister,” he began. Even as he manfully tried to sound placating, he already sounded rather shaken and hopeless. Still, I let him continue. “Y’all must know if this storm comes up you may not make it back to that cabin. He prob’ly won’t be alive even if you do make it back.”

I stared at him levelly and let out my words very carefully.

“Let us both,” I said, pausing a bit for effect, “hope that is not the case.”

I did not hate these men, and I realized my anger the night before had not been so much with them as with myself for allowing these circumstances to come about. But I could not stop myself from knowing that had my Jeremy died in the night I would hunt them down wherever they might be and kill them both with my bare hands.

I shook once, forcing myself back to calmness. “I shall be returning to my husband, regardless of his fate. You shall continue on your way and will make no attempt to interfere with me again. Are we clear on this matter?”

They both looked at each other, uncertain. “ARE WE AGREED ON THIS OR ARE WE NOT?” I bellowed.

Finally I sensed the father’s will completely break. He would not interfere. His son, seeing the capitulation in his father’s eyes, also relented. Both men nodded and murmured, “Yes ma’am.”

With grim satisfaction I carefully placed the musket into its saddle pocket, drew out a large hunting knife, and hurled it at the banked fire where it stuck blade-first into one of the smoldering logs. They both stared at it, startled, as I began to dismount.

“You may use that knife to untie yourselves, and I shall leave you your muskets. I sense that you would not shoot a woman in the back.” As my feet touched the ground, I gathered my pack from the horse’s back. “Now if you will excuse me,” I said, turning back toward them, “I have a very long walk ahead of me.”

I had mounted the horse both for dramatic effect and so that I might gallop away if need be, but I did not want to steal their horse and provide them with cause to chase me. Once I knew from their demeanor that they would let me go there was no reason to remain mounted. I would walk with the mule.

The son was pulling the knife from the fire as I spoke, but the father continued to stare at me.

“No, Mizzus McAllister,” he said. “You take that horse, and the supplies with it. We’ll have enough for the post. You haven’t got much chance but that horse and his supplies will help you. If the weather clears in the next couple weeks, we’ll send a party to look... to look for the both of you.”

I could tell by his tone that he expected nothing but two corpses to be found, and perhaps not even that.

I hesitated. I did not want to take charity from them. As his son began to cut his own bonds away, the old man allowed a hint of pleading to enter his voice.

“You’re gonna need them supplies,” Mr. Kelly said as his son cut him free.

“Pa’s right ma’am. Sides, we just...” Will looked to his father, who nodded at him to continue. “We just couldn’t live with ourselves if we didn’t try to leave you what we could.”

They had no idea how close they had been... might be... to death at my hands. I did not want their charity. But seeing my hesitation, Tom Kelly spoke.

“We’ll keep your mule in trade,” he said. “You take what you need and you go on. We’ll say a prayer for you.”

I swallowed, and my heart swelled. These were good men, though I knew I could not stop what would happen to them if I found my Jeremy dead. I nodded, then re-mounted the gelding as both men stood. I allowed them to remove some of things from our pack mule and secure them to my new mount. Though I knew from their bearing they would keep their word, I kept a grip on my gun and my knife.

As he finished tying the last sack to the saddle, Will Kelly spoke again, cautiously. “We’ll take ya back if you want, Ma’am. We promise... I promise....”

“No.” I said, firmly. “You and your father go on to that trading post and let me be. You are...” I swallowed. “You are good men, you are. But I have made my way alone in the world for... for a very long time. I thank you for your gift and your concern.” Then, before they could see my face, I dug my heels into the gelding’s side and galloped away.

I did not look back. I knew they would not follow.

## Chapter 11

*Circa 1100 B.C., somewhere near Scandinavia*

It was an odd sort of acceptance I had found and not at all the way I had thought I might. In recent years it was as if a fog had begun to lift from my mind, but as that fog cleared I found only desolation around me. I found myself in just another village, just another clan, or so it seemed. These new people were farmers mostly and were more prosperous than others I had seen in recent years. I had come to them in a trade, thrown in almost as an after-thought to seal a deal. The winters had been growing harsher, the summers less productive, and my old clan was cutting away whatever it could not use. At least they had liked me enough to keep me through spring.

I started in this new tribe in almost the worst possible situation. I was still *orjan*, an outsider, but no one owned me and no one was responsible for my well-being. Instead I was merely the property of the village and expected to make the best of it I could. So as was usually the case a strong back, eager hands and a willingness to lie down on demand meant I would not starve or freeze, but I had no place at all of my own. Decade after decade of living like that had me despondent, and I had begun wondering for the first time why anything mattered to me.

It was worse than being in a rut. It had been like this for me for four hundred winters or more, and I had only just begun to notice, to think on, the oddness of that. But my actions were still almost all automatic, driven towards offending no one and otherwise being seen as useful. I could see problems coming and I would do my best to bend circumstances in my favor, but that in itself caused problems for some would see me as too manipulative and everyone saw me as aloof and strange. I had to balance the danger that represented against the danger of becoming too comfortable with my surroundings.

Then along came Att.

His real name was Attaz, but no one called him that. He was a lanky one, with pale skin, black hair he kept in a knot and flinty gray eyes. He was respected amongst the men, desired by the women, but strange in his own way. He had had a mate who bore him a son, Attuz, and a daughter, Herdhiz, before dying in labor with their third child.

Att was often a hunt leader, but he sometimes set out on solitary jaunts, ranging for long days on his own, usually returning with something, but sometimes with very little. To others his wanderings seemed random, but I could always tell when he was going to set out. There was a restlessness about him that would grow as days amongst his people stretched into weeks, until he finally would pack up his gear in the evening and disappear into the wilderness before dawn the next morning, returning after a week or more with at least his peace of mind restored.

I had made a habit of watching Att's comings and goings all spring, for when he set out his sister would have his children to care for, which meant there might be some easier labor for me in helping her. She was friendlier than some of the other women, her light brown hair framing an open face that matched her open manner. So when I showed up outside her dwelling that morning I was expecting Att to be gone and hoping she might need my help.

“Good morning, Red,” he greeted me at the door, giving me a very slight smile, but with his face otherwise impassive.

I was startled. He had never so much as spoken to me before. “I... My name is Utha,” I managed to say, “I was looking for...”

“My sister, I know. Not today. Today, you come with me.”

My heart sank for a moment as I wondered what I had done wrong, thinking that he meant to turn me out into the wilderness; however, there was no malice in him that I could see. He stood from his crouch by the door and hefted a pack, pointing to another like it on the ground.

“Pick it up,” he said, “unless you’d rather stay here?” His manner seemed gruff, but oddly so, almost as if he was testing me.

I opened my mouth and shut it. “Well?” he asked. Before I realized I had made up my mind I was lifting the heavy pack and following him as he set off across the green. We paused long enough for me to gather my small knife, a blanket and my few other meager belongings from the shed I had been sleeping in. Then we turned east for the forest. Many were the curious eyes upon our backs.

We passed in silence for some time and then stopped in the midmorning for water and a brief meal of bread and fruit.

“Utha, huh?” he mused as we ate. I nodded. “I don’t like it. Sounds like a boy’s name,” he said, his face still characteristically expressionless. He didn’t look at me much.

“It can be either,” I said, nervously.

He grunted noncommittally. “I like 'Red' better,” he said. I nodded; people had changed my name before, and I was used to this. “Anyway,” he went on, “it’s a full day’s walk to my favorite camp. We won’t get there until sundown.” He paused, remembering. “We have to range further these days to where hunting is better. It’s not so good like it was when I was a boy. So I hope you like walking.”

“That’s a long way to go on your own,” I noted with surprise, “what would you do if you were injured?”

“Hasn’t happened yet,” he grinned, “and I’m not alone, am I?”

There it was again, that look in his eyes, like he was laughing at me a little, but he was not. I stayed silent as we ate and then returned to walking. I was not afraid of him; rather I was somewhat confused. Att had always seemed to want to get away from people and men usually only brought women along when they were making a special hunting trip in a large party. So why bring me? That he was enjoying my company was clear for he continued to talk as we traveled. I listened with only half my head, trying to make some sense out of his motives. They were not at all clear. If he had wanted sex, there was no need for this, for no man had claimed me. Then he said something that stopped me in my tracks.

“What?”



“You remind me of me,” he repeated, looking over his shoulder, “always watching other people, trying to see what they want.”

This dumbfounded me. Dumbfounded, and amused.

“Now that’s interesting,” he said, stopping and turning to face me. “This has to be the first time I’ve ever seen you smile.” I simply stared at him, trying to read what was behind his face, hiding in that impenetrable grin. “And there you go again,” he sighed, shaking his head, “What’s the matter with you, Red? You’re always so glum. But I watch you and I see you watching everything and everyone. I think if I wanted to know about anyone in the village I could ask you and you’d have something to tell me. But you don’t say anything. You just watch and you try to be good. And you’re always sad. Why?”

I did not know how to answer that. No one had ever asked me a question like that. Att kept watching me, waiting for an answer. What surprised me even more than the question he had asked was how desperately I wanted to answer him. It caught in my chest like a hot pain and I felt tears rising, but I had to force them back. What could I say to him?

“Some people are just born to be sad, I guess,” I finally managed to say. I started walking again, hoping that he would just let it go, while at the same time hoping he would not.

“Kind of tough, I guess,” he agreed, falling in beside me, “being barren and all, with no family. Do you miss them?”

“Who? My family? I... I don’t remember ever having a family.”

“Hmm,” he muttered, mulling it over as we walked. Then he said, “I still don’t get it. You’re young, strong and good-looking. You could still make a place for yourself if you tried. But you just stay on the outside, moping.”

“I’m not so young,” I shot back without thinking. “I’m older than I look. A lot older.”

I regretted that as soon as I said it, but he seemed to accept it easily, and his attitude actually brightened, if that was possible.

“You know, the way you watch things, I think you’d make a good hunter.”

“Really?” I laughed, genuinely amused now, “Me? A hunter?”

“Sure. Like I said, you see things and you’re patient—I’ve seen that, too. Ever used a sling before?”

“No...” I said, thinking. “I’ve used a cudgel. I can drop a rabbit with one on a good day. I got a bird once.”

“If you can do that, you’d be a natural with a sling. Want to learn?”

The idea did not just appeal to me, it astounded me. I looked over at him and I could see he was absolutely serious.

“If you’re offering to teach me...”

“We’ll get started in the morning,” he said, and with that he set out at a brisk pace I was hard-pressed to match. I continued to be astonished by this man, although I was beginning to see why the women of the village all thought so well of him.

After we found his favorite camp spot late that afternoon I busied myself building a fire in the same spot he had obviously used before, while he disappeared into the woods. Some hours later, in the evening twilight, he returned with three fat rabbits. I busied myself preparing them and fed him some of the nuts I had found while he was away.

That night as I spooned against his back, I was surprised again as he seemed simply to want to sleep.

The next morning he was up and gone again before dawn. When he returned the mid-morning sun was poking out from behind the clouds and his face was sour.

“Almost got a doe, but she was too clever for me this time,” he said, dropping his spear carrier. “Maybe tomorrow. So, are you ready now?” He looked at me inquisitively, and I nodded, eagerly.

He smiled and pulled a long buckskin sling from his belt and several largish pebbles from his belt sack. “Now, watch me,” he said, holding the two ends of the sling in three-fingered fashion and demonstrating how to let go of one side but not the other. Then he placed one of the larger pebbles from his left hand into the sling, turned sideways to me and pointed to a tree some 30 paces away.

“Now watch carefully,” he said.

Staring at the tree, he began to twirl the sling in an overhand motion, faster and faster, until it began to almost whistle. Stepping forward, he threw out his arm, and with a loud ‘crack!’ the rock hit the trunk of the oak. Bark flew from a spot directly in its center, and a patch of white wood the size of a man’s thumb was revealed. He grinned at me.

“I do not think I can do something like that,” I said, nervously.

“Perhaps not,” he said. “But let us see what you can do. Here,” he said, and walked closer to the tree. I followed until we were perhaps 10 paces from the same tree. “We’ll start you with an underhand throw. That’s probably easier for girls anyway.” He showed me again how to hold the sling in my hand and made me practice letting go of only one side.

“Now,” he said, “This is very important, Red. You must look at your target. I want you to look at that tree and concentrate on making the rock hit the tree. Spin the sling like this,” he said, twirling his hand in an underhand motion. “But remember, keep your arm out sideways, like this,” he said, gesturing. “And look at the tree until you step forward and let go.”

Determined now, I straightened my back and concentrated very hard upon the tree trunk. I inserted the rock, holding the sling ends carefully in my fingers and then began to twirl it in the same underhanded motion as he had shown me. As I began to twirl the rock caught my eye and I followed its motion around once, then twice.

“Hey don’t...!” he said, as I saw the end of the sling come toward my eyes.

As the spots cleared I found myself staring at white clouds in a clear blue sky, my ears ringing. The sound of his merry laughter filled the air and I sat up, groaning.

“Are you all right?” he said, his voice still laughing a little. But as I looked at him I saw genuine concern. I nodded, and rubbed my forehead.

”You’ll never make much of a boy,” he said, his grin broadening.

To my shock I felt my blood quicken and without thinking, I said. “Yes, I might!”

His friendly laugh barked out again and I laughed a bit too. “So you haven’t had enough of this foolishness?” he asked.

I shook my head and stood up, a little wobbly, but determined.

“Very well, Gloomy Red. Once again. Arm out like so. Now you look at the tree, not at the rock.” He grinned again. “We don’t look at the rock, right?” I nodded, and grinned back at him foolishly. I suddenly knew why all the women in the village loved him.

“So we turn the sling like so, looking at the target...” he went on.

And thus began the greatest summer of the first 400 years of my existence.

We spent five days in the woods together. All that first day I practiced with the sling as he patiently watched. To his surprise, I experimented with throwing overhand as well as underhand, but soon found that I preferred to twirl the sling over my head best of all. He seemed a bit chagrined that his advice about throwing underhand was wrong and I did not let him see my small grin. He seemed content to patiently watch me, letting me find my own way, giving me only a little advice. He also spent some time showing me how to find good wood for a spear and how to sharpen the end and harden it in the fire for a crude weapon and how to fix a precious bronze point to it. I mostly knew how to do this anyway, but I let him show me as if I did not, and to teach me the things about the craft I had never paid attention to before, such as the best ways to hold it against a charging beast. He seemed impressed with how quickly I picked up everything he told me, for I absorbed everything with a single-minded eagerness.

The next morning, while he was away, I surprised myself by spotting and killing a squirrel at nearly 25 paces and then another only a little closer. I felt a thrill that was almost sexual at this minor accomplishment and beamed with foolish pride when he returned empty-handed that morning.

“Haha, not much meat on a squirrel, but we can make a good stew for breakfast with them,” he said. I nodded and set about doing exactly that. “Well,” he said, “you are a most impressive young boy. Perhaps I should teach you how to move silently in the woods today, eh?”

And so, after our breakfast, he began to do exactly that. He again seemed impressed by how quickly I picked up some of the tricks of it and, although I did not master it immediately, he said I would probably only need a few months of practice before I was an expert. I didn’t tell him I had learned some of it before from watching and listening other men speak of it in the past, and from

times when the more nomadic tribes I had sometimes been with needed to sneak quietly through dangerous areas. My smaller, lighter frame also made some of it easier for me. Bare feet helped as well, as my soles were already fairly tough and minor cuts never bothered me and always healed quickly.

As the days passed I got to know him fairly well. He sensed early on that I did not like to talk about myself, so he spoke of his life, his family and his philosophy. He didn't like people much, preferred to commune silently with nature. But when he spoke of his dead wife I always saw a small pain in him and I could tell he missed her. She had been his best friend and a good mother, which made her loss all the more troubling for him. The Chief was after him to marry again and there were two or three marriage-aged girls in the village that would be suitable. Or he might find one at the next clan gathering this summer.

At night he would not touch me and I was surprised at how disappointing I found that. Normally it would have been a bit of a relief, but he was terribly attractive to me and treated me with a respect I was unused to. Still, I understood it. Clearly the memory of his wife still bothered him and I knew that some older men had no interest in bothering with barren women anyway.

On our third evening together at the camp site he told me he would take me hunting with him in the morning, to help flush game toward him and also to begin teaching me his people's sign language, which they used for hunting. It was just the basic gestures to begin: prey there, stop, freeze, down, hide, danger, run, kill. I did my best to follow and obey his every word and that first morning we nearly got a deer from a small herd, but I was too impatient and spooked them. I was mortified, but he was patient.

"Do not worry, Red," he said, his eyes grave. "Have you learned a lesson?" I nodded, my face still hot with shame.

The next morning I helped flush a small herd toward him, and he speared a doe that ran past him. It kept going, even though wounded, so he also began teaching me how to track a wounded animal. Within an hour we found it and killed it, and I felt a thrill just watching him finish the prey. I spent the day helping him to dress the carcass there at our campsite and cooking some of it so we could enjoy the meat's freshness. We would go home in the morning, but I had never felt so alive in my entire life as I did that day.

"They'll be happy to see us at home," he said. "This is a fine fat doe. And you," he said, grinning, "are a fine young hunting companion." I just nodded, beaming at him, my heart nearly bursting with pride. My blood sang and I tingled to my fingers and toes.

I was something. For once I felt like I was something, like I actually mattered.

The next morning we set off back to the village, taking turns carrying the meat. He seemed surprised that I was strong enough to carry most of it for long stretches without complaint. When we finally reached the village near dusk there was the usual small celebration that came with Att's return, his sister and her husband, the children, a few of the neighbors. We cooked more of the organs and meat, sucked the bones and ate some garden vegetables and a little bread, along with the beer Att's sister kept for such occasions. The chief also stopped by to take Att aside for a few minutes, speaking privately of the affairs of men with him and taking the usual haunch for his own family. Att and the chief apparently had an understanding. They both glanced at me a few times as they talked, their voices low and serious. Att shook his head a few times, which made me a bit worried, but I said nothing.

Then a dozen or so adults, with a scattered handful of children and old people, sat around the fire. We sang songs, then Att told the tales of our hunts and of teaching me, while I sat silently, embarrassed. One of the neighbor women, still youngish for a matron, came over and struck up a conversation with me. She told me how she used to hunt sometimes with her father and still liked to travel as a porter with the men now and then, sometimes helping them to flush out game and such, now that her children were getting a bit older. She told me I was lucky to find such a friend in Att. In her eyes I saw something I had not seen in a very long time in someone looking at me: respect. I chatted with her a bit awkwardly, not sure how to respond, and asked her about some of her adventures, eager to learn more about the hunting arts. Most of the tribes I had been with either rarely hunted and never thought me worth bringing along on such trips, or never brought women along at all.

As we talked I watched Att from a distance as he played with his children, drank his sister's beer and chatted amiably with others. I noticed a young girl, perhaps 15, hovering around him and flirting. He had mentioned a neighbor girl whose parents were after him as a mate for her. She was cute, buxom in her young sexuality and she caught his eye a few times. He smiled and joked with her while her parents watched quietly. He was over 10 years her senior, but still young and strong, and a proven father and provider. I felt a tiny twinge of pointless jealousy but a much deeper feeling of happiness. I could think of nothing better than a beautiful young wife for this fine man.

Before things became too quiet, while others were still enjoying themselves, I left and retired to the goat shed I had been sleeping in since first arriving in the village. Att was still playing with his children and I wanted to be gone before one of the young men came looking for me. As I stretched out on my stomach, shooing the animals away, I lay for a while with a wistful smile on my face, then snuggled with the warm straw and my even warmer memories. Att had promised to bring me with him again some time, and I lingered upon the glory that was that week spent learning with him. I had never felt more alive and just remembering it all felt almost as wonderful as living through it.

Such a gift this man had given me. I pondered how I would use it, find time to practice what he had taught me and watch for other chances to learn. I planned how I might make my own spear tomorrow even if I knew others might laugh at me.

I heard a rustle at the gate and with a resigned sigh I realized one of the young men had probably decided to come after me for the night. I was still village property after all, and had my role to play. But I kept still, hoping perhaps he would think I was not there.

"Hey Red, you in there?" a man's voice called quietly, and my heart leapt. I scrambled to my feet and ran to the gate of the pen. He was relaxed and a bit drunk from beer and exhaustion, his shirt hanging half-open. The full moon bathed his face in a soft glow as he squinted at me. Tousled and smelling of beer and sweat and cooked meat, he seemed more glorious there in that moonlight than ever. I felt an urge almost to worship him.

"What, you tired already?" he asked, his voice slurring a little. I shook my head, though my mouth seemed locked. I did not want him to leave, but I could not think of what to say. "You hunt good," he said. "I think I'll take you with us next time we form a party. The Chief's after me to take a group again soon, says the spring planting's done and people are getting tired of just bread and nuts for now. I don't think the guys will mind if you tag along. You can be a porter and learn a bit with the other boys." He grinned at me and I smiled back. "Guess I should call you Utha, huh?"

"You may call me whatever you like," I said. "Utha was what my last clan named me."

“Huh. No family at all with them, huh?” I shook my head. “No father or mother or anyone else?” I shook my head. “No family here wants to take you in either, eh?”

“Young women don’t usually want me around their men,” I said. “I would be happy to help a family that would let me stay with them, and would never try to take the man, but...” my voice trailed off.

He looked at me, sharply. “You wouldn’t, huh?”

“No, no, a few times families have taken me in and I have always respected the boundaries expected of me. Always.” I said it firmly. “If a family were to take me in, I would know my place,” I said, hoping he would catch my hint. He scratched at his beard and just kept staring at me. “I work with all the families now, at least a little,” I said, a little embarrassed. “I take care of the goat pen for the chief’s family and help everyone else when I can. I like hunting!” I said, changing the subject. “A whole lot, and if that can make me more valuable, that would make me very happy,”

He smirked. “You try to please everybody, huh?” he asked.

My throat caught a little, and he noticed. “I want only to fit in, not make trouble. I want to be valuable to everyone.”

He grunted. “You’ll never be valued by everyone,” he said, cryptically. “But my sister says the kids around here all like you, even my brats.”

“I like almost all the children here and your sister is very good with yours.”

He grunted again. “You always have something good to say about everyone, don’t you?” he said, staring at me. I was not sure how to respond, but he yawned and stretched his broad shoulders. “We’ll probably get a group party going out in a few days. They’ve all been waiting for me to get back and the chief’s getting impatient with me again,” he said, rambling a bit and repeating himself. I nodded eagerly. “Well, you go on and sleep well with your goats.” He stared at me, expressionless, for several moments longer, and I began to shift uncomfortably, uncertain how to respond to his dismissal. I moved back toward the wooden shed and straw bedding I normally slept in.

When I looked back, I could see his broad shoulders and strong arms moving as he walked away. I lay down to sleep, planning to enjoy dreaming of the hunt—and a bit of him. I thought of the young girl who had been flirting with him that evening around the fire and smiled again. I hoped that she got what she wanted and that the next few years would be good to watch.

The next morning I awoke before dawn when the chief’s youngest son took the goats out to graze. As I shook off my sleep I was still glowing from my recent adventure, and my blood sang with the hope for another like it. While I had been away, however, the village children had tended the pen only halfheartedly, so I had some mending and cleaning to do before going off to see if I could beg some breakfast from the Chief’s wife. I imagined she might be more generous this morning, since I had contributed to Att’s recent hunt.

“Good morning, Utha,” a young man’s voice called with a mocking tone. My heart sank a little and my shoulders dropped a bit, resigned. It was the chief’s nephew Ghraniz again. He really should have been married by now, but his parents had not chosen a proper mate for him yet, so he sometimes liked to visit me when he was feeling frisky. As usual, he had his two younger cousins

with him. This was nothing new, but it was a bit disappointing after the last week to find myself back in these whelps' company.

I nodded, gave him a halfhearted smile, and said, "Well, let's get to it, then." He followed me as I moved toward the rain shelter next to the shed. "I'd like to find some breakfast soon. Could you help find me some?" I asked, putting a little wheedle in my voice.

He smirked. "Maybe," he said. I thanked him as he pulled open my blouse. He started fondling me and I hiked up my skirt a bit for him as his cousins watched. I closed my eyes. I didn't mind this sort of thing, but I was not really in the mood. I tried to disconnect my mind as he pawed at me eagerly. This would not take long, anyway.

Suddenly he yelped and I felt him pull away from me. My eyes snapped open and I saw him standing on the balls of his feet, waving his arms. "Hey, hey, I didn't do anything!" he yelled.

Att was holding him by his hair, right in the middle of the pen, practically lifting him off the ground. But Att was staring at me.

"What in blazes are you doing?" he roared at me.

Stunned and frightened, I shrank back and closed my blouse, unsure what to say. Was it not obvious?

"No fair, I got here first!" yelled Ghraniz, sparing me from answering. "I'll tell Uncle Wulthuz!"

Att turned his head, forcing the boy's eyes toward his. "Bah!" he yelled. Then he practically threw the young man to the ground. He turned to me, his eyes seething. I had never seen him like this and was genuinely frightened. I thought he might beat me. But then he calmed slightly and his voice lowered slightly, but still sounded dangerous. "What in blazes have you been doing, Utha?"

Frightened, I noticed Ghraniz staring angrily at me over Att's shoulder. He was the chief's nephew and I could not afford to have him angry with me. Thinking quickly, I said, "Please, Att, he hasn't done anything wrong, he's a good man. If I've done something to make you angry, it's not his fault. He was just maybe going to help me find some breakfast."

From the middle of the pen Ghraniz said, "Yeah, breakfast!"

"Was just going to....!" He stopped and looked around. Then he looked at me again. His eyes were cold, expressionless. "You sleep in the goat pen," he said, his voice flat. "You keep it clean, you beg for work and food, and you bend over on command. That's your life," he said. "You have no one and are nothing." He said it flatly, but his eyes looked angry.

I noticed we were attracting the attention of the other villagers and that he was loudly saying things that everyone knew. "Att," I said. My heart was racing wildly because I could not think what to say to placate him. Stepping toward him awkwardly I said, "If you want me this morning first...."

He pushed me away and I had to stop myself from falling. "You are very stupid, do you know that?" He said it very loudly. Then he whirled around. "Get the hell out of here!" he yelled to the young men, who all scrambled as he stomped away. As I watched his back leaving, I noticed that more villagers were staring, watching from a distance. Att never acted like this.

“What did you do Utha?” called one of the women who had gathered to watch the scene.

“I told you she was crazy,” I heard one of the older men tell her.

Ashamed of the attention, unsure what to do, I scrambled back into the shed and hid in the straw. My mouth tasted of ashes. I did not want to be turned out, but I began to think I understood. Att’s unexpected interest in me, taking me away from the village for a week with no explanation, his conversations with the chief...

Likely I was an unwitting party to some game Att and others were playing, some power struggle involving the Chief or some such. I was to be scapegoated, the public spectacle giving them some pretense. I wondered vaguely what woman was involved since one usually was. Perhaps that one who had spoken to me the night before? None of this was really new to me; I had been used in such ways before. I was just angry with myself for not watching more carefully, seeing whatever it was before it came. Grimly, I began making plans. At least this time I would be turned out with something more, with skills I had been foolish not to begin learning sooner.

I wiped my eyes, pressed down my emotions and smiled grimly. Yes, I had faced worse, and now I had learned new, useful things, including useful things about myself. Perhaps before I was gone I could think of a thing or two to hurt their plans, whatever they were. Who all were involved? Men were not usually so clever on their own unless...

Att’s voice called loudly again from outside, startling my reverie.

“Utha,” he said, firmly. I stood up, straightened my shoulders and poked my head out. I kept my face passive, for I would display no sign of fear or guilt.

“Gather your things. All of them. And come out here.”

I did as ordered, keeping my face impassive. I was a bit surprised to notice the chief, his woman and a few of the other elders of the clan there, but was relieved that they did not look ready to beat me. I resolved to say nothing and merely calculate until I could find my best advantage—whether to say something, to run or to quietly do as ordered. I kept my emotions at bay. Remembering everything he and that neighbor woman had said, I knew now I had missed something I should not have. I would watch for what I could say or do to at least rob them of some small piece of their spoils.

As I walked out the gate he grabbed me a bit roughly by the arm and savaged my mouth with a kiss. Still holding my arm, he turned to the chief’s woman and said, “Do you have any objections?”

She looked a bit dubious but said, “It’s your choice, Att.” Att then looked to the chief, who gave him a perplexed but resigned shrug.

Then Att turned and said, “Anyone else object?” No one said anything and most turned back to their tasks.

He then marched me through the center of the village, his hand holding my upper arm as I stared at the ground in frustration. Apparently I was not even to be told what was happening, or why. We stopped suddenly, and I was surprised to find we were in front of his hut.



He relinquished my arm and said, "Go on inside." His voice was much quieter and I began to get nervous. I considered running, but thought the better of it. No point in being chased down in broad daylight.

I had never been in his hut before. It was one of the smaller but nicer ones in the village, with a fresh thatched roof and a few wooden walls with skins sealing off three rooms. A fire pit with a small stone chimney and a few nice pots stood in one corner, and there was a wood table in the center with a few utensils on it.

He turned me to face him. "Never had a family?" he asked.

Numbly, I said, "No, though I've lived with a few..." My voice trailed off as my mind recalculated. "I can cook for you, I'd be honored to help you..."

"You want a family?" he said, gruffly.

"What?"

"I want you to be my woman," he said, "If you'll have me."

My mind reeled and my knees went weak. This was wrong. Some men had made this mistake a few times in the past before learning I was.... But this man... I could not think. As my head went light he caught me and sat me at his table. My mind replayed everything that had happened this morning and I felt as if this could not be real.

"Att," I started. "Att, I can't give you..."

"I don't care. I have children and I've lost one woman that way anyway." He paused. "I've also got my sister's kids. You can help me with mine, since they like you."

"But, Att, that girl would be better for you." I said, my head still spinning, almost not hearing myself speak. "If you take her, I can help you..."

"I don't want her. I want you. I like to hunt, like to be away and most women don't understand that. A huntress-wife will do me just fine," he said. "Though sometimes you can stay here with my kids if you want."

I just stared at him, uncomprehending. This had never, no man had ever... but he stood up and pulled aside the cloth to one of the rooms.

"The children sleep here. They'll join us tomorrow night. You and I," he said, pointing to another of the hut's divisions, "We sleep in there." Then he walked to the fire pit, turned toward me and pointed to it with his open hand.

"This is yours now," he said.

In his clan the woman owned the family fire pit. A lump grew in my throat and I had difficulty breathing. I tried to stand, but faltered. My hands started shaking.

He smiled softly, and came back to sit next to me. "In our tribe, when a woman becomes a man's wife," he said, stretching out a hand to touch one curl that drifted over my left brow, "she braids her hair so the other men will all know to leave her alone and the other women will respect her territory." As his finger trailed gently down my cheek, I could only nod in acknowledgement. I knew this.

"Utha, will you braid your hair for me?" he asked, softly.

My heart leapt like a small rabbit caught in a trap. Fear bound me, as it had kept me for so many centuries. As I tipped my head down, I pushed at my mental bonds and slowly wrapped my fingers into my thick, red hair. The strands were tangled and my hands began to tremble, making things worse.

Att's hand cupped my chin, gently forcing me to look once more into his eyes of flint. In that instant I wrapped my arms tightly about him, mirroring the prison of my own heart. I could smell the earth in his skin, the fires of his people in his hair, and I could feel the softness of his children in his hands that ran down my back.

"Att, you don't know what you are doing, please, you can't do this," my entire body shuddered as I whispered so softly I could barely hear my own voice, "You don't know..."

"I do know and I just did." His voice rumbled in his chest like the thunder of a distant storm. Slowly we stood, me clinging to him as though I were hanging off the edge of a cliff. Firmly but tenderly, Att spun me so my back was to him. "Let me help," he said.

From the table he took a comb of shell and pulled it through my hair with infinite patience. I stood as each knot was replaced with smooth strands that crackled with electricity. My hair fell to the middle of my back and as the comb reached the bottom of that first stubborn lock, my body shook once more, but no longer with fear. Within my mind the bonds that had held me for so long shattered. A part of me screamed that I should stop this, but I ignored it. With a grateful sigh I heard myself mouth the words, "Thank you," but I wasn't sure I made a sound. Att's lips brushed across my hair until they touched my ear and a thrill of electricity ran through my body. Then he gently cupped my breast and squeezed before returning his attention to my hair.

Time stood still for me as Att divided my hair and plaited it. I'm sure I never once took a breath. With each and every curl tamed by the ritual, my heart became calmer but my soul steadily more aroused until I could no longer stay where I was. Turning, I slipped my arms around his body and lifted my lips to his. My face, my teeth, my tongue tingled. The first kiss was harsh, of anger, desire, hunger and need. Then the second, more subtle as our lips brushed lightly, like explorers taking that first hesitant step onto a new land. I felt as if I were floating.

"You are mine," he said. This was both a proclamation and an order. His hands undressed me, with deliberation. As each piece of clothing fell to the ground, his hands stroked each curve. When I was completely naked, I felt a blush course through me and felt a tiny particle of panic threatening to rise up—but why? Naked I had been many times, but I felt truly vulnerable with him. Yet before I could say or do anything, Att took my hands into his. It was clear I was to do for him what he had done for me.

I began with his shirt, untying the leather laces and opening the shirt. Once my fingers got in their own way, but he caught them up and kissed each fingertip and set my hands back to their task.

"Say it," he urged and I stared up into his eyes. At first I didn't understand, but then I spoke.

"You are... mine," I whispered. It was as though lightning struck and there was nothing in the universe but him and me. Together we embraced, desire suffusing both of us. It felt like I couldn't breathe, but then I didn't want to. Att could breathe for me.

The bed was beneath our bodies before I even realized it. Suddenly I pushed him off of me and back against the soft straw. He looked surprised, but I needed to touch him, to explore—and, quietly, he let me. I'd never done this before, taking to my own curiosity with such abandon. My fingernails tickled the softness in his elbows and behind his knees. I playfully nipped at him, luxuriating in tasting his saltiness. When at last our bodies came together, the Earth was swept into swirling madness and time stood still as we became one. I closed my eyes, and shrieked my pleasure to the skies.

If I slept, I don't remember it. I do remember being alive.

## Chapter 12

I talked to her a few times on the phone after Thanksgiving, but Zsallia kept saying she needed some time alone. I had all sorts of questions, but she just wouldn't let me engage her in any long conversations. When I finally pushed her on the phone one night, all she said was, "I'm not in such a hurry now and I would hate to see you burn your bridges. I'll see you when you have your affairs in order." Then she made an excuse and hung up on me.

Typical.

Still, she was probably right anyway. The two weeks after Thanksgiving were a grind, what with quitting my job, then calming my wife's horror over my quitting, then fending off my employer's generous attempts to keep me. But the money "Miss Baker" was paying was far too good to pass up and there was no way this could be a part-time gig anyway.

So it was a Monday in the middle of December when I finally saw her for the first time after Denver. I brought her a sack of groceries and as I approached her suite door I noticed it was already open. I had called ahead as a courtesy, so I just knocked at the door jam, poked my head in—and froze. She was standing by the breakfast table smoking a cigarette and drinking a large glass of orange juice.

Standing. Not balancing on one leg. Standing on two.

A tiny foot, about half normal size and curled up a bit, poked out of the left leg of her blue jeans. She wore a billowy, long-sleeved blouse, but it looked like her arm had elongated a bit as well. I just stared at her.

She gave me an embarrassed-looking half-grin. "I still can't walk very well on it," she said, putting down her glass, grabbing an elegant-looking walking stick and hobbling toward me. I just stood there looking at her from the doorway. As she approached, she leaned her stick against the wall, looked at me very seriously and shook my hand. "It is a pleasure to see you again," she said softly.

"I brought you a present," I said gruffly, pointing to the bag of groceries. As she thanked me, I noticed that she looked like she'd put on at least 15 pounds—pounds that looked good on her. She'd seemed wanly pretty in the hospital, but now her cheeks, bust and hips had all filled out significantly. The circles were completely gone from under her eyes and she didn't look nearly so pale. I noticed, though, that she winced a bit in pain as she took up her cane and limped back into the suite.

"Please come in and make yourself comfortable. If you could set the bag on the counter there I would appreciate it."

I set the bag down on the bar, staring as she limped into the middle of the suite and sat down on a large sofa. I moved to a large easy chair across from her, took out the recorder and set it down on the glass coffee table, then said, "How the hell are you even possible, Zsallia?"

She gave me a pained smile. "Not one to waste any time, are you?" she said. A bit awkwardly, she pulled her shriveled left foot onto her right knee and began massaging the new leg, which looked

very thin under the jeans. "It hurts," she said, absently. "But it's a bit stronger every day and it helps to rub it." Then she fixed her eyes on mine. "The short answer to your question is 'I don't know.' My primary hypothesis, the one that seems to make the most sense, is that I'm a sport. Some sort of odd stage of evolution gone awry." She smiled a bit sickly and said, "An acquaintance once suggested that I might be some sort of new stage in human evolution." She gave an evil chuckle and I started a bit, but she gave me a friendly snort and winked. "I'm not much of one if so, since I add nothing to the gene pool and there aren't any others like me. I'm hardly a boon to the race."

"I hate to say it," I said, "but that doesn't really make any sense anyway. Genetic anomalies, even if they're very extreme, can't produce things like... like..."

"I wouldn't be so certain if I were you. Man's knowledge of these things is hardly complete."

"But no one's ever found any immortal animals or human spontaneous growth of limbs like this. I'm sure of it," I said.

"Yes, well, perhaps you'd know better than I." Her expression was blank. "I honestly don't know." She seemed to be growing distant and a little cold as she spoke.

"So you're pretty sure you're not..." I trailed off. I wasn't sure what I was asking, or how to proceed. "You've never met anyone else like yourself?"

"No, I've made a few efforts to look, made a very serious effort for about 200 years. Decided to chase legends of vampires and whatnot, thinking perhaps.... Well, it came to naught. I entertained the notion that I might be from fabled Atlantis, but it now seems rather unlikely that such a place even existed. I am alone so far as I know and I do not know how I came to be." She paused and smiled a bit again. "I'm one of God's little jokes, perhaps."

I heard just a trace of bitterness there as she pulled out a cigarette and puffed it to life. None of this made any sense, but she seemed to be getting glum inside. "Well, let's try something else," I said, thinking about it. "Back in Denver, you told me you woke up one day with amnesia and for a long time after that you were, well, stupid, and a piece of property more or less. That's obviously changed for you. When did you start to be, well, not slow and stupid?"

She thought about it for a while. Her eyes took on a faraway look as if she was searching through the caverns of her mind. "It's tempting to draw a fine line. For a long time I was not really so much aware of the world or myself as simply existing. Almost like a beast. I believe it took nearly half a millennia to understand what I was and even longer to fully accept it. For a long time, a very, very long time, I was traded and sold every few years, either as a beast of burden or a whore, and did little but what was expected of me. It honestly never even occurred to me to resent it and I thought very little about much of anything. I merely did the necessary, whatever was easy and nothing more."

She thought about it some more. "I suppose it may have begun to change when I first learned to count." She looked up at me. "Yes, it was probably there, although I can't say it was all that dramatic."

I shook my head. "Counting?" I asked, a bit confused.

"Well, most people didn't, you know. One, two, three, perhaps, then simply "many." But there was once this odd traveler who guested in the roundhouse of my master. I was sent to entertain his

bed because he'd found favor with our chief shaman. That was no small feat since we usually killed strangers in that tribe. But he was entertaining and didn't have any possessions that seemed worth killing him over."

"Jeez," I interrupted. "Real barbarians huh?"

In response she just gave me the oddest look, like she was looking through me. "I suppose so," she said. She sounded pretty noncommittal though. I could also tell she wanted me to shut up, so I did.

"Anyway," she continued, "He sang and told tales, and none of us had met anyone quite like him. He wasn't too rough in bed either, come to think of it. But afterward, while we talked idly, he asked my age and I couldn't tell him. So he taught me the basic skill of counting to ten, then to count tens: one ten, two tens, three tens, and so on. It was more an amusement than anything else for him, but I picked it up pretty quickly. He probably doubled my sale value in the years to come, as I think of it."

That last part made me queasy, but I didn't say anything. She smiled ironically at me, like she could read my mind and was enjoying my discomfort a little. But she went on. "So he asked me again how old I was and I lied. I told him thirty-three because two hundred and thirty-three felt frighteningly wrong somehow. I wasn't sure why, but it did."

I thought about that. "I'm not sure I could count all the years I remember and I'm nowhere near that old."

"Yes, well I confess that there is a certain amount of guessing involved," she said, "but I've a fairly sharp memory and am fairly good at guessing the passage of time. There's no clock in this room but I can tell you that it's about 10:45 as we speak. Years sometimes seem blurry but I can usually count the springs. If I think on it, for example, I seem to recall reading that my favorite modern author, Samuel Clemens, passed on... oh, 83 Springs ago I believe." She sighed. "He's one I wish were still writing, even if his last days were so sad."

"83 huh?" I said. "How long ago did Shakespeare die?"

She gave me a dim look, one of her eyelids drooping like an evil eye, although she put a little grin behind it. "I'm not a circus pony, my friend."

"Sorry," I muttered and grinned back. She smiled bigger and moved on.

"Just take my word that I'm guessing, but that I'm pretty good at this. I have had a long time with my memories, and plentiful opportunities to double-check myself. In any case," she went on, "that was one small incident I remember being different. I seem to recall that I learned a bit about guile the first time I became a shaman's woman exclusively. But for the longest time I merely existed, drew as little attention to myself as possible and that was all."

She stopped and just looked at me. I gathered that she was ready for another question but wasn't sure what to ask. Finally I remembered something.

"You told me once that there was a child who helped you decide you were something more than property or whatever. What was the story there?"

“Oh,” she said, starting. “Attuz,” she sighed, “and his father.” She smiled, wistfully. Out of nowhere she suddenly looked almost tender. “I suppose I could tell you about them. He was my first husband, my first true husband, and I still think of him that way. It would be something of a long story though.”

I smiled. “I’d guess you’ve got a lot of those. But it’s what I’m here for, right?” I asked.

“Very well,” she said, and took a deep breath.

## Chapter 13

*Circa 1100 B.C.*

The next few years were happy ones, deliriously so. When I use that word, part of me acknowledges that it was a delirium in some ways, for there was also a madness to what I was doing that I did not wish to acknowledge.

Still, I had never felt so alive, so free, or so accepted. Just belonging to him made me respected by most of the women, well-liked by most of the men, accepted almost everywhere I went and treated as an equal by most. It was intoxicating. His children were also wonderful and I took to helping him with them like a duck to water.

Hunting was a constant thrill and pleasure. Although the men teased me at times when I would join their hunting groups, they always welcomed me. I learned as fast as the cleverest young boys among them, and even some of the girls started trying to take after me. All were impressed by how quickly I acquired skills that usually took young people several years to master. I learned so quickly in part because I possessed at least some of the basics of these skills before, having quietly watched others during my years as lowly *orjan* or outright slave. But I believe I also learned so well because I had learned patience in my 400 years, and because this new avocation was such a heady joy for me.

One frustration was that I never could manage to throw a spear quite as hard as the men, but my ever-gently-mocking husband Att had an immediate solution when I mentioned it. He made for me what we called a *darriz*, which was very similar to what is called an atlatl today: a spear-thrower. They are a bit tricky to master, but allow one to throw farther and harder than with the naked arm. Most of the men did not bother with them since hunting deer in deep forest rarely required one, but I found it invaluable and soon could out-throw many of the men who were too proud to use the *darriz*.

While I did not always join the men on their hunts, I was fully accepted when I did. Indeed, sometimes they were disappointed when I demurred to stay home with little Attuz and Herdhiz. But even when I stayed back with the children and other women I would still practice my weaponry, and even teach the younger children some of what I had learned with Att and the other men.

I learned best and had the greatest joy, however, when Att would take me with him on his solitary hunts. A few times we went off together for a week or more at a time, leaving the children with Att's sister. Those trips together were always the most delightful for me as he would teach me some of the tricks not everyone learned, of solitary tracking, of hiding your own tracks, and of mastering complete silence in the woods. He also helped me grow particularly adept with the sign language of his people, and we would sometimes hold suggestive and lurid conversations together while sitting in the pre-dawn, waiting for elusive game. He was something of a rutting beast; it was one of the many things I loved about him.

Often on those solitary hunts, especially during the mid-day when we tired of stalking real prey, we would make a game of tracking. He would hide in the woods, covering his tracks and leaving only hints for me. He knew I had mastered those skills on the day I not only caught him unawares, but



managed to attack him from behind, jumping upon him and pinning him to the ground before he sensed my presence. He yelped in startled surprise, then laughed, turned over, and pinned me as I opened for him. He was easily the best lover I had ever had, but that day in particular was one of our most splendid lovemaking sessions.

In later days, for sport, we would practice by having me hide in the woods, covering my own tracks. He would always find me, but as the season wore on, I became good enough at the game that I had to intentionally leave him at least one or two traces so he would not give up. After all, our unspoken agreement was that if he found me he got to ravish me, and that was no prize I wanted to deny him!

Still, for all our fun, Att sometimes needed to go out on his own. I respected that need and never minded. I knew it was not a rejection of my companionship, but rather a reaffirmation of his place in the village. He was not a farmer, could not seem to take that task seriously, so I knew he needed to prove his value to himself more than those around him. Besides, he was my husband, and I desperately loved him, the first man I could ever say such a thing about. I would do most anything to make him happy and was often content just to be near him. Moreover, his children, his sister, and the other villagers were a joy to be around and I basked in the acceptance and friendship I had found among them while Att was away. Indeed, I drank it in thirstily. I had never known such contentment.

I have progressed so many centuries since those days that I rarely think of them. Yet of all the memories of my first centuries, those burn brightest in my mind, and almost always bring a smile to my lips when I do think on them. He was my husband, my first true husband, and in many ways still my hero. He taught me so very much about life, about what I could be, about self-respect and self-worth, about confidence, about friendship. I was changed so much by that flickering instant in my long existence, it seems nearly miraculous.

During those brief, heady years, the only bad spots were those times, late at night, when I would awaken sweating, my pulse racing, unbidden thoughts echoing in my head, whispering: *this cannot last, this cannot go on. He is going to die, and you will not.* But I angrily pushed those thoughts away. I knew one day I would have to face them, but I refused to think dwell it. Joy had been denied me; misery and loneliness and self-loathing my constant companions for so long, I could not make myself face the truth. I knew I would have to make a choice one day, but I refused to ponder it, instead holding it at arm's length, desperate to somehow escape the inevitable.

As it turned out, the choice was made for me.

I had but four years of happiness there, only four years of belonging to Att and his people. It was little more than the space between two heartbeats, but one fact I have known from the very beginning: all things end.

It was spring again, the beginning of my fifth year with these people. I was baking bread with Att's sister and two other women late one day. We would make many flat loaves at one time, sufficient to serve us for a many days. Winter had been hard, and another earthquake had frightened us all recently. But the hunting had been a little better, enough to keep starvation away, and now we had bread again and the weather was fairer. We all hoped this year would be better than the last, and we would joke that it could hardly be any worse.

I stepped out of the hut where we had our ovens. The scent of fresh bread was like flowers on the air, sweet and promising. But then there was a commotion to the south, first just a hint of noise, then cries of alarm, then screaming.

They thundered into the village, men on horses, clad in dark leather and bronze, wielding lances and blades and great hammers, laying about them at all they encountered. I had seen war before, had seen slaughter, but this... who were they? I stood transfixed, staring as they swept closer, until one of the women peeked out from the hut and shrieked to her children to run and hide.

I found myself running, desperate to find Att and the children, my hands aching for my sling or a spear, anything I could use to fight. They moved up the hill, slowly now, more methodical as the men in the village began to fight, lunging at the riders with whatever was at hand. I saw a rider go down, swarmed by farmers with shovels and forks, and then heard an ululating scream—Att! I turned towards the sound in time to see a rider wheel about a corner and bear down on me, raising a giant hammer for a looping swing. I ducked low and scraped up a handful of dirt, tossing it at his face as I slipped inside his swing, nearly getting caught under his mount. He cursed and spat, rubbing at his face as he furiously heeled his horse, turning to come at me again.

Lunging forward I dashed behind a hut, then along the wall until I reached my own dwelling where our spears were laid up against the outside. Desperately wishing for my *darriz*, I seized up the largest spear I could reach and turned as the rider again swept around the corner of the row of huts, casting about, looking for me.

“Red! No!” Att screamed as I stepped away from the wall and set myself to throw. The rider spied me, laughed as he wheeled his horse and lunged towards me, his hammer high as he prepared to swing down on me, while his left hand clutched the reins, presenting his small shield against what he obviously thought was the very small danger of my throwing the spear. He did not see a woman as a real threat.

The man died when I dropped to one knee and planted the butt of my weapon firmly on the ground, guiding the point towards the right side of his belly and letting his own momentum impale him. The spear stuck in the ground and lifted him out of his saddle, turning him over. His head crashed to the ground, and I heard his skull and neck break as he died. I was buffeted aside as his horse shied past me, but I rolled to my feet and turned just in time to see another rider, and another hammer whistling towards my head. I turned and began to duck—but then I saw nothing more.

—

Consciousness was pain. My head ached, my side burned and thirst and hunger warred inside me for primacy. I was trapped beneath something and as I forced my eyes to open I understood that somebody was on top of me.

“Get off!” I gasped, but the person was not moving. I began to push, struggling out from underneath...them. The bodies had been gathered and tossed in a rude pile in the center of the village. The reek of blood, death and fire was overwhelming, and as I crawled free of the bodies I saw the smoldering ruin of the village, all the dwellings and outbuildings reduced to charred mounds.

It had all happened so fast, so unexpectedly, I could barely think. I was too weak to stand, and all I knew was that the well was nearby and I desperately needed water. My head ached horribly and my limbs protested, resisting the urge to move, but ever so slowly I managed to crawl to the well, pulling myself up so I was leaning against it. I rested there to gather my strength when I heard something off to my left.

“Utha?”

The voice startled me, even though it was so small and frightened. I turned towards it, too exhausted, and feeling too much pain to react strongly. But then joy flickered in me as I finally recognized him: Attuz. He was peering at me from behind a stone wall that backed on the forest above the village.

“Attuz!” I croaked, my tongue thick and dry, “Attuz... help me. Water...”

He came over the wall, wary, but eager to see anyone he knew still alive. He drew a bucket of water from the well for me and I drank greedily, the sweet taste of it coursing through me. The sickening ache in my belly began to subside. The effect was almost instantaneous. I could feel strength returning to my limbs, my thoughts clearing, although I suddenly felt hungry. I reached up to feel the aching wound at the back of my head and felt encrusted blood mixed in with my hair as I probed the tenderness.

“Attuz, is anyone else here? Is anyone alive?”

“No... Hild and Tokiz were with me up in the trees, but they went home just before... before...”

Hild and Tokiz were Attuz’s cousins. I managed to get to my feet and drew another bucket of water, using it to wash the blood and filth from my body and hair.

“Your father?” I finally asked, but my heart knew the likely answer. Attuz’s eight-year-old face turned solemn and he shrugged.

“I haven’t seen him,” he said, sounding lost and frightened. “What are we going to do?”

“We can’t stay here. They may come back through. We’ll see if we can find anything useful, then we go. That way,” I pointed south into the wilderness. Attuz looked uncertain at the thought, but he nodded. Together we started searching through the ravaged village, gathering together anything useful that we could carry, mostly tools and knives. The riders had stolen almost everything of value, but useful scraps and overlooked items were still to be found.

While he was off scouring one of the burnt-out barns, I went to the pile of bodies and started searching for Att. Finally I found him, his body battered and bloody with wounds on his arms and through his chest. He had died fighting.

I dragged him free of the pile and straightened his limbs, then paused to stare at his face. As I closed his wide, staring eyes, I felt something very small, like the collarbone of a tiny bird, snap inside me.

Then I felt nothing.

I started picking through the other bodies looking for salvageable clothing or tools. I found Herdiz, her young face almost peaceful despite the pallor of death upon her. Her neck was broken and I straightened her head as I laid her beside her father. I continued my searching, but there was very, very little. I collected anything leather or metal. I could sort through it later. I had just finished piling it all together when Attuz returned to the well.

“Look what I found!” he exclaimed, holding high two loaves of the bread I had helped to bake that now felt like an age ago. “There’s more in the bag, too. Some of it was burnt, but most of it was sitting on the sill outside the...” He stopped when he saw his father and sister stretched out on the ground. After a moment he set down the things he had found and walked over to where the bodies lay, falling to his knees. I took to wrapping up the things we would take with us, forcing myself to ignore the rumbling in my belly as the scent of the bread reached me, trying hard to feel something, anything, as I listened to the boy quietly weeping.

When I was ready I stepped up behind him, standing over Att’s body. I reached down and took his hand, drawing him to his feet. We stood together, regarding his father and sister.

Attuz looked up at me, his face passive, and then he stared away into the sky. I squeezed his hand and looked down at the body of his father.

We stood silently for a bit longer. Then I let go of Attuz’s hand, pulled out my knife and reached up to my scalp. Roughly, wincing a bit at the pain still in my skull, I severed my braid. Bending down, I put it into Att’s lifeless hand, closing his fingers about it, then straightened back up.

“Good bye, Att,” I said.

“It isn't fair,” the boy said, his voice breaking.

“No. It isn't fair,” I said. I took his hand again and shook it a little. He looked up at me. “It is never fair, Attuz,” I said, looking into his eyes. “Never.” I felt almost nothing, but it seemed important that he understand this.

He nodded. We stood silently contemplating for one last moment, then I handed him the sack full of bread he had found and took up my pack.

Together we walked south into the forest. We never looked back.

## Chapter 14

*Ann Arbor, December 2004 CE*

“You’re right, it is a nice city,” she said, as I pulled us into the parking structure a block or so from the restaurant. Yeah, downtown Ann Arbor was beautiful, especially since it was Christmastime. The city had put up soft white lights to decorate its many trees, which added a nice ambiance to the late dusk. We’d been working a lot on the book project, and it was nice to get out and relax a bit.

When we left the car she stuck her left hand, which was wrapped in a brace that looked almost like a cast, into her jacket pocket. The hand had grown significantly, but it was still very thin and weak. As I walked around the back of the car I saw her dither a bit, thinking about leaving her walking stick in the car. Finally she sighed and leaned on it as she closed the door.

We walked down the street to the restaurant I’d chosen, a micro-brewery called the Maple Tree Inn. As we got near it, I noticed a willowy blonde in leather walking down the street toward us. She glided past and I noticed she was sporting a streak of green in her hair as well as several ear piercings. I turned my head back to watch where we were going and I noticed Zsallia looking at me. She chuckled softly.

“Pretty, isn’t she?” she asked.

“Yeah, I suppose. She’s a little young for me and I don’t know how I feel about all the earrings. I kinda like the hair though.”

“Do you know what makes a woman beautiful?” she asked, as I opened the restaurant door for her.

“I must admit I don’t,” I said.

“I can tell you,” she replied.

I told the waiter there were only two of us and asked for the smoking section. I knew she liked to be a little old-fashioned, so I took her coat and held her seat for her. As she gracefully settled into her chair she pulled out one of her Camels, briskly snapping her Zippo to flare it ablaze, then went on with the conversation.

“Beauty is partly decided by your tribal values, your upbringing. But it’s mostly not,” she said. Then she quickly glanced at her menu and, before the waiter could get back, told me she would like a 20-ounce porterhouse, rare, with rice, a large Greek salad with extra cheese and a bottle of the house Burgundy. I was a bit confused at first, because she just sat there after that, smoking and looking

around the bar. Then I got it and laughed a little as she winked at me. When the waiter arrived I ordered for her and ordered a beer and a burger for myself.

“Okay, what makes a woman beautiful?” I asked.

“Different times, different places, men may like women thinner or fatter, taller or shorter, more or less hair, and so on,” she said. “Individual men also have their personal preferences. But these are all minor. A man may find a woman desirable even if she looks nothing like his fantasies.”

“Okay, so what is it?”

“Honestly, it’s only a few basic things. Youth is helpful—you men are all looking to make us pregnant, whether you realize it or not. It’s instinctive, not intellectual, so even if you are certain you don’t want kids, that primal urge still informs your lust to a degree. But that isn’t everything.”

“Okay, I’m with you so far. What else?”

“Clear skin is important and anything else that conveys basic healthiness. Symmetrical features help. Makeup helps us highlight that or conceal shortcomings. It can also help us attract attention. If we look different, we’re more likely to catch your notice. Other than that, it’s almost all a matter of attitude, how a woman carries and comports herself.

“Some men are attracted to vulnerability, to damsels in distress. Some prefer quiet and demur. Some prefer tomboyishness. Some like women domineering. If you manage to throw in a little of all of that, you’ll drive most men wild. But most of the time, what men most like to see is a certain kind of feminine confidence.”

“Is that it?” I asked. “What about blonde hair, or fair skin?”

“Hair is a matter of taste, just so long as it looks healthy. As for skin, some men don’t care for fair skin at all. Clear skin without blemishes is what’s most important. But those of us who have fair skin do have one advantage. It’s a minor thing, but it is helpful. Do you want to see?”

“Come on, you know I do.”

She slowly unbuttoned the top buttons on her blouse and spread her collar, showing me a bit more of her cleavage. I laughed. “Boobs is boobs, honey,” I said.

“Wait,” she replied.

She closed her eyes, arched her back a bit and exhaled. She opened her eyes and looked at me, and as she did, her cheeks and her chest flushed pink. She plumped her lips at me, turned her head, dropped her shoulder a little, and grabbed me with her eyes.

I started a little and said, “Whoa, don’t do that!”

She laughed and deftly lit herself another cigarette. “You’re such suckers. Anyway, when a woman is sexually excited, she tends to flush a little in her face and chest, and it’s more noticeable in fair-skinned women. If she blushes while she’s looking at you, she probably wants you and that tends to excite you as well. Neither of you may be aware of that, or maybe you are, but either way, most

men find it sexually stimulating when they see it. The same thing happens when a woman's pupils dilate, by the way. It excites you."

"Seems kind of clinical, physiological," I said.

"Aren't smiles and laughs physiological?" I had to nod at that. "It's simply all part of the game," she said. "I'm a vain woman at heart and I know it. You can safely say I'm relatively pretty by today's standards. Then again, I'm not one of those tall skinny women on magazine covers, and am clearly not every man's type. No woman is. Some men would find me very attractive, others maybe only a little. Yet I can make almost any man want me." She paused and looked at me sideways. "Do you like smallish redheads, by the way?" She smiled seductively.

"Hey, you know I'm married."

"Oh, you're no fun," she said, flicking her fingers at me. "But honestly, aside from clean healthy skin and fairly symmetrical features, almost everything else is how you carry yourself and how well you do courtship dancing without seeming desperate."

"Courtship dancing?"

"There are a handful of postures and hand and foot gestures that all women use; men too for that matter, although some of theirs are different. But some are found everywhere, in all societies." I looked at her skeptically. "Well, every single tribe or culture I've been in or read of, anyway," she said. "Very simple things. For example, a woman who's interested in you will always show you the palm of one or both her hands. Usually both."

"You're kidding," I said. "I've never seen that."

She laughed. "Yes you have. I've never even met your wife and I know she did it to you. Unless it was an arranged marriage?" I shook my head. "Well then, she may or may not have been aware what she was doing, but she did it. You likely did it to her too." She looked up as the food arrived. "Maybe I'll show you later," she said. I remained skeptical.

As the food arrived, she picked up her knife and looked a bit dismayed. Coming to my senses, I offered to cut her steak for her.

"Thank you," she said. "Having you help feed me would be a perfect start to seducing you, if that's what I wanted," she added.

"Yeah, yeah, shut up and eat. Why are you so obsessed with sex, anyway?"

"What better thing to obsess about?" she said, with a grin. "Besides, it's one of the basic things I share with you people, not to mention it's helped me into and out of more than one situation."

I laughed. "It must be a lot of work, being a woman. Having to work so hard to get attention, play games like that."

"Well, I quite enjoy it, but I confess I didn't used to and some women don't. For a long time I thought men had it better. But the more time went on, the more I realized that there's no real truth to that notion. You're a little less self-conscious than we are, but you have to work as hard as or

harder than we do, especially in the modern world. Your bag of tricks just has to be different—and it's often more harsh, and you're less quickly forgiven if you step over a line."

I thought about that and we grew silent for a bit as we ate. It was funny to watch her eat that steak. I'd never seen anyone with such impeccable manners eat so quickly. She daintily but swiftly polished the whole thing off in just a few minutes, drinking generous amounts of wine between bites, then started to work on the salad. "I'm not normally such a wine drinker," she said when she noticed me looking at her, "but I've had such a craving for it this last month."

"Must be something in the healing process," I said.

"No doubt," she replied.

When the waitress approached again, Zsalli ordered coffee and dessert: a hot fudge sundae *and* cheesecake with strawberries and whipped cream *and* a slab of Black Forest Chocolate Cake. The waitress was nearly cross-eyed when she turned to me, but I just ordered coffee.

"Man, I'm glad you're paying," I said. "So, you're going back to Pennsylvania for the holidays?" I asked as she polished off the last of the wine. Christmas was only a few days away.

"Yes. I have a flight the day after tomorrow. I just need to get the flipper into a cast." She lifted her left arm and grinned at me as I tried not to laugh. "The fingers are solid enough to pass, but still too weak. With a cast I should be good for the week I'll be there."

"Why Pennsylvania, anyhow?"

"I have people out there. Family, for lack of a better term."

"Oh, right, you mentioned that before. Who are they?" I asked.

A brief look of discomfort passed through her face. It was momentary, but unmistakable. Then she gave a diffident shrug.

"I married a man from Pennsylvania, lived there until 1852. They are his family," she said.

The waitress interrupted us, bringing our coffee, and then returned a moment later with the first of Zsallia's desserts. She made happy sounds and ate a little noisily, offering to share with me. I begged off while she talked about how good it was. This went on for a few minutes, her eating, me wanting to ask questions but keeping my mouth shut. She was obviously changing the subject again, but we were having a nice time so I dropped it. When she was finally done, she said, "It's been a productive week, and a nice evening, but I imagine you'll want to get home to your family, yes?"

"Yeah," I nodded. She dropped a wad of cash on the table as I got her coat and we left.

Outside, the temperature had taken a plunge and the wind had picked up. I steered us towards a side alley that would lead us straight back to the parking structure. It wasn't a narrow or very dark passage, and I'd used it many times without thinking anything of it since it was my favorite restaurant and I'd been here often. But as we started towards the far end three men entered from the other side. I glanced at them and shook my head. For all Ann Arbor's charms it had more than its share of scruffy anarchists and drug addicts, and these three were pretty typical: young, shabby green jackets



held together with duct tape, unshaven and generally looking like flies would be buzzing around them if it weren't so cold. I grinned, thinking it was good we had the breeze at our back.

As they approached I naturally guided us to the right to pass them, but suddenly they spread out in front of us. I tensed a bit, trying to stay calm, see what they wanted. "Hey, dude..." I started. But that was as far as I got.

Without so much as a sound, Zsallia lashed out with her right foot, kicking the one on the right in the knee as she swung the heavy end of her cane hard against the jaw of the one in the center. The kid with the smashed knee grunted and fell back, while the other one hit the ground like a sack full of batteries. As her cane clattered to the ground, in one smooth move she pushed me back with her shoulder, hopped once, then seemingly out of nowhere pulled out a pistol and leveled it at the last guy standing, who was only just reacting. His eyes crossed as she moved forward, favoring her left leg, and pressed the barrel of the big snub-nosed revolver against his forehead. Her thumb very deliberately drew the hammer back until it clicked.

She swore softly and said something I didn't understand. Then, her voice radiating command: "If you would be so kind as to get on your knees. Now!"

It wasn't until then that I saw the knife in his hand, and noticed that the kid on the ground spitting blood and teeth had a chain in his hand. The other was holding his knee and moaning; it looked like she'd bent it sideways, hyper-extending and maybe breaking it. The kid with the gun to his forehead dropped the knife and slowly kneeled.

It had all happened in no more than five seconds. My heart was pounding, but she wasn't even breathing hard.

"Any of you makes a move, I turn his head into a canoe," she said, her voice grating but steady. "Lie down, little man," she told knife-boy, who was shaking, his eyes big as saucers. As he lay down, I noticed she'd put a red dent from the barrel of the gun into his forehead.

"Could you fetch my cane, please?" she asked, her voice friendly but without taking her eyes off the three of them. I snatched it up and looked behind us. People were walking back and forth across the entrance of the alleyway. All it would take would be for one of them to look our way.

"We need to go, now," I said as I stepped up beside her. She was so small but at that moment, she seemed enormous. She neatly tucked the gun in her coat pocket, kicked the kid on the ground in the side of the head, and then cursed loudly, in an almost bloodcurdling yowl. People passing the alleyway behind were startled and looked in our direction, but she simply gripped my arm and deliberately strode toward the parking garage.

"They're lucky I didn't take their balls as souvenirs," she muttered, with a disturbingly matter-of-fact tone. Then, solicitously, almost motherly: "Are you all right?"

"Um, yeah," I said, my voice shaking just a little. I'd been in street scuffles before, but I'd never seen anything like that in my life. My head was reeling. "Wow," I said, "what the hell was that?" But she just flashed me a pretty smile as we emerged from the alleyway. I looked around nervously, but no one on this end of the alley had seen anything. Suddenly, it was like we'd stepped into another reality and nothing had happened at all.

“Turn his head into a canoe?” I asked.

“*Tombstone*. I always did like that movie,” she said. “You have to understand, if there is one thing I do not tolerate, it is bottom-feeders.”

We reached the car and made a quick exit, turning west as the sound of sirens approached. I wasn't too concerned about the police so long as we were gone, but...

“Where'd you get the gun?”

“I know people,” she replied, and refused to say more about it.

We drove silently for a while. She turned on the radio, humming a bit as she listened to some old rock and roll. I pulled into the hotel lot and parked towards the back.

“May I?” I asked.

“What? The gun?” She seemed surprised, but took it from her pocket, checked the chamber and handed it to me. It was heavy, a snub-nose Ruger .357 with a smallish handle. I checked the loads and nearly got sick.

“Magnum hollow-points? Are you insane? If it doesn't break your arm it'll make you deaf?”

“Well, I prefer my Army .45, but an automatic is tough to manage one-handed. This came highly recommended.”

“Yeah, I'm sure.”

She stowed the pistol in a holster behind her back. I was a bit surprised that it was so well concealed. She let me walk her back to her suite and gave me a peck on the cheek at her door as we parted company.

“Merry Christmas to you and your family,” she said.

I didn't see her again until after New Year's.

## Chapter 15

*Circa 1100 BCE*

“I don’t understand why we’re following them.”

“Because we can’t stay out here on our own forever.”

Attuz looked at me with doubt, but at eleven years old he was not about to challenge me on this. Another couple of years down the line, maybe, but not now. In the three winters since our village had been attacked we had been living off the land, avoiding contact with others, and doing rather well. Still, we had to find a place to settle down. Indeed, I had been a little selfish and I knew it. We had seen no sign of the riders in more than a year, and I had been avoiding doing what I knew I needed to do.

We chose to camp a good distance from where I expected the hunters to stop, conveniently downwind from the site. I left Attuz with the job of setting up while I set out again to make certain they were headed where I expected.

I had seen these hunters a few times since we had migrated closer to the coast in the spring. They were organized and disciplined and seemed relaxed. Most important to me, they bore no resemblance to the riders who had massacred Att’s people and deprived us of our home. This time rather than giving them a wide berth I was trailing them, at a good distance of course. They followed familiar trails, seeking deer, only this time rather than the normal four there were seven—a fifth man, really not much more than a boy, and two women. I had seen this before: when they were after larger game women often joined them, and not just as porters. They would act as beaters, flushing game, and were often in the thick of the kill.

Once I was certain of their destination, I circled around moving fast to get well ahead of them. The game trail was clear to see and I sought out a spot with the proper ground, finding a wide stretch of softer loam. At a leisurely and deliberate pace I strolled across it, leaving clear tracks in my wake. This was nothing more than my way of letting them know somebody was there.

I took up a position some distance back from that spot and waited for them to pass. The boy was in the lead and he did himself proud, stopping several paces ahead of my little sign and signaling the others. They let him look it over and I could see them asking him questions. He gestured off in the direction I had come from, then off to the north. They made some comments and the boy set off north to follow my path. I thought I had done a decent job of covering my tracks once I was in the deep brush, but I could hear him coming closer after some time. I softly crept backwards, careful to bend and break as little as possible as I did so. Then he cut back over to the trail and rejoined his companions.

“She circled around behind us, I think,” I heard him say. She?

“She?” one asked.

“She.” He replied with conviction. “She really knows how to cover her tracks, has to be an adult.”

“So, where is she?” the tallest of the men asked. I liked their manner: cautiously concerned, but not tense or angry, just probing to see how much he had observed.

“Nearby, I’d think. Maybe watching us now. Those tracks were left on purpose. She wanted us to know she’s been here.”

“How can you be sure?” one of the women asked.

“Because it was hard to follow her when she didn’t want me to.” He pointed to the tracks in the soil. “She wanted these to be seen.”

I considered revealing myself. They seemed a normal enough group, and I was encouraged to know they sometimes included women in their hunting. Still, Attuz was back at our camp, and I had been gone most of the day. Normally this was not a problem—I had left him alone for a day or more at a time before. But with the hunting party near and his concern about that, I felt it better to let him know what was happening.

I circled wide again and got ahead of them, then sprinted along until I reached their most likely campsite. From a low-hanging tree branch I hung a clutch of rabbits I had collected through the day, just another sign of good intentions. Then I made my way back across the hills to our camp.

“I think this will work out well,” I told Attuz after describing the day’s doings. He glowered at me but said nothing. “They look like good people.”

“We don’t need them!” he spat, then turned to the low, covered fire, turning the rabbit that was our dinner, his back to me. I could see the tension in his shoulders, and I moved in behind him, sliding my arms around his chest, drawing him close.

“It will be okay. I promise,” I whispered. “They’re going to be impressed by you, you know.”

He straightened a little then, and I turned him to face me, my hand settling on the necklace of bear claws that adorned his neck. “How many boys do you think have killed a bear at your age, hmm? They’ll see you and they’ll think ‘My, what a brave young man!’ and they’ll decide you should be hunting with them.”

“They’ll like you, too,” he said, turning his face up to grin at me. I laughed.

“I’m certain they will.”

Of course, that was more hope than certainty. But I felt good about these people.

We were up as the sky was turning gray with the dawn. After a quick meal of berries and mushrooms we struck our simple camp and prepared to head out to make the acquaintance of the hunting party. As we set out over the ridge I turned to look down into the valley behind us. The sun was just peaking up over the ridge, shining down on the light mist that had settled in the night, bringing the green of the canopy into high relief. It was as if I could see the whole forest coming to life beneath us, and for the first time in many, many mornings I found myself admiring the simple beauty of it. Hope has a way of making people see things in a brighter light. I knew I was doing the right thing.

I let Attuz lead as we made our way quietly, parallel to the game trail. He had good eyes, but I was watching for more than just a hunting opportunity. It would be a poor introduction to stumble into the other party by accident. I was so focused on that that I was startled when he hissed quietly at me.

*Down!* he gestured silently with his hand, his back and knees bending, looking over the crest of the latest hill.

I squatted and slid silently up beside him to see what had his attention, there to the south.

*What do you think?* he gestured silently with his left hand.

There they were, a small buck and a doe. It was a little odd that there were only the two of them, and they seemed a little more skittish than usual. Perhaps the other tribe had already been about and had scattered them? Regardless, we were in an excellent position and neither appeared to be injured.

“I think the buck would make a nice present to our new family,” I breathed almost wordlessly into his ear. I looked up, judging the light breeze, then motioned Attuz off to the south.

I gestured: *Down by that log. Flush them from there. Take your time.*

*Right,* he gestured. We quietly stripped off everything but our loincloths while calmly watching the two deer ahead. He glanced at me in that way he had been beginning to lately whenever we did this, and I smiled grimly to myself, knowing I was right that our time together was drawing short. I silently drew my long knife from its bag and handed it to him, then watched as he slipped carefully off to the south, down the slope and out of sight.

They were calming as I watched, the fluttering of ears and tails settling as they began to graze furtively. I set out my gear and chose the sturdier of my two spears along with my short blade, then began inching around to the north and east, creeping just a pace every ten heartbeats, watching the prey intently for any signs they might be aware of us.

It was a painstakingly slow process to set up something like this and the reward was by no means certain. Anything might spook the prey: we could do everything right and still have naught to show for a half-day's stalking but cramped muscles. When Attuz flushed them they would probably take a bounce or two directly away from him, then turn. If we were lucky, one would turn towards me. If not, we would watch their hindquarters disappear into the brush. It would have been better to be down the slope rather than above them, but we took what fate handed us and made the best of it.

Motion caught my eye and I froze. Down the slope, past the prey, cross-downwind and nearly opposite from me, a man was creeping slowly along, much as was I. We were stalking the same animals. I looked towards where Attuz should be, but he was still concealed. Checking the two animals and their positions, I decided I should take a chance. I lifted myself up a bit, swaying my head rhythmically back and forth, back and forth, then ducking, hoping the hunter had seen the motion of my red hair. I saw him freeze. Our eyes met. I lifted my spear in my right hand, and then showed him the palm of my left. He did the same. I gestured off towards where Attuz should be and saw his gaze travel in that direction, then lock for a moment before returning to me. He understood.

I watched him melt into the ground as he began moving south again while I continued around opposite. One of us should have luck with this.

The sun had made some progress across the sky when I finally reached my spot. I saw nothing of the other man, but had to assume he was set up across from me. If others of his party were near, as they should be, they might be opposite from Attuz, but they had to be a fair way off or their scent would be picked up. We had approached the game with the same tactic, just from opposite directions.

Now it all hinged on the boy.

Attuz exploded from the brush with a scream, charging at the deer with his arms flailing. Both of them leapt straight up and charged hard away—one bounce, then two, and the doe turned south while the buck turned north, almost straight at me. Thrilled at my luck, I rolled but once to my right, staying low, then planted the butt of the spear firmly, bracing it with my foot and lifting the point just as the terrified buck crashed out of the brush and leapt again. He screamed as the head of the spear sank into his soft underbelly, the shaft shuddering under the impact.

I dove to my left as the animal collapsed over the spear, snapping it, then began kicking and thrashing as it whistled with pain and fear. Rolling to my feet, I danced around the struggling beast until I could seize him by an antler and straddle him, then twisted his head around to expose his throat. My knife sank into his neck and I drew it sharply upward, blood spraying as the artery in the neck was severed. I held him, keeping my place until the kicking stopped, then let his head fall to the ground as he gasped his last.

Attuz was still running up the hill towards me, but he stopped when he heard me shriek and ululate, then jumped and yelled in delight. We both shrieked together as he skipped to me, his hands jubilantly clenched in the air, and he joined me in celebration even as similar victory was given voice further down the slope. Attuz was clearly surprised and a bit fearful, at least to my eye, but he beautifully feigned cool dignity as a woman and two men emerged from the brush below him and approached us.

I wiped sweat, blood, and perhaps a bit more from my eyes as we strode forth to greet them.