

Chapter 1

I awoke in the Enchanter's shelter. Though I had never been in it before, that was the only place it could be. His things of power were all around adding fear to my other problems. My head hurt and moving made me feel dizzy. The leather walls were a blackish grey where I could see them, more smoky than ours at home. I could not see the Enchanter but could hear him changing the cold stones in his cookbag for hot ones from the fire. With the drawstrings open I could smell his stew. It was probably good-smelling food but it made my stomach move uncomfortably and then begin to hurt, threatening to vomit. Closing my eyes only made it worse.

It made no sense. A scrawny little girl like me, perhaps nine or ten years old, would not be in the Enchanter's shelter. Nobody was allowed into it and all of us children were too afraid to go near it even. He played with us sometimes, but we were always wary of him. His idea of play was tricks and practical jokes. They were fun sometimes and we giggled and ran in circles round him. But at other times his jokes were unkind and we shunned him. Looking back I find it easy to see that he was testing us. He had no apprentice and I don't doubt that he felt old age coming up on him. His knowledge would be lost if he found no apprentice.

It would not be a disaster for our group if he died with nobody to take over, because we could get an enchanter from another group. Some groups had too many, which always led to factions and even to the group splitting up. But an enchanter from another group would have her (or his) own ways. However good she was, people would want the cures they were used to. The men especially would resent different hunting magic. Even if the new enchanter were powerful with the weather - ours was not good in that respect, he would be the first to say so - it would not make up for being new and different.

So I see now that the tricks he played on us were to see how we reacted, whether we were suitable apprentice material. But we found him difficult even on the occasions when we were not actually afraid of him.

Something had happened that I did not want to think about. To keep back the memory I looked hard at the Enchanter's things. But then he saw that I was awake.

"You can call me Ikaseraz. It's not my name of course. What's yours?"

I was really surprised that he had to ask. I thought everyone in the group knew everyone's names, not their real names but what they were called.

"Kizkur"

"I know your real name. Your parents and I named you in the cave when you were born and it seemed that you would live. Kizkur, will you be my apprentice?"

Fear was the first thing I felt at the thought of having to be with him all the time. Then came a surge of joy such as I had rarely felt. Nobody had ever shown any trust in my abilities before. They were right too, I was no good at anything much, except making dyes and paints, and even at that I often made a mess.

"Yes, oh yes."

I turned a bit dizzy again, but he didn't take any notice.

"It is not an easy job. Dangerous too, you have heard of the dangers involved?"

"People say that when you enter the spirits' world they may attack you. Or that they may keep you there so that you can never return to this world."

"That is true, though there are other dangers too. Are you willing to face them?"

I said "Yes" of course, but only with a child's understanding. With an adult's clearer view of death and mental horrors, now I would still say "Yes".

"Rest now" he said "I'm busy."

"But, is my brother alright?"

"Of course he is. He hadn't gone far, he soon showed up again."

When I next woke I was alone. Though I could have got up I just lay there. The excitement of becoming the Enchanter's apprentice had passed.

"I must learn to think of him as 'Ikaseraz'" I thought. But it was a trivial something to think of to try to force the bad memories from my mind. It didn't work. I thought I saw how I came to be in Ikaseraz's shelter. He must have rescued me from them.

Father had gone with the men, I don't know what they were doing. Then some of the women came to our shelter and told Mother that they were going gathering berries and nuts down by the river. We were short of them and the season was ending so Mother had to go with them to get some for us. All the women agreed that I was quite old enough to look after my brother, who can walk well now, and the baby. Mother fussed at me that I mustn't let the baby crawl into the fire. I reassured her that I wouldn't, though thinking to myself that the baby had much more sense than to do any such thing.

There was enough to do with changing the stones in the cookbag and thinking that we would soon have to make a new one, Mother had repaired it more than once; and reciting rhymes with my brother and telling him odd bits of stories while he played.

But my mind was set on making a purple body paint. I wanted a good rich purple, not the washed out looking one I had. The big gathering at the Hall of the Bulls was not until the mid-summer solstice, but all the groups around here would be there then and I wanted to show off in a new body painting. I wanted a tattoo really but would not be allowed that until I was older. The winter solstice would come before then, but we only celebrated that here at Gabillou. Nobody travels in the winter.

The purple paint meant starting with a dye and modifying it later. That was a good thing anyway, some of the family's clothes were getting faded and we would have to re-dye before long. If I could get a really strong one we could perhaps use it on leather, fur and feathers as well as fibres. Some previous attempts I'd made at purple had only been half successful, the dyes were perfectly good but not that special colour I had in mind. I remember pounding up the dried lichens and bark in the pestle and mortar and heating up some water for later, but then things went all wrong. I'm so afraid that I may be going mad. The next thing that I can remember was trying to climb a mountain. How could I have got there? There are no mountains near here, and why would I be climbing one by myself? It wasn't a dream because I know for certain that I wasn't asleep. But I know too that it is mad people who hallucinate and don't want to think about that.

But what came next was even worse. I was in our shelter again but Mother was hitting me and shouting

"Where is he? Where is he? What have you done with him?"

Several of the other women were there too and they began shrieking and hitting me too. My brother wasn't there and I should have been watching him. Then some of the men arrived and they started hitting me. I do remember falling but the next thing was waking in Ikaseraz's shelter.



When Ikaseraz came back he knew I was confused but he started to press me persistently to tell him what I had seen.

"My brother wasn't in the shelter and Mother thought the baby would crawl into the fire."

"Of course she wouldn't - what nonsense - but what did you see?"

It came to me then that he meant the mountain.

"A mountain. I wasn't dreaming, am I mad?"

"No, no, no. If you're to be my apprentice you must recognise the spirit-world when you see it."

"It was a spirit-mountain?"

"Alright have a rest. Let's hope you're quicker on the uptake tomorrow."

"Won't Mother and Father have me home tonight?"

"They would but they're not going to. You live in my shelter now."

Perhaps I was too exhausted to be shocked at the sudden change in my life, I just slept.

The next day I was more alert, I felt it anyway, though Ikaseraz seemed unimpressed. He said I must tell him about the mountain before I forgot, if I hadn't already.

"It was very high and cold."

"What shape was it?"

"The shape that you always draw a mountain." I drew a triangle in the air.

"Go on what happened?"

"It was very hard, steep, and I was panting out great steamy breaths. And it got steeper and harder the higher I managed to get. I didn't know why I was climbing up it, but I knew I had to. Then I saw a nest on the top, a big nest made of sticks and that was what I was trying to reach. A bright light came from it, yellow and red like firelight. It looked hot and I thought that I must reach it to get warm, but most of all I wanted to see what was in it. But though I tried and tried I couldn't reach it. But I was so frightened then because a huge wolverine was there suddenly, and it knew I wanted to see into the nest. But it didn't want me to and went for me with its teeth. I jumped back but it came after me and I could only get back down slowly with all the rocks in the way. Then I was back in our shelter and everyone was shouting at me. They were all hitting me, did you rescue me?"

"In a way. They all backed off when I arrived and I could see that they had knocked you unconscious. They hadn't intended that, of course, but some of the men were drunk and got over-excited by the women's shouting I think. It all got out of hand, they're sorry now and feeling rather abashed, specially when your brother appeared to see what all the noise was about."

"My parents must be furious with me."

"Oh, it will all blow over in a day or two. In a couple of days you can go and collect your things and bring them here. Your parents will be so curious about what you've been doing they will forget to be cross with you."

So it turned out. Only Mother was there when I went in at our door and she came over and hugged me.

"Oh Kizkur, nobody meant you to get hurt. We were just so worried."

I smiled and hugged her back. I couldn't think of anything to say.

"Come on. Let's have a hot drink while the kids are being quiet for once."

It would have been easy to slip into the familiar routine. This had been home for so long but now I had to go and live with Ikaseraz.

"Mother I don't want to leave you." I started crying.

She knew better than to tell me to stop, just stroked my hand and poured out two drinks for us. Then she sat beside me by the fire and put her arm round my shoulders.

"You don't have to do anything you don't want."

We sat in silence for a while until it passed.

"But I do want to be an enchanter."

"You'll be a good one Kizkur. I think it is probably the right thing for you."

"Because I'm no good at anything else?"

"Don't be silly. You would have become good at many things. Look what a good dyer you are. And you were always so strong, right from being a baby. You never cried, you know, like some do. You just took everything that came along and as soon as you could walk you wanted to run - oh, yes - strength, I want to give you something."

She went over to a pack and unrolled it then took out something small and closed her hand round it. She said

"It was my mother's. She gave it to me, for strength, when I left home to marry Father."

When she put it in my hand I drew a sharp breath. It was a bear's tooth with a cord through it, to wear round your neck. Mother gently pulled aside my hair and put it on for me. I was almost afraid, bear's teeth are known to be very powerful. Though I shivered as it touched me its strength made me feel warm all through. I smiled into Mother's eyes lost for words of thanks. She understood what it was doing to me, she must have felt the same when she wore it.

"Is Father still angry with me?"

She laughed. "No he's embarrassed. Do him good."

"Why?"

"He'd drunk more than he should have. He should have stopped them hitting you and he knows it."

"Oh." Father being embarrassed was something else new to get used to.

When my few things were collected up and packed I made to leave. Mother said

"You're not going far and if you're unhappy or frightened Father and I are just here to help you."

"Thank you."

"Of course we'll be expecting something in return. A magic spell to make all the dirty things clean again would do!"

"I'd like that too. The spirits must think cleaning is good for us."

When I got back to my new home it looked stranger than ever by comparison.

The objects of power seemed to be compelling my attention, but I was determined to unpack my things and set up my small area of the shelter. My sleeping-furs took up the bulk of my pack and with those out and my winter boots there was little enough left. I had left my few toys for my brother but Mother had insisted I start with a few ingredients for medicines, paints and dyes. My spare clothes I left in my main pack for storage. Deciding what to put in my waist-pouch was easy, just a small all purpose tool and some willow bark. That done I considered myself ready for my new life, and looked at Ikaseraz's compelling and powerful things.

The largest I had seen many times before. It was the mask Ikaseraz wore at all the rituals and leant against his power drum with the various pieces of antler and bone that he drummed with. The mask must have been a horse's skull at one time but was greatly modified. A pair of reindeer antlers had been attached at the top and the lower jaw was missing. The back of the skull had been removed and leather straps attached to the sides. You could see that the eye sockets had been enlarged, he could not have seen through them unaltered. They were surrounded by a beautifully made feather mask. Some of the feathers were easy to identify but others came from birds I had certainly never seen. The whole was incised and painted with patterns and signs which meant nothing to me in my ignorance. Though I wanted to look at everything there was a small black shiny object that kept calling for my attention. I gave in and picked it up. The feeling of its power passed all through me. It was like the feeling I had had from the bear's tooth but much more intense. I had no word for the feeling at that time, perhaps today I would say it was ecstasy. When I looked closely I could see that it was even more shiny than I had thought, it reflected my face. It was a carving of an animal I had never seen, but from what the older people said I knew it must be a woolly mammoth. The carving was amazingly skilful, but I could not think what it had been carved from, there was nothing shiny and black in my experience. My fingers had made smudge marks and I rubbed them off, I knew it must be perfect.

I was still gazing at it when Ikaseraz came in. Its pull on my mind that first time I saw it was so strong that I barely greeted him. He must have just sat and watched me I think because when I became aware again he was scrutinising me. That is disconcerting from anybody but doubly so from a fierce person like Ikaseraz. To pretend that I could take it calmly I studied him back. He looked old to me, but we all know what a child's perspective of age is like. He had a nose like a beak, very dark eyes and wrinkly brownish skin. His white beard was partially plaited with brightly coloured cords in it, and his white hair was all plaited and coiled on top of his head in the usual way. What passed between us during that scrutiny I was too young to judge.

"Do you know what drew you to that object?"

"No. It called me, I couldn't look at any other thing."

"Do you know what it is?"

"A woolly mammoth."

"There have not been any near here for a long time. When I was a child they were common, there were often big herds of them up on the moors. But as it got colder they moved away. Not enough for them to eat I would think."

"But the reindeer feed up there."

"Yes, while the reindeer can survive here so can we."

"We may not survive?"

"We'll survive, but perhaps not here."

"But our group have always lived near the cave."

"We have, but the future may be nothing like the past."

It was too much change for me.

"Don't get upset. I only said 'perhaps.' You have a bear's tooth for strength."

I put one hand to it and with the mammoth in the other felt better.

"What is this black stuff the mammoth is made of?"

"It's called obsidian. There's none near here. Very far to the east are sacred mountains where Earth Mother gives fire from herself and one of her gifts that comes with the fire is obsidian. I don't know who carved it, when we traded for it in my grandfather's time the trader did not know either. It was the biggest trade the group had ever made, but we were richer then, and the group was much bigger. Everything the group owns now would not be enough to buy it. Do you understand why it is so sacred an object?"

"Because it is part of Earth Mother's body."

"That's part of it. As well as that is the fact that all our prey animals are sent by Sky Father. The prey that is most sacred to Sky Father is the woolly mammoth. This piece of obsidian is Sky Father's worldly representation made from the body of Earth Mother and in combining the two means the actual source of life. This object means that our group will continue and that the animals and plants we need will continue. Do you understand me?"

"Only partly I think, but I feel it."

"That is even better."

I handed the carved mammoth to him and he murmured over it for a while before placing it back exactly where I had taken it from. He saw me watching and said

"You're right everything has its own correct place, but that is for another day. Before we sleep I want to go through your visit to spirit-world with you. We will only discuss the basic things at first, you have years of learning ahead of you, but it is best to learn about something you have experienced yourself first."

That the mountain and that wolverine were part of the spirit-world was still frightening me, but I did want to know about them.

"I will tell you what each part of your visit signifies and you must stop me and ask if there is anything which is not clear." I nodded that I would and felt that I must look into his eyes as he spoke.

"The mountain itself means life and your attempt to climb it, with all your difficulties doing that, represent the obstacles we all have to overcome going through life. There is a group further south of here which sees it as a tree because there are more trees down there, but no matter the idea is the same. The glowing nest at the top represents what you will strive for in life and you may not understand that until you are nearing the end of your life. I cannot help you with that, it is personal and only you will see that truly. But I can tell you with certainty what is in the nest, or what kind of thing it is. It is your spirit-guide. Your initiation into the group will be a spirit-quest during which you will find your spirit-guide who will help you for the rest of your life. Only enchanters need a spirit-guide so your initiation will be quite different from that of all others in the group. It will take place in the passageways behind the cave where only enchanters may go."

"But what was the huge wolverine? I don't want to see that again."



"You may or you may not. That is unknown. It is very important that you grasp this Kizkur. Only you have ever seen the wolverine and I cannot stress enough what this may mean to the group if I have interpreted correctly. I believe that the wolverine is an Ice Giant spirit. The Ice Giants want everywhere to be covered in ice because they thrive in the cold. We desperately need that the ice should go further north, we are dwindling in the cold. We need the warmth to bring back our food plants and prey animals. I believe that you, with the help of your spirit-guide, will find a way to defeat our enemies the Ice Giants and make the land warm again."

"I can't...you...I don't know anything."

He smiled. It was the first time I had ever seen that.

"Of course you don't. But I am going to tell you everything. That is my hope. I hope too that you are a quick learner, Kizkur. You can see that I am old and the spirit-world is beginning to call me."

"I promise to do my best."

"Good. You said that of your own accord so the spirits will hold you to it."

"Yes. I meant it."

"I know you did. But you will have to mean it down many years."

"Yes." I said in my complete inability to imagine the years of struggle, with the mental and physical exhaustion that would follow.

We held each others gaze for a while, and I knew, even then, that the course of my life was decided.

"I may be wrong that you are the one to rescue us from the cold, but there have been several signs and I don't think I am. Many generations ago, when we first came to this land, we were not the only ones here. The ice giants lived among us then. It would be better to say that we lived among them because they were here first. I have never seen one."

"You mean they are real people, they walk on the earth like us? I thought you meant they lived in the spirit-world."

"No, they are of this world. But different from us. They are bigger, you would guess that from their name."

"What do they call us?"

"I don't know."

"The sun dwarfs!"

He almost laughed.

"We have always thought that their hunting-magic must be very powerful. It is said that they can bring down adult mammoths. None of our hunters would think of it. Hunting parties that have gone a long way north have returned with stories of shelters made entirely of bones of the mammoth. They must have been built by the ice giants. Can you imagine killing so many mammoths that they had enough bones to build their shelters from them? I don't want to discourage you at the start but their spirit-wolverine must be really potent and there are probably other spirits helping them. The bear would be no help, it loves only plants, but imagine if they had a lion-spirit helping them."

"Why are there none of them here now?"

"They seem to shun warmth altogether, they have gone up north with the ice."

"So they look like us only bigger?"

"Not really. They say that their faces are ugly, with big, wide noses and prominent brows so they appear to be frowning. But as I said I have never seen one myself. It seems that they are not so much taller than we are but much more massive, more robust. Perhaps if one found their bones...no, no that could only spread unco."

"Spread what?"

"Unknown diseases, prey animals that refuse to die, blizzards at mid-summer."

"From their bones?"

"Yes, but you will never find out all there is to know about bones. No more this evening, there are practical things to sort out. Can you cook?"

I said "Yes" which was strictly true, my results were not often good, but they were cooked.

"Sew?"

"Untidily."

"What medicines can you make?"

I recited my simple remedies.

"That will be fine. We will get by for now. We will share the work as it comes up. I would tell you to do it to save my time for our work, but your learning is our priority now. But be warned, if I live I shall certainly get feeble with age and the work will fall on you."

To hear that he thought my learning was our important work made me feel so proud I wasn't bothered about having to do the chores. But then he said

"It will always be your job to collect our reindeer droppings and dry them for the fire. They will respect their Enchanter more if they do not see him doing that."

I did not like the implication that nobody respected me anyway so it did not matter, but it was true. To save my face a little I said

"I can make paints and dyes."

"So your mother is forever saying, you'll be some use then."

Even that soon I think I was beginning to see through his mocking tone.

"To sleep now. I have decided that tomorrow we shall go up and visit Vezeru and we shall start early."

Everyone knew that there was a figure of Vezeru at the source of the river, but I had never been. It was a long way.

Chapter 2

He woke me before dawn and it was very cold. Then he surprised me by giving me a hot drink before I had to leave my sleeping-furs, that warmed me enough that I could get into more clothes by the fire and try to think.

"What are we taking with us?"

"We'll have to have quite a big pack each. It's a long way and we'll be exposed to the wind up there so we must have an emergency shelter and more food than just today's. Your pack is a good strong one, but I'll take most of the weight. You've got thin little arms and legs, you'd better not carry much."

"I'm stronger than I look."

"Yes, I expect you are. And a bear's tooth to help you."

We had honey and seeds for breakfast, it was good and I felt more cheerful at once. My pack only contained some food, extra furs, tinder fungus and a piece of white quartz to give to Vezeru. I had seen Ikaseraz pack a hand axe or would have taken my rather smaller one. My dagger went into its holder on my belt.

The sun was coming up as we closed up our shelter and started off. The going was easy along the river and we were quite hot with walking and the sun getting higher. Where we stopped to eat there were even a few midges. But it got tougher after that. I found the climbing hard and Ikaseraz did too though he tried not to show it. It got colder as it got rockier and we stopped to rest and put more clothing on. I was glad of my lemming fur hood as the wind got stronger.

The figure of Vezeru startled me, I thought he was looking at me and could see what I was thinking. I quickly opened my pack and laid my quartz gift at his feet. Ikaseraz called me to him.

"Come and sit here a while. I need to rest before honouring Vezeru."

It was sheltered where he sat and the sun warmed us.

"How can I tell whether he accepted my offering?"

"This time next year you will not make that mistake. It is with not thinking things through. Vezeru is "she" not "he". Now tell me why you should have known."

He sat patiently and my first thoughts were of him. I thought that he was quite nice really and not the scary old man we children had thought him to be. Then I thought about his question and wondered if I knew much about the world at all.

"This is the source of the river, this river is called Vezer. So Vezeru is the origin of the river, this spring here. Mother Earth is giving us water from her body, so the spirit of the spring must belong to Mother Earth so she is a "she"."

"You said that well. Who told you about those things?"

"Father. He always said I was ignorant of the world and tried to make me learn."

"Good, I shall do the same."

A dragonfly flew up to us and looked at my face. Then it flew over and settled on Vezeru's foot and bobbed there a few times before flying up and looking into Vezeru's eyes. It flew off and we didn't see it again.

Ikaseraz wanted me to interpret the incident but it was beyond me. He didn't seem displeased to have

to explain it himself.

"The dragonfly is a strong flyer, of the sky, so a messenger from Sky Father."

"Oh, of course."

"Yes, you could have thought of that." I nodded.

"The message is always harder though, it may be more than one. This is your first day as my apprentice so it must be about that. The messenger looked at you, then went to greet Vezeru. It is very good news Kizkur. Sky Father is saying that you will be a good enchanter for the group. He has told Earth Mother your real name and said that they will together bless you with power. But what sort of power? That is left open for different interpretations. I would like to think that it is the obvious one, that Sky Father controls the weather and will help you with that. There are other things it could be, the big eyes of the dragonfly could make you a far-seer, or the strong flying could mean an interpreter of dreams.

We cannot know. I will do everything I can to make you a weather-monger. Neither Sky Father nor Earth Mother has sent an omen against that and it is the group's greatest need. I only wish I knew more about weather-spirits."

"Your spirit-guide will help you Ikaseraz."

"Yes she will. I cannot tell you about my spirit-guide yet, though I would like to. Only enchanters can know about each other's spirit-guides. As soon as you are initiated I will tell you all about her. But now I must dance for Vezeru."

He got various power-objects from his pack and put some around his neck while holding others in his hands. He struggled a bit to get up but I knew better than to help him. The effort made is part of the offering, I had learnt.

The figure of Vezeru was surrounded by a ring of reindeer antlers. It was not a circle which surprised me, but I knew that I would find out why at some point. My awe at Ikaseraz's knowledge gave me complete faith in his teaching. Outside the ring he performed his dance. The previous dances I had seen him do had always been accompanied by his drum. I wondered if the things in his hands perhaps represented his drum in places he was not able to bring it to. Low notes that he intoned were in the same rhythm as his steps. It seemed to go on for a long time and my thoughts strayed to when I would be dancing for the spirits. I hoped I would have a better shaped figure by then, they wouldn't think much of my stick-like arms and legs. After my initiation I could make myself a drum, that would help to convince them that I was a real enchanter. But I must start to think about being a weather-monger. I could think of nothing except that the sound of a drum would probably be most unsuitable as it seemed to me to imitate thunder and it was storms that I would be trying to prevent.

Ikaseraz's dance was getting slower and it had not been very energetic at the beginning. Dancing at all with his painful hips would doubtless please Vezeru. He stopped soon after and we went and sat by the



spring for him to have a drink.

I saw a movement in the reeds beside the water and a spider came from her hiding place and sat on one of the rocks by the spring. I can picture her now in my mind.

"Look at this beautiful yellow spider. It just came out of the reeds and sat there in the open like that."

"It's a relief to get a sign after all that dancing. Tell me what the sign means, think it through."

It took me a while and I was doubtful.

"The spider has no wings, it crawls on the earth so it is a messenger from Earth Mother which has come in answer to your dance to Vezeru."

"That's the easy part. Now what is the message?"



It took me even longer and then I had to admit I could think of nothing.

"It was a trick question, I don't know either. Let's watch and see if she does anything," We were disappointed in that, all she did was to turn round and go back into the reeds.

"Can you see anything different about that rock? I can't" he said.

"It's darker than the others."

"But that is probably just to make sure we saw the yellow of the spider by contrast. Perhaps the colour is significant though. It must be a blessing on your apprenticeship, that is what I danced for. What do you associate with yellow?"

"The sun."

"No...the sun is a servant of Sky Father. She would not be referring to him. It must be something produced by the earth."

"Ochre. Is she saying I should paint in the yellow rather than the red? I've always liked red ochre best."

"I do too. Anything else?"

"There are yellow lichens that I use in dyeing, and some of the plants have yellow flowers. Or do you mean that the dye from it is yellow?"

"Could be either. We'll try the yellow plants first, what do you use?"

"The yellow lichen you know the one, and dandelions are yellow they give a lovely magenta. The best blue comes from elecampane which has yellow flowers."

"The best feverfew is brewed from elecampane too, and it is good...were you making blue dye the day you saw the mountain?"

"No, purple, but I had put elecampane in when the result was too red."

"Were you adding elecampane just before you saw the mountain?"

"I don't know. It's all jumbled up. I think I probably was."

"That will be the explanation. Not of what the spider was telling us. Why you should suddenly enter the spirit-world for no reason that I could see. Elecampane helps some people into the spirit-world, you are probably one of them. Good, we'll try that when you're more prepared."

"But what could the spider have been telling us about elecampane?"

"I can't think of anything. So let's try plants which give yellow dyes, which are they?"

"To get a good yellow...mmm...sundew, but that's a bit harsh, bog myrtle gives a nice soft yellow or the roots of bracken if you want it a bit pinkish."

"You can throw bog myrtle on the fire to clear your head, but - no - we're not really getting anywhere. Let's start back, something may occur to me on the way home."

It was easier walking downhill of course but we went more slowly, Ikaseraz was tired. When we had stopped and were resting on a rock he looked at me as if he were trying to estimate my weight. "Not very heavy." I thought.

"Being an enchanter opens up a wonderful life. Adding the spirit-world to your experience is something so enriching I can hardly imagine now any other way to live. But there are drawbacks as well. You are probably too young yet to have realised that most good things come with bad ones attached. Though it can work the other way too. Bad things may have unforeseen good consequences."

"What drawbacks?"

"Being an enchanter takes up all your time. You will not be able to have children. Or rather you will not be able to raise them. In two or three years the time for your initiation will come. After that you may have a baby, but you would not have the time and energy to look after it. We would have to give it to a couple who had no children. Do you understand, you would probably feel badly about giving it over to someone else?"

I tried to think how Mother would have felt giving the baby away. She would not have done it. But she knew the baby. If I had a baby it would be a stranger, perhaps that would be alright.

"If I was giving away a stranger I think that would not be too hard. But the baby would need my milk for quite a while and then I would get to know it. If it was not a stranger I think it would be hard. What do you think?"

"I think that something could be arranged so you could give it to its new parents when it was still a stranger to you. There is no need to worry about it yet, but I thought that you should tell me if you would rather be a mother than an enchanter."

"I would rather be an enchanter."

"That's agreed then."

We went on in silence for a while and he seemed to be walking more vigorously.

"Perhaps the spider's colour was nothing to do with it. It could be the fact that it was a spider that signifies. Have you heard of Misumena?"

"Yes, Father told us about all the protective spirits. She is the Spider Spirit in charge of trapping. She lures prey into our traps."

"Your father has taught you well. It could be as simple as that. You had better check our traps if we are

home before dark. The spirits can be deliberately obscure, you will soon find that out. The message they send may be of absolute importance for the survival of our group or it may just be a personal joke, or anything in between."

"What does 'deliberately obscure' mean?"

"Hiding your meaning for some reason that you do not give."

We were not home before dark, so the traps were left. Ikaseraz said we must add Misumena and Anaxa, the spirit of the dragonflies, to our evening reverencing to see if either would send us a dream about the spirit messages.

Chapter 3

The first thing to do the next day was to visit the traps. If I had had any useful dreams I could not remember them. I went quietly out of the shelter and left Ikaseraz sleeping. He had many traps but I thought I could remember where he had told me they were. Retrieving from the traps had been one of my jobs at home so I did not doubt that I could do it.

First I went up on to the moors for the land traps, a quick and easy journey compared with yesterday's. They were mainly for fur animals though if we were lucky enough to have caught a hare it would make us two good meals. We would dry the meat of any others for winter then we wouldn't notice the unpleasant taste so much.

The first trap was empty and the second too. But the third had a really good gift from Misumena, a fox. Its fur was beginning to turn white already and that would make it more valuable to trade. I looked around for a spider to send to Misumena with my thanks but could not find one, so I spoke directly to her instead. It is not the same but she would understand. The rest of the traps produced two lemmings and a weasel, not good but not bad either. When they were all in my game bag I went down to the river.

At Ikaseraz's stretch of the bank I could see water flying and hear loud thwacking noises. I crept up on all fours and was just in time to see an otter diving. But the threshing of the river continued so I started to pull up the trap it was coming from. All my strength would not bring it up. I didn't know what to do so I pulled up the other traps while I thought. I hit the fishes with the raven, just a simple stone bar such as everyone keeps in their fish bag, and laid them on the grass. It had come to me what to do about the big whatever it was in the first trap. My hopes were up that it might be an otter, that would be a very fine pelt. I found two stout sticks and sharpened one end of each with the all-purpose tool from my waist pouch. Then I hammered them into the bank, angled away from the river, with the other end of the tool. This time when I pulled up the rope holding the trap I wound it round the two sticks so that I could pull a little at a time and not lose my earlier work. My strength was not really up to the job, but I was determined. This was something I was going to do. I couldn't face admitting to Ikaseraz that I'd failed when he was so tired after yesterday.

The catch slowly rose in the water until I could see it. I nearly fell over. It was the biggest fish I had ever seen. Only its front end was in the trap but the mechanism held it fast. It was struggling so violently I couldn't see what sort of fish it was and was too flustered to try to guess. After some more pulling and winding the rope round the sticks I was beginning to think the sticks would not hold and hammered some more.

A twist of the fish's body showed me that it was injured near its tail. Another pull on the rope and I could see that it was a bite or even a gnawed patch. It must have been attacked by the otter I had seen disappearing. Some water splashed into my face and for that moment I believed I could feel the fish's pain myself. It was there clear in my mind what I had to do, to kill it, as soon as I could to stop the pain. I must not lose it to die a slow painful death. The rope was tied to the first stick so I pulled that one out of the ground and sat down digging my heels into the bank so that I could hold the struggling fish with one arm. Then with my free hand I eventually got the rope tied around my waist. Whatever happened then the fish could not escape by pulling the trap away from me. We were both held now by just one stick and I had no idea whether it would keep its grip, but I got into the water grasping the first pointed stick and the rope holding the trap. As soon as I stepped away from the bank the current pulled hard at me and I jerked back in fear which made the fish leap to try to get away. There was a chaos of splashing water for a time but I steadied myself and moved towards the fish more slowly. The cold started to enter my feet and I knew I had to be quick. I took a deep breath and threw myself onto the fish as I thrust the stick through its head. We thrashed about underwater for what was probably only seconds and then I felt the animal die. While there was still feeling in my hands I grabbed the trap and struggled to the bank.

The pull of the current was stronger than I could have imagined, but finally the trap with the dead fish and I were on the bank. There was no time to rest, I was shaking with cold and must get back to the

fire.

I met Ikaseraz at the edge of the camp, he had seen me coming. He took in the picture of a soaked girl with a huge fish and I could see him trying not to laugh.

"It's not funny" he told himself and we ran as best we could, which was not very well, for the shelter.

"Into your spare clothes - quick."

But when I got near the fire I felt too cold to make my hands work, so Ikaseraz got my wet clothes off, towelled me dry and got me into the dry ones. He didn't seem very expert at it but was definitely better than I was, in that state. He made us a hot drink while I told him what had happened. I made a bit of an epic out of it with me as hero, but I had no need to exaggerate the size of the fish. It was a salmon he said. I had thought that at first but as I said to Ikaseraz they surely don't come that big.



"I didn't think so either, but salmon it is."

"What are we going to do with it?"

"Winter says we must salt down at least half of it. But we'll dig a pit and bake the rest, we'll eat half and give the other half to your family because they will be missing your trapping skills."

"Oh, good. They'll be thrilled. And they'll think I've been some use at last!"

"I ought to scold you for going off without saying where you were going. But I'm not going to. I would never have made a good father. I'm not going to say that you might have drowned either, because you know that. Now you've felt the strength of the river you will respect it more."

"But look what I've got too."

I pulled the fox out of the game bag.

He smiled at sight of it.

"Did you throw yourself on that too?"

"Your teasing me."

"Not really. I'm proud of what you did for that salmon. But it doesn't get you out of the fire-dung collecting. When we've got you warm again you'll have to go. It's urgent to get more for our winter stores, the first snow could come and cover it at any time. Don't go south though. I know collecting would probably be better that way, a few aurochs droppings would be better than many reindeer, but it's not safe. Our border with the souther people is in dispute again, so don't go to the woods."

North it was then, up to the tundra with the rather smelly fuel bag. It was always just a matter of luck how much you could collect, whether the reindeer had passed that way and if nobody else had got there first. When I had got an adequate amount I sat to rest. Fighting that fish had tired me, or perhaps the cold of the river. I was good and warm now though in an old jacket of Ikaseraz's that served as a

coat to me, my own was drying by the fire at home.

The last pile of dung I intended to collect was beside me and I turned it gently to see if there were any beetles in it. I loved watching them, they are beautiful animals in their way and so skilful. There were a few there busy making their little dung balls or rolling them away, with their back legs holding their beautifully made spheres, and their front legs pushing hard. I watched them closely but then I could not see them any more, just a sparkling whirlpool. There was the sound like a waterfall which got louder as I went down the vortex without spinning myself. Both the sound and the whirling flashing lights stopped suddenly and I was standing on my hands pushing backwards with my feet. I knew at once that I was a dung beetle but felt totally calm and just kept pushing the ball behind me. Then, at the same time as I pushed, I could see myself from a point quite far away. I was indeed a giant dung beetle and I was pushing the moon up into a dark blue sky. After pushing for some time I felt hands taking the moon from me. But when I could see again they were not hands but white paws belonging to a hare. It was the white hare that we have round here, with black-tipped ears, not the brown one you see on rare occasions further south. Soon after passing the moon to the hare I was back watching the beetles.

This time I knew I had been in the spirit-world and nothing frightening had happened. It was unsettling but not alarming in any way. I went through the visit trying to make sure I could remember everything to tell Ikaseraz. He would be able to interpret for me, my efforts to understand it yielded nothing.



When I got back to our shelter - I had hurried because I was hungry - I put the new dung away in the dryer beside our peat, then went in to tell Ikaseraz about my unexpected visit to spirit-world. But I was disconcerted to find that he could not think of an explanation either. Not of what I had experienced or why I suddenly went away. He suggested that I was perhaps stressed by the over-excitement with the salmon, but he didn't sound sure at all.

"You actually experienced being a scarab?"

He called dung beetles "scarabs", though nobody else did.

"Yes, although I was looking at it as well."

"The flashing lights you saw are almost always the sparkling of light on water which suggests that it was Vezeru who took you in, but why did she show you that particular vision?"

We ate in silence and then I cleaned our bowls.

"The light's too poor this evening, but tomorrow I want you to make me some paint. Plenty of red and some black, a little white and any other colours that you can make. Spend all day on it if you like, I shall be going to the spirits. I want to get some guidance from my ancestors. In three days there is to be a hunting ceremony in the cave so I need their advice about that. That's when I need the paints as well because I shall probably paint after it, either on the walls or the roof. What I paint will depend on what happens during the ceremony, we shall see."

"We. You mean that I will be there?"

"Of course. How else will you learn?"

"But Father has always said that everything to do with hunting is for men only."

"He's almost right. The men represent Sky Father who sends the prey animals. But that does not apply to enchanter's or apprentices who must learn by watching. We are exceptional in every way!"

"Do I have to do anything?"

"No, just keep quiet and don't get in the way. The next day, when I've recovered, you can ask me about anything you didn't understand."

But I didn't make the paints the next day because we were hardly more than up and dressing when we heard someone shouting that the river traders had come. Their smoke signal had been sent from lower down the river. They wouldn't risk their boats in the shallow water this high up the river.

We had a very quick breakfast. Everything for the trip had to go in my pack, lightweight shelter, food and our furs, because Ikaseraz had to carry all the furs for trading with. Some people had things they had made to take to trade with, fabrics, bowls, belts, even spear-throwers or cutting tools, but we only had furs. I didn't know what Ikaseraz might want to buy, but no-one knew what the river traders might have.

Most people in our group were going and we assembled to walk together. Ikaseraz and I joined up with my family so that we could help each other on the journey. We all had big loads but although Oskol, my brother, would start out by walking, we all knew he would have to be carried at some point. The baby, her name is Eraminpe, was strapped to Mother's back. The walk took most of the day as there was so much to carry, but many people offered Ikaseraz help or it could have taken even longer. When I asked him if they were people he had cured in the past he said

"I pulled most of them out of their mothers on their first day."

"Oh, what a strange thing. Did you birth me too?"

"Of course. Who else was going to do it?"

The even stranger thought was that I would be doing it in the future, suppose Mother had another baby, I might have to deliver it.

We joined with another group on the way, the wester people, and some people were making trades with them while others caught up with their relations who had married into that group. Ikaseraz spoke briefly to their enchanter but I got the impression he did not like him much. When we reached the traders' camp on the river bank we all set up a temporary camp together. Ikaseraz put our shelter next to my

parents'. After our fires were alight and we had settled our things we went down to the riverside to see what the traders had brought. There would be no trades made until the next day, but everyone wanted to see what there was and to think how much of what they were willing to give for it.

We all went down together chattering about what we might get. I had nothing to trade with but wanted to know what Ikaseraz would get. Samples of their goods were laid out for inspection and there began a great hubbub of sellers crying up their particular products and buyers pretending they were not really interested. I just wanted to see everything. This was their last stop and some traders were trying to sell things they had acquired lower down the river, but they were mostly just the same things we had at home, wooden dishes and cups and everyday leather goods. None of that stuff interested me, I wanted to see what they had brought from the coast. A lot of it was laid out together and I saw that Ikaseraz was already looking through it. There were a great many different seaweeds but I didn't know which were food and which were medicinal. They were lovely to look at though, some highly coloured but even the usual brown ones were all different shapes. The shells drew a lot of attention, there was a beautiful one as big as my head covered in a pink and white pattern, but both Father and Ikaseraz said that it was too expensive.



Mother was busy amongst the cooking and eating wares. There were cookbags of all sizes and I knew she wanted to get one, but Father said they would get a good piece of leather and make their own. They had plenty of thread and seam sealant at home. I knew Mother wanted me to look at the herbs with her, but I just wanted to look at the sea things. The starfish and sea urchins I recognised but there were a lot of dried animals that I didn't. Ikaseraz told me the names of a couple but I was really none the wiser and he was soon away to look through the bones. That made me think that I should be looking for something with power over the weather that I could use in future to fight the Ice Giants. One of the traders looked friendly so I asked him if there was something from the north where the ice was that I could look at. He brought out a wonderful object. It was a very long pointed tusk with a spiral design on it. He let me touch it and I asked him if he had carved the design, but he said that it grew like that on the animal.

"What animal?"

"It's a small whale that lives in the northern sea."

"I would love to own that, but I could never afford it. Have you something small that would only cost two or three cowries?" That was all I had. He smiled and said he would see what he could find. When he came back he was holding a strange-looking thing which I wanted at once. It was a claw of a great white bear he said. It was black and shiny, like the obsidian mammoth, I could hardly believe it, and I wanted it.

"I need to know that this bear lives in the north, is it an ice bear?"

"Oh yes, its fur is white and they say it is only found up north on the ice."

"Have you got a pelt of one, have any of the traders got one?"

"No, I'm sorry but they are always the first things to go. We have to pay the hunters who bring them quite highly, they are seldom found and very fierce."

"You've seen them though?"

"Only the pelts, I've never been up north myself."

"White bearskin, how I'd love just to see one and feel it."

"Yes, they are very beautiful. They are quite large bears too. Not as big as our bears round here, but bigger than that dark brown one that sometimes comes up from the south."

"Do you come from round here?"

"Yes, just down by the mouth of the Vezer."

"I've never even been that far. How I'd love to see the sea."

"It is a wonderful thing to see, but very strong and wild, dangerous, many drown. I expect you will see it when you are older."

"They're always telling me about things I'll see and do when I'm older."

He laughed and said

"They said the same to me. But it was true."

I settled with him that I would buy the ice bear's claw for two cowrie shells when trading began in the morning.

Our group had made a communal fire and we all sat around it to eat and drink. But I did not enjoy it as much as I would normally have done. Though I was longing to get my claw and that felt good I knew I had not done as Father said. He had told me that when you meet the traders, if you see something you want you must pretend you do not want it at all, and if you do buy it you are doing so as a favour to them. But I had immediately grinned in delight and told the trader I wanted it very much, so I obviously was no good at it. One more thing I couldn't do. He had seemed so nice though that, even if I had remembered what I was supposed to do, I would have felt bad pretending to him. So I just listened to everybody's stories of what they had seen and what they would buy and said nothing myself.

In the morning everyone was up early, but I was the first out and waiting at my trader's stall before he had arrived himself. Nobody else was going to get my claw. He soon arrived and smiled when he saw me.

"Don't worry the claw of the white bear is yours. Just let me get some things unpacked and on display."

It seemed a long time to me until he had unpacked down to my claw, but adults always took a long time over everything. Finally he found it and brought it out with a flourish. The two cowrie shells were ready in my hand but when I tried to hand them to him he wouldn't take them. He gave me the glorious claw and said

"It's yours, that feels right somehow. I don't want your shells."

I stumbled badly over thanking him, but I felt so overwhelmed that a stranger would give me something so obviously valuable that it came out all jumbled and in spurts.

"Stop...stop. The pleasure on your face is thanks enough."

He returned to his unpacking so I thought I could leave without seeming rude, and ran to find Ikeraz. I hadn't said anything to him about it before it was safely mine. He might have said it was no good and I

should not waste my shells, but it called to me and I wanted it so. He was looking slightly scornfully at another trader's stuff when I found him. In my excitement I bounded up to him calling

"Look. Look what I've got. It's a claw from a great white ice bear from the north. Isn't it wonderful?"

He took a step backwards and looked very serious.

"Which trader did you get that from?"

I pointed describing him. Ikaseraz looked at him for quite a long time though my trader was too busy to notice.

"You are telling me that with all the things you could have got here you spent your shells on that?"

I sank inside, he must think there was an evil spirit in it. So I quickly told him that my trader had given it me and would not take my shells.

"He gave it you?" He was looking even more tense, and picking up our trading-furs he took hold of my arm and hurried us over to my trader. I could see my trader's face change to alarm when he saw an enchanter coming towards him. It seemed to me that he got rid of the customer he was talking to because she moved away looking displeased. I hoped I hadn't got him in trouble with Ikaseraz when he had been so kind to me.

Ikaseraz was not one for small talk.

"You gave my apprentice a claw from a northern bear?" My trader looked at me then with a sort of distancing respect. It was the first time I had got that look from anybody, I saw it many times afterwards, but I preferred the way he had looked at me previously when he didn't see me as an enchanter's apprentice.

"Yes...I hope the spirits are not offended."

"Oh, no, nothing like that. But I wanted to know why you gave it her."

"She seemed to want it so much and, to be honest, I couldn't sell it. People seem to be afraid of it. But I like it myself and wanted it to go where it would be appreciated."

"Are you sure it is from the northern bear?"

"Yes. I removed the claws from the pelt myself. It was very thick and a yellowish white, the nose was black, it was definitely the northern. The customer who took the pelt wanted the claws removed, he said they frightened him."

"They seem to frighten everybody except you and my apprentice."

"Not you surely?"

"Yes, it startled me. I would be happier if you would let me give you something for it. If you would let me look at you for a minute or two I could find a guardian-spirit that would give you a safe and fast journey home."

"That would please me. I don't like my wife being alone, she will give birth soon."

"I know."

The finding of a guardian-spirit took longer than I thought and I sympathised with the trader, I knew how unsettling it was to have Ikaseraz looking into your eyes. He looked relieved at the end and I didn't know if that was because it was over or because he would soon be safely home.

Then Ikaseraz asked him if he had more things from the ice regions and he brought out all he had.

"The spirits are pleased with you and I can see myself that you are an honest man. What if I show you all the furs I have, well I just want two or three small ones to get some honey with, and you say which from the rest are any good to you. Then you can give us what you think they are worth from this collection of northern objects. Does that suit you?"

"Very well, and you know I would be foolish to try to cheat an enchanter." He half smiled at Ikaseraz, who smiled back and then went off to get our honey while I stayed with the trader as he looked over our furs.

"I think your Enchanter would like you to say which things you would like most from my goods."

"Do you? I've no doubts about that, I like the long tusk best."

"Suppose you arrange them in a line with the tusk at one end as your favourite, then your next favourite and so on down to the end of the line with your least favourite."

While I did that he had a good look at our furs. I was happy, I enjoy sorting, and picking favourites is always fun. The last few were still undecided when Ikaseraz came back with the honey. He seemed to have a good large amount in his basket. The trader told him what I was doing and he waved me to carry on while he and the trader got down to business. Of course I couldn't help listening. The trader was pleased with our furs as I had thought he would be, we had several beaver pelts and everybody wants them with their being waterproof as well as extra-warm.

Ikaseraz called to me

"We can have the narwhal tusk for your white fox and two beaver pelts." I grinned back my pleasure at getting that. So the small whale was called a narwhal. I'd have loved to see one swimming.

"Look Enchanter, these things from the north are hard to trade, so you can have them all if you think that is a fair trade for all your furs." He did, so I had sorted them for nothing. They touched their right hands together to agree the trade and both seemed pleased.

"You've still got three cowries. Go and look round for something you'd like while I find a strong lad to take our things back to the camp. I'll see you there." He was looking pleased with himself and I suspected he was just trying to get rid of me. Some time to have a good look at everything by myself was welcome though. I soon found that three cowries wouldn't buy much. When I thought that there was nothing else to see I went back to a trader who had what I wanted. She sold babies' rattles and honey, so I said I would have one rattle and however much honey made up three cowries worth. She smiled and asked if the rattle was for my baby brother or sister. I said it was for Eraminpe my sister. She gave me a rattle and a good lot of honey - that was for Oskol who loved it - and I waved "goodbye".

At our camp that evening there was a lot of present giving. Eraminpe tried to throw her rattle in the fire but Mother rescued it unharmed. Oskol was only allowed a little of the honey but he made a grand mess anyway.

Father gave me a present that was beyond anything I had ever owned - a pearl - so perfectly smooth and shining with many soft colours. Afterwards I thought perhaps it was a peace-offering over the incident when I got hit, but at the time I just felt love for him and sorrow that I couldn't still live with him and Mother. It is in my waist-pouch to this day and still causes surprise at its beauty, and yearning for Father to smile at me again.

Mother gave me a ribbon in the deepest red colour I'd ever seen. No berries we ever find are that shade. She said she thought I would like the colour and she was right. I plait it into my hair when I contact her spirit now, though it has faded through the years.

I think we all enjoyed the evening round the fire. People took turns to sing and it all got more and more

lively as the adults became affected by their drinks. I was allowed a little mead, it was good. At the end of the evening Ikaseraz chanted a protection on our journey home which would start in the morning.

We set off as soon there was any light. Many people were overloaded, including us. Ikaseraz and I had to carry the narwhal tusk between us as neither could manage it alone and there were others in more severe difficulties. Somehow we all got back to our camp before dark, though it was a near thing. Those disappointed by their exchanges with the river traders were less willing to help than on the outward trip.

At breakfast the next day Ikaseraz said

"The hunting ceremony will have to wait for the next auspicious day now."

I nodded with a mouthful.

"In the mean time we have to go through everything we got from the traders and evaluate it."

"Do what to it?"

"Decide what will be useful for which rituals. In particular you have to choose the objects you feel speaking to you. Those we will keep for a ritual, just you and I will perform it, to send the cold back north. The objects you feel no power coming from we will put away for trading with the sea traders from the south when they come up here."

"I have to choose?"

"Yes. You chose the claw of the ice bear, that shows that it must be you. You felt it didn't you?"

"It spoke to me about ice. I felt that I must have it."

"Kizkur I can't stress strongly enough to you how powerful that claw is. When I first saw it I felt I might faint. I want you to be very careful with it. The problem is that I don't know how to protect you from it. We will use it together at first, I don't think either of us should use it alone. It will be the centre of our ritual against the Ice Giants, I am convinced that it is their spirits which are sending away the warmth of the sun."

"Where should we keep it?" He thought for a while then said

"For now we will put it behind my drum, that will keep anything eldritch in it away from our fire. When you have your own drum we can keep it behind that."

I brought it out, with more respect after what he had said, and gave it to him to put away. I didn't want to accidentally touch his drum.

"Let's lighten things up shall we? I've got a present for you. I didn't give it you yesterday because I didn't want your father to think I was competing with him." That amazed me. I had thought a present was a simple thing.

He gave me a limpet shell with a little leather cover. Inside were some black granules.

"What is it?"

"It's a purple dye. If it's not the exact colour you are trying for I'm sure you have the skill to modify it. The strange thing about it is that it comes from that big shell you were admiring. The animal that made that shell makes a purple dye too, I couldn't resist getting it for you."

"Thank you" was all I could manage. I didn't want him to see the tears that were coming. He didn't need to tell me that there was serious work to do before I could try out my present.

Chapter 4

It was a responsibility that I felt was beyond me, to choose which items to keep. We had traded a year's furs for these items and I knew I had to get it right to change the weather. Though I felt honoured that Ikaseraz should think I was more suited to choose than he was himself, it seemed to me he was taking a gamble on an unknown. I sat and stared at them for a long time, but couldn't decide.

"I don't know, Ikaseraz. Suppose I get it wrong."

"It's not in your hands, the spirits always guide us if we want them to. So whatever you choose will be right just by the fact that you have chosen it. Look, we'll get out the northern bear's claw. I'm here if there should be any danger."

He brought it out from behind his drum and put it in my hands, giving them an encouraging squeeze as he did so. I held the black claw in my right hand, closed my eyes and held my bear's tooth for strength in my left. It was not long before I felt better. Confidence had come from somewhere. I opened my eyes again and saw Ikaseraz sitting perfectly still watching me. He smiled and I wondered if he had done something to ask the spirits' help.

"The narwhal's tusk and the bird's skull." I told him. He smiled more widely.

"That is good. They are what I would have chosen, but I was unsure. Just those two?"

I studied everything closely again. The horns of the musk ox and some of the carved whale bones were attractive. But I analysed my feelings for them and decided that it was a personal liking and nothing to do with the spirits.

"Yes, just them."

"I want to keep the wolf skins anyway. We will need extra sleeping-furs this winter if it gets as cold as I think it will."

It came to me then that he was treating me as an adult and I couldn't tell if I was pleased or not.

"Let's attach the narwhal's tusk to the central pole of the shelter, shall we? It's an awkward thing to store. We might feel then that it was supporting and blessing our home too." He seemed pleased with his idea so I agreed and smiled at him.

"Which bird is the skull from?"

"It could be a goose, but I'm fairly certain it's a swan."

The sound of their wings as they flew over came to me when I looked at it now, so I was sure he must be right.

When we had stacked up the rest of the things ready for trading with the sea traders he said "We should get some good things for those carvings, there are no whales in the south where they come from. But we shall have a long wait, they won't risk the sea again until Spring."

"What do you think they will have?"

"It's different every time. Part of the excitement. What I need most is some spikenard."

There's enough for the next hunting ceremony, but after that I don't know, I shall have to improvise until they come. Even then they may have already traded all they had. They never set out without it, everyone knows of its intermediary power with Sky Father and wants it."

"When will the hunting ceremony be now?" "No knowing, the spirits will send signs. You must get the paints ready though. You stay here and do that, yes you can try out your new purple. I've got a patient to see".

The purple colouring was a temptation, but I knew that the only way I would be able to enjoy it was to do the ordinary paints first. They were all simple enough. Red and yellow were prepared in the same way, crush up the ochres in the pestle and mortar then add whatever binders we had available, various saps, oils from seeds or I could chew up bark linings. Blood works well too, but we hadn't got any. For a really special paint I would have bled myself, but not today. For black paint I would use charcoal instead of the ochres, and for white, chalk. As I finished each I put it in its own special bowl and covered it.

Then I was free to think about my purple. I had to use a few granules to test what it would dissolve in. Almost anything, so that was lucky, and I had more luck with the binder to make a paint. The first one I tried was pine resin and it held really well and - I had almost been holding my breath - the colour was glorious, exactly what I had hoped for. I couldn't get on with trying for a dye, always more complicated, for interrupting myself to gaze at that colour. In the end I found a new bowl for it, there was no bowl for purple, and covered it telling myself I wouldn't look at it again. I was wrong, I did but at least not so often.

When Ikaseraz came back I had not succeeded with the dye. He looked at all the bits of discarded rag and made a sympathetic gesture, so I triumphantly showed him the bowl of paint. He was nearly as pleased with it as I was.

"How's your patient?"

"It's Hankagorri. He's got the lung disease. I've done what I can, if the spirits help him he will survive, but he is rather old, as you know. We'll have to start you coming with me soon to healings. Not yet, I want you to concentrate on the hunting ceremony for now." I showed him all the ordinary paint I had made and he thought it was enough. Although almost everyone liked the red the best, and it signified life so was the most important as well, we had to be sparing because the red ochre came from a place a long journey from here.

"During Hankagorri's healing the spirits showed me that four days from now we can hold the hunting ceremony. When I've had a rest and a drink I'll go round and tell all the hunters. They need to prepare and some of them will need purification. Why don't you go and tell your father, you can see how they're all getting along?"

I fingered the pearl in my waist-pouch as I walked across to their shelter.

"Hello dear" Mother said as I entered. Father looked up from the work he was doing and smiled.

"I'm just renewing the lashing on this spear. It looked as if it might fail. Any news of when the ceremony will be?"

"Yes, that's why I came over. It's to be four days from today. Ikaseraz is going round now. I shall be going too, but he says I must stay back and keep quiet."

"Your respect is due to him, and to the hunters as well during the ceremony."

"But I've got to learn as much as I can."

"It'll be strange for you at a men's ceremony. I wouldn't want to go." Mother said.

"My whole life has suddenly turned strange."

They nodded sympathetically, but at that moment Oskol shrieked as Eraminpe pulled his hair. As they pulled them apart I waved "Goodbye" and went home.

The four days until the hunting ceremony passed quickly for me because I was busy with the preparations for winter. Ikaseraz had little time to teach me as he was concentrating on his work for the ritual. He became more and more withdrawn as the evening of the fourth day, the time of the ceremony, approached until it became impossible to get a word out of him. I understood, this was the most important hunt of the year and he felt stressed by the responsibility of bringing willing reindeer to the hunters before the herds moved south. The meat from this hunt would go into the cold caches on the tundra - it was cold up there already - and would have to see us all through the winter until the reindeer returned.

Mother helped me with my salting down of both fish and meat, and then I helped with hers while Father sharpened his weapons and looked after the children. We also had stocks of both dried and smoked meat and fish. I could manage the fruit and berry preserving in honey myself. Nuts and seeds were already stored away, but our preserved eggs were nearly finished. There would be no more eggs until Spring.

When it came time to set out for the cave Ikaseraz seemed calmer. I had to help him carry some things, though his drum and mask he carried himself. It would have been disrespectful of me to touch them. The bones and our extra furs were left to me. He gave me the essence of spikenard and the smoking mixture, which he said it was essential that I should carry as a trainee weathermonger. I didn't follow that at the time but thought it better not to interrupt his concentration. It was not far to the cave but we had a couple of rests due to the awkwardness of carrying so much. The cave had been stocked with food and drink for everyone earlier in the day. The hunters were coming along behind us carrying all their weapons. They caught us up at the entrance and we all went in together.

The cave entrance is low and though it was easy for me to just bend down, some of the bigger men had to crawl in on all fours. The first thing was to get the fire lit and then torches lit from it and set in stands. Only then could we see the cave properly. A little light came in from the entrance but most of the cave was dark without the fire and torches. It is big enough for all our group, even when the women and children are here too. More than big enough, it would hold many more. The last time I had been in the cave the paintings had rather frightened me but I wanted to see them with an apprentice's eyes so I took up a torch and walked round the walls studying them all. They were all so real looking and depending on how the torchlight caught them some seemed to be moving out of the walls towards us. There were several horses, a bison, two aurochs and many birds, but the one that really gripped me was a mammoth. That day was the first time I had the chance to really look at it. What an animal. The painting made the mammoth seem to be thinking. There was plenty of time to look, nothing would happen for hours. The hunters were setting up a roasting spit over the fire, they had a small boar and some birds to roast. Others were seeing to the drink.

Ikaseraz and I found an out-of-the-way corner to put our things. He said it would be a fine place for me to watch from when things got going. The paints I had made were carefully placed against the wall, they wouldn't be needed until much later. We went over to the fire and joined the men who were sitting cross-legged and passing a bowl of drink round. I was only allowed a sip occasionally. Every time the bowl reached Ikaseraz he spilled a little onto the floor of the cave as an offering. They were all telling stories of old hunts, some of them were quite scary. Ikaseraz told me later that the same story became more hair-raising at each telling. But he was probably teasing me, they really do kill some dangerous prey. Father spoke to me briefly but soon went back to his friends, this was an occasion for the men.

It seemed a long time before the roasting was done, the smell of it had made me hungry long before. But they finally took the animals off the spit. They were broken up with hand tools and the pieces put on large wooden platters which were passed round for everyone to help themselves. But before we could eat Ikaseraz had to bury the best piece of the boar deep in the cave floor as an offering to Earth Mother.

When everything was eaten the singing began. It was accompanied by three or four flutes which the players had made from the long bones of reindeer. I was enjoying it when Ikaseraz asked me to go to our pile of things and bring him the spikenard. The singing stopped as he raised it above the fire then, singing quite loudly but tunelessly, he sprinkled it around the edges of the fire. The scent was intense

and very heady, one or two people looked a bit dizzy. He intoned that with this offering to Sky Father we asked for a blessing on tomorrow's hunt. That was the sign for the ritual to begin and we went to our dark corner for Ikaseraz to get changed. I helped him into his mask, then the attaching of his lion's tail which is awkward to put on yourself with being behind you. Finally between us we got the aurochs' hooves attached to his feet and he picked up his drum and a striking-bone and went back to the fire leaving me behind.

The first dance around the fire was just Ikaseraz striking his drum slowly and singing quietly. When that ended all the hunters started to dance and the old men sat further from the fire and played any instruments they had. Ikaseraz returned to me and asked for his pipe and the smoking mixture.



At that time it was just a dried up mixture to me. Later I learned which fungi, lichens and herbs to use for which type of ritual. Then I only wondered if there was any elecampane in it. Perhaps not as Ikaseraz had said that it was me who was affected by it. He scattered dried lavender and rosemary at the edges of the embers so that they would slowly give off their fumes. Those were traded from the south, but he had told me that they used to grow here, it hardly seemed imaginable.

As he smoked he slowly increased the speed of his drumming and varied the rhythm as well. The men with drums speeded up as well but kept to a simple rhythm, their drums were just drums and not objects of power as Ikaseraz's was. He had finished smoking and was dancing again when he very suddenly fell to the floor and went rigid. It was the first time I had seen him trancing and had to stop myself running to help him. He would have called me a foolish child, this was the whole purpose of the ceremony, that he should enter the spirit-world. I had no idea what he would do when he got there. There was plenty of time for me to think how much there was for me to learn and begin to despair.

The men continued playing and a few danced some repetitive steps but none went near Ikaseraz. The thought that one day it would be me lying on the cave floor made me feel hollow inside. I was not only scared but excited too. A great deal of time passed with nothing happening. The hunters were talking and laughing, nobody took any notice of me. I went round studying the great paintings again. Between them were many symbols that I didn't understand and what seemed to be random lines carved into the rock. The most common image was of people's hands, especially near the floor of the cave. I wondered if they were the handprints of the people who had painted the great animals, but as some were so small they must have been children's I thought that couldn't be right. There might have been paintings on the roof of the cave but the light didn't reach that far. The smoke was all going up there so if there were any there they would have to be renewed often unless there were some way to remove soot.

When Ikaseraz began to stir I felt that he had been away for hours. Two of the men helped him into a sitting position and gave him a drink of water. He signed feebly to them to give him more. When he had drunk that they gave him some honey and left him with another bowl of water. His exhaustion was plain to everyone and he was left to recover. I started shivering with the cold despite the good fire and put on my extra furs. But you could see that Ikaseraz didn't need his, he was sweating. It was some while later that he signed to them to gather round and with obvious difficulty spoke of what he had discovered. It was good news, that was clear from the men's reaction, though I could only hear the occasional word.

He told me later that there would be many reindeer and that they should also go south for red deer and possibly even boar. After giving them the news he needed to rest again, but not for so long this time. Then he came over to collect the paints and gave me a small smile to let me know he was alright. I quietly asked if I was allowed to watch him paint. He seemed surprised that I had asked and said that I should. The place to paint seemed to be already decided. He got himself into a comfortable sitting position and I passed him the different colours as he needed them. He said immediately

"It's going to be a raven." I hadn't dared ask. He scratched the bird's outline into the rock very confidently, then filled it with black except for a white eye. It looked like a mad bird at that stage. He hesitated for some time then before giving it yellow eyelids. The paints had to be mixed after that, which he didn't let me do. Shades of grey produced its nearer three-toed foot with just a hint of a darker fourth toe then white claws. The leg further from us was darker and less well defined, also it didn't quite join up with the raven's body. I was learning. He did the eye next in a slightly blue black and letting the white show through just a little. With more blue and just a touch of purple he did its beak. The highlights on its feathers were mostly purple but he finished off with various greens and even a little white. It was so skilful, from his mad looking sketch he had produced a noble creature.



Father and I helped him home between us, even that short distance was a struggle for him. The sun was rising when we got there and Father got him into his sleeping-furs and made sure he was asleep before they all set out for the hunt. I slept until about mid-day. Ikaseraz slept on, so I quietly took our cookbag and went to Mother's. She was happy to give us food for once and let me cook it at her fire. The camp was very quiet without all the young men. Mother was pleased to hear that the ceremony had been successful, though she worried every time Father went hunting. The baby was sleeping and Oskol and I played while Mother got on with her work. She didn't ask for details of the ceremony but chatted on about what she would get done while the men were away. We had a good quiet afternoon and I was glad of the rest after all the strange excitement of the cave. Towards evening I carried our hot meal back to our shelter where Ikaseraz was awake and looking better. We ate in companionable silence.

Afterwards neither of us felt up to doing anything, so we just talked. Well, Ikaseraz did the talking I mostly listened. He would fire questions at me though, I couldn't go a whole day without lessons.

"What is the meaning of the raven that I painted?"

"I wish I could paint like that."

"Application and practice. The meaning?"

"Ravens mean death, that's because they eat the flesh off bodies. The death of the reindeer? You didn't foresee the death of a hunter did you?"

"No I didn't. The raven does signify death, but many other things beside. It is a very clever bird and that is often used symbolically. But it is also the keeper of memories. During this visit to the spirits they allowed me to speak to my ancestors, usually it is forbidden. I painted the raven to have something in this world to hold their knowledge."

"Are your ancestors happy in the spirit-world?"

"I mustn't speak of it. It is not a secret to be kept from you, don't think that. But when you trance it is easy to be influenced by what others have told you. It is important that you should enter there with a clean mind and receive what is meant for you to know."

"I'll make us a hot drink. It's cold tonight, I hope the hunters have found shelter and got a good fire going."

We warmed our hands at our fire and felt better for the drink.

"My spirit-helper showed me the meaning of your vision with the scarab. That I must tell you about. It is quite simple really. As we know the moon is a servant of Sky Father. The hare is the guardian of the moon in this world. The scarab is a winged creature which therefore belongs to Sky Father. You were the scarab so it means you are welcomed as a servant of Sky Father, passing the moon to its guardian."

I just hoped I would be able to find anything at all to do about the weather.

"Most people think the moon and the sun are discs, but some say it is more likely that they are spheres. This vision of yours of the moon equated with a scarab dung-ball seems to bear out the idea of spheres. But the spirits may not have intended us to make that interpretation."

He always thought I could understand long words.

Chapter 5

The last journey before winter was for collecting honey. Each family went separately, so it would be just Ikaseraz and me. I could see which of us would be climbing the trees. We had to wait until the hunters came back though because some families would need the men on the honey collecting trip.

The day they got back all the camp was out to meet them. Even from a distance we could all see it had been a success, there were many large animals on poles and they mostly had smaller ones on their backs as well. They were walking slowly with their burdens but at last they arrived in camp to great applause. All the wives had counted when they were far away, and as many were returning as had set out, which was the thing uppermost in their minds. When the reunited families had hugged and chattered, the dividing up began. The hunting stories would have to wait.

Ikaseraz and the Elders counted all animals out, then gave to each family according to the number of people in it. Our pile was nearly the smallest, most families were bigger than ours. Even Mother and Father's share was quite small compared with families that had several big children and old people as well, though they had a boar which is always a favourite. Ikaseraz told me later that pregnant or milking women got more too. The Chief Elder asked if there were any complaints about the division, but it was a formality, everyone could see it was fair.

Ikaseraz and I managed to get our share, a reindeer and a red deer doe, back to our shelter but we hoped someone would help us to get the butchered meat up onto the tundra. There was a lot of work to do before that. We spent all day skinning the two animals, then scraping the skins and setting them out to stretch. The intestines were the next priority. That was such a messy and smelly job we had to do it outside, luckily the weather was fine. Even so we had to keep going in and warming our hands at the fire. We had saved as much of their blood as we could, for paints of course, but it made a good general binder, and with some meat, bulbs and roots could be baked in one of the stomachs into a fine meat pudding.

When we had emptied the intestines and got them soaking in a bowl of water, I asked Ikaseraz if I could have the doe's intestines.

"Yes, you can. But what will you do with them?"

"I want to make a musical instrument that would sound like the south wind, to make it blow for us."

"Kizkur, I'm glad I chose you, what an idea. How will it work?"

"I was thinking about it in the cave. The flutes sound good, but I think they are too harsh for this. If I cut the intestines into very thin strips and dry them as you would for sewing-thread, then cut them into various different lengths, held taut they would give different notes if plucked with your fingers. I thought an antler, where a tine branches off, could be drilled then the short and long threads put through the holes and held with dowels or pins. Do you see what I mean? The threads could be made more or less taut, to change the note, by pulling out the pin and winding more thread onto it."

"It will take some practice, I should think, to get it right. We've got two antlers here. You can start with them. And you think it will sound like the south wind?"

"Yes. I'd hoped to play it at our weather ceremony."

"That sounds right. The doe's intestines and the reindeer's antlers are yours."

The hooves and ligaments were put aside for making glue, the eyes and tongues for sausages, that left us to deflesh the bones. Between them they gave us a good pile of meat, Ikaseraz was well satisfied. We would roast the bones for a while to make them easier to split for the marrow.



That was as much work as we could do that day and we both went over to see Mother and Father. They had finished before us so we all sat and had a hot drink.

"What's that?" I asked pointing, although I could see what it was. Oskol ran to it and picked up his wolf cub as if I might take it. Father smiled at him and said

"We didn't want to kill the she-wolf but she attacked and was killed when we defended ourselves. The wolf-spirit will forgive the accident I hope, Enchanter?"

"It is the intention that the spirits look at. You are safe."

"We saw the milk coming from her then and knew there must be cubs. But we could only find one, and here she is. If we can raise her she and Oskol will make a good hunting team when he has been initiated."

"I wish you success."

"I hope so, Oskol has taken to it very strongly already. It can eat meat, although we brought as much of the mother wolf's milk as we could get."

"She, not it." said Oskol.

"What is she called, Oskol?" I asked.

"Wolf" he said.

"Oh."

"Hello Wolf" we all said to welcome her into the group.

Ikaseraz asked Father what they had done with the mother wolf's body, but Father cast his eyes quickly at Oskol and said nothing. The next day Ikaseraz told me that, when Oskol was nowhere near, Father told him that they had skinned her and kept the pelt, but decided nobody would be pleased with wolf's meat from the division and cut up the body on the spot hoping any remaining cubs might find it.

The discussion turned to how we would organise getting the meat into cold storage the next day. It was decided that the three adults would carry both our households meat up to the frostline between them. They would need to make more than one trip up, so it would just have to be done slowly. Both families had a cold pit already dug up there so that saved work, they would just have to cover the stores, after the last was in, with rocks that were too big for any scavengers to move. They thought I was too small to carry anything of significant weight so my job was to look after my brother and sister. All the elecampane, and anything even slightly druglike was to be put away.

The three of them intended to start early so, when we were back at our shelter, I collected up the things I would need for the next day before going to bed. The south wind instrument was my priority now in order to have it made by the time Ikaseraz wanted to hold the weather ceremony. There was no hurry for the purple dye, but after the success of the paint I did want to discover how to make it right.

They set off heavily laden at first light. Oskol was too busy with Wolf to care if I were there or not, so when Eraminpe was comfortably gurgling to herself, I could begin work on my instrument. The doe intestine had dried well overnight and I began by cutting that into thin strips. The lengths would be determined by the space that there was for them in the antler frame. I had brought both antlers because I could easily get one wrong. With the gut threads laid across between the main stem of the antler and

the tine I could get some idea of what it would look like, but it was hard to make them stay parallel to each other and with space between them to get a finger in to pluck the thread.

My burin cut the antler without too much effort and, when I had one hole made, it made placing the rest easier because I could tie one of the threads through the hole and round the tine. Where the other end of the thread should go on the main branch was clear then, so I drilled its hole and tied it in. I plucked it to see what sort of note it gave, but it was too loose and just went "clunk". Tightening the knots at both ends worked though and I had my first note. It was high-pitched because I had started near to where the tine branched off and that was the shortest thread. Though I couldn't tune it until my other threads were in I decided to make the dowels for the holes as I went along. Bone is so much easier to work than antler that I had brought quite a lot of spare bones with me. Even in bone getting a good tight fit wasn't easy, but two were eventually finished despite interruptions from Oskol who wanted to take Wolf out to play. He wasn't allowed out of the shelter. Luckily Eraminpe was asleep by this time so I could tell him to be quiet and not wake her.



My idea had been that the dowel would hold the thread tight in the hole then the loose end of thread would be tied to the dowel with some slack so that you could lessen the tightness as well as increasing it. On the first thread though it came to me that I didn't need to vary both ends, so I fixed the main branch end and left the thread to be altered at the tine end. With two more threads fitted in that way I was longing to get it tuned but knew it was better to wait, I didn't even know yet how many threads there would be. I looked at it and held it in various ways and had just decided that it needed to be played with both hands at once to get a chord out of it, when Father's head came in at the door.

"Everything alright?"

"No, I want to go out and play with Wolf" was the instant shout from Oskol.

"Alright Kizkur?"

"Yes, we're fine."

"You can come out and play with me for a few minutes Oskol." He told me that Mother was resting with Ikaseraz and took Oskol and Wolf out with him.

When he brought them back a while later he said they would have to be setting off again soon but came in to see what I was doing.

"What's that for?"

"It's going to be a musical instrument. I want to play a sound like a breeze from the south."

He didn't seem to know what to say.

"A breeze? Do you blow it then?"

"No, you pluck its threads. It's going to have more than this." I plucked what it had got to show him. He was getting quite taken with the idea, so I showed him how you could alter the notes by tightening or loosening. He had a go with it himself.

"You could make the sound stronger - if you wanted to - by hollowing out the antler."

"Yes - I could." I smiled thanks for a good idea.

"Must get back to the others."

After he'd gone I thought that he hadn't had much of a rest, running about with Oskol then improving on musical instrument design, and he was probably carrying by far the most up to the tundra.

The rest of the threads went in each one longer by a little and parallel to the previous one, until there was no room for more. There were ten when I had finished. As I did them I thought about hollowing out the antler. My burin wouldn't go in far. Father might have a long rasp of some kind.

Before starting to tune it I gave Oskol some honeycomb and let the baby suck honey off my fingers. It might be late before we could all eat. When the tuning was done to my satisfaction I played a lullaby for Eraminpe. Either that or the honey worked, she was soon asleep again.

I played some simple tunes that I knew, then ran the back of my fingernail quickly down all the strings one after another. First I went from high to low, then from low to high. I had to use my thumbnail to come back towards me low to high. It was lovely, that was the first time I ever did it but it still thrills me today.

It was a crude instrument, of course, but I loved it then. When I heard them coming back I quickly packed it away. They might ask me to play for them and I needed a lot more practice. But they were all talking at once about the success of getting all the winter meat safely stored and how hungry they were, so I would probably have been safe anyway.

The next day should have been the honey collecting, but Ikaseraz was too tired to set out again so we had an easy day. It looked as if it might rain anyway or even snow, which would have made it harder.

I showed Ikaseraz my new instrument and played a few bits of things to show him what it did ending with my run across all the threads. He seemed quite impressed, for him anyway. He didn't insult it.

When I'd hollowed out the main branch as far as I could with my burin, I took it over to ask Father about a rasp or something to do the rest with. He tried a few things with no success before finding a beautiful three-edged blade. It was perfect and did part of the job very quickly, but it was not long enough to reach the end.

"I'll have to haft it on to a handle." Father said. "There won't be time to do it today. I'll do it tomorrow, but the glue won't be set until the next day. What we could do today though is to take the top of the antler off. You don't want that top part on do you?"

"No, it only gets in the way."

It was quick to saw the top part off and then file it down smooth, but it left a smooth patch so I suggested that we file it all down to the bottom of the main branch. When we'd done that Father couldn't resist engraving all up the smoothed part. He was very good at engraving and carving, his weapons were much admired. I just sat and watched him. It looked really good when he had finished. There were two lines of zigzags with a pattern of branching curls between.

"It looks lovely Father. Thank you."

"The curls mean you. We named you Kizkur after your hair." I felt silly never to have thought of it, it had just been a name to me before that moment.

It looked as though it would stay fine the next day, though the wind was cold, so Ikaseraz and I put some furs on and went after honey. He usually had some bad news kept up his sleeve until we had started on something and today was no different.

"If you don't get stung accidentally you must aggravate them deliberately into stinging you. You need at least eight stings but no more than ten. That is to start getting your resistance to them. There are times that you need bee stings to get you into trance, but you need a lot. I need about a hundred for instance. But it is not safe to go for a hundred straight away, you must build up your tolerance slowly. Ten is a good number to start with. It's a pity that there won't be any more this year. The bees are going to sleep for the winter. We mustn't wake them, so we will have to wait until Spring to continue your course of gradually increasing numbers of stings." That was something anyway, after today I would get a break until Spring.

"What is the power of bees?"

"They have wings so they belong to Sky Father."

"Yes, yes. We've got beyond there haven't we?" His impatience flustered me, but I thought he was perhaps more tired than he would admit.

"They make honey, sweetness... a preservative, er..., they make very neat homes."

"Not very good. They all live together and get on with each other. They cooperate. They signify the strength in numbers."

He was chanting quietly to himself so I said nothing.

"It is the group that matters not any individual person, do you understand?"

"Yes." I said, but only so as not to upset him further. It seemed upside down to me, without the individual people there would be no group.

"We will soon come to the end of our group's normal range. Beyond there if we meet anyone we must be very polite, thank them for allowing us to use their land. It is understood between us and the south-westerns that we may gather honey here, as they have more than they need, and our area is too bleak for many bees. We have nothing to offer that they haven't got here, so we are under obligation to them."

We had been walking down the valley, sometimes beside the river, and I had noticed that there were more trees as we went towards the sun. I was busy looking for bees' nests but Ikaseraz hadn't finished

"Both our groups and many others are part of the larger gathering of people who celebrate mid-summer at Lazcux, so there are mutual obligations between us anyway."

But I was more interested in bees than politics and pointed at what looked like a nest to me. He agreed and as we approached the tree he made a continuous low-pitched thrumming in his throat, I guessed that he was speaking to the bees. It was at this first tree that his bad mood was reversed. He spotted that there were claw marks on the trunk.

"Look, look a bear has scratched this tree, it is a sacred one. Get out your bear tooth and thank bear-spirit for guiding us."

We did so and I was relieved to see him look so pleased.

"How did the bear scratch the bark so high up?"

"That's not specially high. It stands on its back legs and stretches up with its front ones."

"But, look" I reached up the tree and pretended to scratch with my nails. It was nowhere near as high as the claw marks.

He laughed at me.

"But the bear is four times as tall as you."

I had never seen one so couldn't argue, but he saw I was sceptical.

"This was probably a young one. They grow bigger than that. When we go to Lazcux I'll show you some bear claw scratchings quite a bit higher than those. They use several caves to visit bear-spirit, I think they pass through the walls to spirit-world at the scratched points, as we use engravings on the walls to show us where to pass through. There are no marks of their claws in our cave though, perhaps the entrance is too low for them."

The tree did not look too difficult to climb. Ikaseraz gave me a push to get me on the lowest branch, that's always the hardest part of any climb. Once among the branches it was fairly easy to get up to the nest. I only took half the honey so they would have some for the times they woke up during the winter. With only one sting I was pleased with myself when I got back down. We transferred the honey from my small collecting bag to the large one Ikaseraz was carrying. After we had made our reverences to the tree we set out in search of more.



It was quite a long time before we found another bees' nest, but after that one we found several more in the same area. Only one was impossible to reach. The lowest branch of its tree was much too high for me, even standing on Ikaseraz's shoulders which he did not like at all. We needed a ladder, but carrying one we would never have got this far. He was satisfied with my thirteen stings.

On our way home he said

"I believe there is some deep connection between bears and bees. When I was a young man I found a bees' nest inside the skeleton of a bear and it seemed very fitting to me. I took the skull of that bear and set it on a sacred rock in the spirit-cave that I used at that time."

I looked at him surprised.

"You probably didn't know that I have not always belonged to this group. I used to live a long way further to the east. When you are grown up I will tell you how I came to be this group's enchanter."

Something else I had to wait until I was grown up for.

As we came near to our camp we were met by one of the hunters looking very anxious. His wife had been in labour for several hours and he wanted Ikaseraz to come, he didn't know if she was alright or not. Ikaseraz told him to go home and calm his wife if he could and we would be with him as soon as we could gather what was needed from our shelter. The 'we' shook me at first but I realised I had to learn how to do it sometime. But I had hoped to cosset my stings, no time for that. At our shelter he handed me the honey bag to store away while he searched through his things for the birthing kit. I didn't know what was in it or what to expect. Then we were out of the door and running, I'd never seen Ikaseraz move so fast. The man was waiting for us at his door and ducked inside quickly to make way for us.

The woman was lying on her sleeping furs and looked horrible to me. Her face was twisted in a way I wouldn't have thought possible and was running with sweat. Her hair was already wet, I supposed from sweat too, and at intervals she would scream so loudly I thought it must be a banshee. I found out later that the other children had long since been taken away by a neighbour. It was just the four of us. Ikaseraz told the man to boil up some water for purification, but he said he had already done that but did not know what to do with it.

"Give it to me and boil some more." He tested the boiled water to see how hot it was, then poured some into a smaller bowl and put his hands in it. Then he gestured to me to put my hands in while he chanted over all our four hands.

"Throw that water away outside" he told me and filled another bowl with the rest.

The woman had removed her clothing from her lower half and when I returned Ikaseraz was putting the purification water all over the bared skin. Her belly looked enormous to me. There was a really bad smell. He told me to intone one of the chants he had taught me that was a general one to implore the spirits for help. I thought what he was chanting must be one for birthing.

"Is that water boiled yet?" he shouted at the man.

"It nearly is."

"Bring it here as soon as it boils." He was extracting a potion from his kit and pouring it into a cup. Then he extended the cup to me to show me that the potion came up to the first engraved mark inside. Cold water brought the level up to the second mark and the boiling water, when the man carried it over, brought the level to the third mark.

In a pause between bouts of screaming he managed to get the woman to drink it.

"We must wait now for it to take effect,"

"What will it do?"

He lowered his voice although the man had gone to the other side of the shelter as if he were trying to keep as far away as he could.

"It relaxes the passage that the baby must come through, so enlarging it. It has opened somewhat

already, but not enough and the woman is getting exhausted. It should speed things up."

We waited and waited. The woman's screams had lessened, which made things easier for me, I think I hoped it meant they were easier for her. After some time Ikaseraz examined her again. He looked grim, but the man did not seem to notice. So he went over to him and touched him to get his attention.

"My assistant and I are going outside to consult the spirits. Watch her and call us at once if she seems to be worse."

I was rather simple at that time and when we were outside I expected that we would consult the spirits. But Ikaseraz just said

"You must be prepared for a long hard night. The outcome may not be good. The baby has moved down as I hoped, but I am fairly sure that what I can see is not its head. A baby's head is soft, but not that soft, I think it is coming out bottom first. Once it starts to come it must come out fast or the mother's birth passage may suffocate it.

We may have to pull the baby out, it is difficult but there is no time to think. The baby will be wet and slippery so take that into account if you are needed to pull, and do whatever I say immediately."

I could see he was worried.

"Do you think the mother might die too?"

"We should bear it mind, but if the spirits wish it, we should be able to save at least one of them. I could drug the mother but I need her awake to push. She doesn't seem to have the strength to push as hard as she should. We'd better go back in."

It seemed a very long night, but at the end of it there was still no baby. The woman was mostly torpid by then except when she would suddenly rouse and scream. We managed to get her to drink some water and took turns to have some breakfast ourselves. Ikaseraz said we had better get some sleep in turns, I was to go first. The father was already asleep. The sun was high, towards noon, when Ikaseraz woke me urgently.

"Compose yourself and then come here quickly. The baby's coming now."

I shook my hair back, worked my arms and legs for a moment, then joined him beside the mother. He had been right, the bottom and legs were already showing.

"Move round there. Yes, now grasp one leg in each hand. When I say, pull firmly but gently." He had both hands on the baby's trunk.

"Pull." We did but nothing happened except that the woman groaned.

"The head must be misaligned. We will have to turn it." His eyes looked into mine, and I thought I could read them,

"We'll turn it, very carefully, towards you, a quarter turn. Now."

We did and at the same moment the woman sat up and pushed. The head came out all at once and he screamed so loudly that he woke his father who got up and rushed across. The mother lay back panting and the father put his arms round her gingerly. Between us Ikaseraz and I got the baby boy washed and wrapped, after I had cut the cord under instruction. As I did not know the correct rituals I just watched Ikaseraz perform them. If the baby lived he would be given his real name in the cave.

With nothing more we could do we left the father to care for them.

"The mother was looking better at the end, wasn't she?"

"That was too much for her strength, I don't think she will survive the winter. The boy, well maybe." I thought then that it would be better to give birth in Spring.

When we got home Ikaseraz went straight to sleep. I didn't because I knew I wouldn't sleep that night if I did. Deciding not to start a meal in the cookbag, in case Ikaseraz slept through, I went to see Mother. I needed to talk it through with her before I knew how to feel about it. I had been frightened, bored, disgusted but I had helped to pull a baby into the world. She said all the right things as I had known she would. She made me out to be a hero and almost convinced me that mother and baby would live.

"Anyway it is a very good thing that you have got the experience now of a difficult birth. You may need it."

"But what if Ikaseraz wasn't here. If I was the Enchanter, who would deliver my babies?"

"I would of course, or... Eraminpe."

No, there couldn't be a time when Mother wasn't here. I didn't have to think about that because Father came in then and was wanting to show me the fine tool he had made of the three-edged blade. It was lovely in itself as all his tools were, he had already decorated the handle. He had carved in a wolf cub and a narwhal tusk.

"You've done it already! Can we use it now?" He was eager to, so I went back to my shelter to collect the instrument. Ikaseraz still slept.

Father started to enlarge the hollow that I had begun with my burin.

"Do you want to do it?"

"No, you do it." His hands were bigger and stronger, and anyway so much more skilful. Of course I was hopping about trying to see properly and getting in his way by wanting to try a note on it. I wouldn't have dared do that with Ikaseraz. But he soon finished despite me and handed it over. I tried each note and then a small tune, it needed retuning but I could do that later. He had been more right than I had thought. The sound was richer altogether. It held some power now.

I drew breath, but he said

"No need for thanks." I knew that really and smiled at him.

Chapter 6

Ikaseraz didn't wake until the next morning as I had thought might be the case. It took him longer than usual to get ready, and I breakfasted without him. We were going to see how the family with the new baby were getting on and I was soon ready.

"Don't rush me." he said, although I hadn't. I went outside to see what sort of day it was, but was rather sorry I had. Dark grey clouds and a cold wind, so I went back inside.

Our traps would have to be emptied today or scavengers would get everything, and it would be me that did them from the look of Ikaseraz. I made a heartfelt reverence to Misumena to keep vultures and bears away.

When we were ready and left the shelter there was an ugly yellowish light in the sky and I went back for our waterproofs. The rain was coming down hard by the time we got to the family's shelter. The father came forward eagerly when he saw it was us and put our wet things by the fire. The baby was trying to suckle but screwing up his face and screaming. The woman looked grey-skinned and listless, but she or, more likely her husband, had tidied her hair and put it up. Ikaseraz examined her breasts and then the baby.

"You haven't enough milk, I expect you guessed that?" She nodded as if it concerned someone else. He went over to the father who seemed to be making us a drink.

"Jaso has just lost a baby, did you know?"

"No, I've had no time for anything."

"She's a helpful woman. She's quite near you too. I'll ask her if she will wet nurse your baby. Have you decided what to call him?"

"Yes, he's Sinotsu." That was odd, I wanted to ask why, but Ikaseraz did.

"His mother and I both thought the same of him. A stranger. He does not look or behave like our other children." The mother nodded agreement. Ikaseraz and I said

"Hello Sinotsu" to the baby but I don't think he noticed. We had a welcome hot drink with the father and I carried one over to the mother and helped her drink it.

Ikaseraz left dried herbs and powders with the father explaining how to administer them to his wife.

"And make sure she has lots of fluids. A little food if she can stand it, honey if you have any, perhaps some broth."

Once outside, and on our way to see Jaso, Ikaseraz said

"That is a strong baby. I've every hope he will live. But the mother, I'm not hopeful there. Though she shows no signs of childbirth fever, not yet anyway. If we can get to the cave later we will hold a life-holding for them. You need to get to the traps as soon as you can, I'll go and see Jaso."

The weather was worse on the tundra, the rain was sleet up there, and there was very little in the traps anyway. I reset them and hurried back down with the meagre take. We had better luck at the fish traps. The river was high and I had a struggle to get the traps up against the strong current, but it was worth it for several good fish. It was a slower return as I was burdened, but the rain had stopped. It was unpleasantly muddy and the wind was even colder. I was very glad to get home where Ikaseraz had a hot drink ready for me.

"Your nose is red."

"I'm surprised it isn't frozen." More wet clothes to dry. He could see what I had found in the traps and just nodded as I got it out.

"Jaso is willing to feed Sinotsu. I was sure she would be. She even seemed pleased that her milk would be used. Perhaps she will be more comfortable with it sucked out." I didn't want to think about it, it sounded so messy.

"She's over there now. Did you think him strange?"

"Sinotsu? No. He seems like any other baby."

"Mm."

"Should I have done?"

"Not necessarily." It was not Sinotsu whom I found strange.

There was work for me to do, with the catch to store away and the evening meal to keep going. But when I looked up I could see that Ikaseraz was fidgeting. He went out suddenly and came back almost at once.

"Prepare me a little toadflax. I'm going to trance lightly, to prophecy." I handed him his pipe, but couldn't find toadflax though I knew he had shown it to me.

"That one. That one, here." He prepared it himself scowling at me. It took nearly the whole pipeful to have an effect but I saw that he was far away before it was finished and gently took it out of his hand. I knocked it out into the fire. He made odd noises, even for him, while he was in trance, howling and growling and scratchy scraping sounds. They made me uncomfortable and shivery, I was glad when he returned.

"We must all get to the cave at once. I must tell the Chief Elder, it's very urgent but must be organised."

"What...why?"

"Collect everything we'll need for tonight and possibly tomorrow. There's a blizzard coming. There will be deaths if we stay in our shelters." He left at once and I started gathering stuff together. It was like a trip anywhere I told myself, but it was not. We would not need our lightweight shelter. I knew there was water in the cave, but didn't know if it was drinkable. I packed some anyway because it would not be far to carry it. Food of course and sleeping-furs. The sacred objects would have to come with us, if the shelter blew down they could be destroyed, but I wasn't allowed to touch them. But what I could touch I packed, my white bear's black claw and the obsidian mammoth. I put extra warm clothing for us both in my pack to leave room in Ikaseraz's for the mask and other things of power. Then I thought that we should take spare leathers and ropes, to keep them safe, we might have to remake our shelter when we got back. It would need two trips if we took all this stuff. I needed Ikaseraz to say what we should do.

He returned looking distracted, but concentrated on our things when I asked him.

"We'll go immediately with as much as we can carry, most important first. Then when we come back for the second trip there should be less to carry, and I'll check then that Sinotsu's family are not in trouble. I mentioned them to the Elders but they have got too much to get done as it is."

The wind was stronger already as we walked with as much speed as we could manage to the cave. Some families were there before us, reserving spaces for their things. We found a place that suited us, by the cave wall where things could be leaned against it. It would be furthest from the fire which some people were tending to, but we had plenty of good furs with us.

"We had better bring some fuel too the second time we come, not everyone will be able to carry some." Ikaseraz said. He was impatient to get going and we set off back straight away. He left me at our shelter

to gather the stuff and went out to see how Sinotsu's family were getting on. There were a few snowflakes on him when he got back.

"It's all organised, but we'll walk along with them in case we can help. Jaso is taking the baby, he's already strapped to her chest. The Elders have found a strong young hunter to help the father carry his wife in an aurochs hide. They have to pass us here on their way so we'll walk behind them."

And a slow walk it was, with the snow coming on harder all the while. Though Sinotsu's mother was small anyway and quite wasted by this time, the men carrying her needed frequent rests. They were both strong men, it must have been the awkwardness of the burden. By the time we reached the cave entrance we were all white with snow and brushed ourselves off before going in. The sky was dark as evening though it was only mid-afternoon. Ikaseraz got in rather stiffly on hands and knees, then Jaso moved in with the baby, quickly with one supple movement. I stayed outside to see if any help was needed to get the mother inside. It was a slow and awkward business for a while but at last she herself rolled over and over on the ground until she was inside. A place had been found for her near the fire, and although she managed to walk to it with the support of the two men, she lay down at once on the aurochs hide and I think slept. Ikaseraz paid respects to the spirits for the group but there was no ceremony. This was a practical gathering and we split up into family groups. Mother, Father, Oskol, Eraminpe and Wolf were quite near us. With two strong adults they had had no difficulties making the move, though Mother was worried they might not be able to sleep with everybody packed in and belongings taking up a lot of space too.

Everybody said that the water at the back of the cave was good for drinking, but I was glad we had brought some. Collecting the cave water was difficult and you couldn't do it without getting wet, which was not good in that cold weather. We ate a little of our food supplies. I think everyone was being sparing with no knowing how long we might have to stay here.

The blizzard came on at its hardest when most people were beginning to settle to sleep. It was lucky that the entrance to the cave faced south and the wind was blowing the snow from the north, so none came in. I looked out of the opening before going to sleep but could see nothing but fast blown snow. It was dark by then but I don't think I could have seen any more if it had been daylight.

It was hard to get to sleep with people moving about and coughing and babies crying, but I must have slept for a good long while. Suddenly everyone was awake though at a great noise. It was Wolf. She was dashing around the cave over people and scattering things about all the while barking, growling and howling. She was always so quiet I could not believe it. My first feeling was embarrassment at our family having woken everybody up. The torches had all been put out but several people lighted theirs again at the fire. Then there was a very loud shout from near the entrance

"Help... Come here... Help."

I ran with everyone else before even thinking. There was a fight of some sort with arms and spears, then I saw blood. Only then did I see, with such a jolt of fear, that there were at least three lions in the cave just near the entrance. I had never seen lions before and knew there was nothing I could do, I just stood there. Father appeared beside me, even he looked afraid. He moved between me and the lions and I could see no more. I turned and saw that Mother had hold of both Oskol and Wolf. There was shouting and screaming from near the entrance but I saw nothing as Father drew me to him and brought me back to our place. He spoke quietly to Ikaseraz, who gathered up some things and left for the cave entrance. Father took me to sit with Mother and we just looked at each other for a while.

"The lions fled when they saw us all roused, but it looks as though one of Esonde's boys has been attacked. The younger one. Ikaseraz is treating him, no - you're staying here Kizkur. The blizzard has stopped, but even so those lions must have been desperate to come into the cave. I've never known that happen before, we shall have to post a look-out at the entrance in future. It could have been much worse if Wolf hadn't roused us, well done Wolf."

He put his hands round Wolf's head, then stroked down her neck. She whined and wriggled with

pleasure.

Ikaseraz came back after some while.

"Only one person injured, Esonde's son. His lower leg is badly mauled. I've done what I can with pellitory and brank ursine and bandaged it up. But I think the lion's teeth went through to the bone, he may lose the leg, maybe worse. If he survives I can't see how he can be a hunter."



Nobody said anything, we all knew the next few days would tell one way or the other. Father said something quietly to Ikaseraz. I supposed he was saying that if the leg had to come off he did not want me to be there. I was not going to argue. We settled down again for what was left of the night, with Oskol proudly cuddling Wolf.

When we woke in the morning I went with Ikaseraz to see how Esonde's son was doing. The whole family was awake and the boy moaning. Ikaseraz gave him something for the pain and rebandaged the wounds. As he was treating him the first sun came in through the entrance. It was bright with reflecting in off the deep snow.

Everyone was awake by then and wanting to get back to camp to see what damage the blizzard had done. We all had a quick breakfast and set off. The snow was up to people's knees in places which impeded us all but especially the children. Esonde had a big family so no help was needed for his son, but Father took turns with others carrying Sinotsu's mother. Though everybody, I'm sure, had waterproofed their boots some started to leak on the return to camp and unfortunately Ikaseraz's were two of them. It was with relief that I saw that our shelter was one of the few still standing and Ikaseraz was soon inside and drying his feet by the new-lit fire. He gave thanks to the narwhal's tusk. Mother and Father were not so lucky and I left our shelter to help them get theirs back up. There was snow everywhere and my hands were soon too cold to do anything so I went back home to join Ikaseraz in having a hot drink and a warm up. He found an old pair of boots and we waterproofed them together, it

was no use doing his current ones until they were thoroughly dried out. The old pair were good enough for him to go about the camp in. He would soon have to go and treat Esonde's son's wounds and he wanted to check on Sinotsu's mother too.

While he was out I re-did some of our shelter's lashings and unpacked as far as I was able. It was good to be home and I happily got our stew cooking. He looked tired when he got back and he arranged the sacred objects slowly then re-blessed our shelter. We slept well that night.

The next day was very cold though sunny. The snow was frozen to ice after yesterday's slight thaw. Even with spikes lashed to his boots it would be hard for him to get to the injured boy, so I got my spikes on too and we went together. It was a shock to me to see the boy's leg. I had imagined a few tooth marks, but it seemed to be all ripped apart, a horror of red flesh still bleeding and oozing yellowish matter. Ikaseraz told me later that the lion must have ripped with its claws as well as biting. I felt weak at the knees and was no help at all. His mother seemed too shocked to do anything but sit and gaze at it.

Back at our shelter I made us a hot drink, more for something to do than anything else, but we were glad of its warmth inside us.

"We will have to hold a healing ceremony for him soon, but we must also have our weather-changing one. I think the best thing would be to combine them and hold them in the cave, then everyone can come and we are surer of the spirits' attention there. As you are a child like the patient I want you to lead the healing ceremony. Don't worry I'll go through it with you several times beforehand and I'll be right behind you if anything should go wrong. I will do the weather ceremony first and then you will do the boy's healing. It is a responsibility but I think you are ready for it."

"We couldn't get the boy to the cave with this ice."

"No, certainly not. I have asked several spirits for help for him, but as soon as the ice goes I think we should hold a full ceremony."

So, instead of going skating with the other children as I had hoped, I spent the next few days learning all about healing and weather rituals.

But it was not long before the thick clouds returned and the ice melted. The two ceremonies were to be held in the middle of the day, so that Esonde's family would have time to get the boy to the cave and afterwards to get him home in time for him to sleep through the night. But when I saw the boy in the cave he was already deeply asleep there. Perhaps Ikaseraz had given him a draught, it would be a bad thing for the spirits to hear him crying or screaming. Everybody who could get there had done so. There was nobody who was not worried by the increasing cold, and similarly with the healing, everyone wanted to implore the spirits' help for the boy. I noticed that Sinotsu and his mother were not there, she must have been feeling ill. Jaso was not there either, so she must have been taking care of them.

Ikaseraz looked very imposing in his sacred mask, it was like having a stranger present. The drums alone helped him into trance, but we had agreed that after a certain time I would play my stringed instrument both to summon him back to this world and to call to the south wind. After I had played the necessary refrain through a couple of times I heard a flute joining in. I would have known the sound anywhere and turned to smile at Mother accompanying me on her reindeer bone.

It was a relief when Ikaseraz came back to us, though I had felt less concern for him this time. He addressed the group when he was strong enough, but he did not think there was much cause for hope. He looked depressed as he helped me prepare for the healing. As one not yet initiated I could not wear the mask of course, but I held the sacred flail for the first time.

They had brought the boy to the fire and as I approached him I felt Ikaseraz's hand squeeze my shoulder. He stood behind me as he had promised. The drums started with a slow rhythm and I passed the flail all around the boy in time to them. Ikaseraz had lit the pipe and passed it to me as the hunters started their dance. As I smoked it and danced around the sleeping boy I felt that the hunters were

urging me upwards and stopped wondering if there were elecampane in it. The more I danced the taller I felt until my head was near the roof of the cave which became a noisy vortex that I soared upwards through. The spirit-world seemed a dreary place when I got there. It was grey and foggy so I could see very little. A snake that I felt I should recognise flew past saying something that I could not catch. A large cobweb blocked my path ahead and a voice, which I took to be the spider's though I could not see it, said

"Too much blood." and then laughed.

I detoured round the web and headed for a greenish yellow light that I could see ahead. Closer to, I could see that the light came from a person or seemed to be a halo around them. The person was draped in loose clothing which seemed to keep turning into fog. The only part of them that I could see properly was their feet which were very large and thin, the toes were twisted about in every way and the joints swollen. The light kept going dim for a while and then coming up bright again. As it got bright the person turned and looked at me. But all I could see of their face was a large beak shaped like an eagle's which they opened to show rows of sharp teeth. It had a person's feet but it obviously was not a person. As I thought that it lashed its tail at me, the back of which looked like a saw. An arm round my waist pulled me backwards and a very deep voice said

"Don't you recognise Death when you see it?"

The arm was furry and I saw that it was a trunk. I turned in its grasp and saw a woolly mammoth.

"Whose death?"

"Only it knows. And it never speaks. I have been watching you Kizkur and I have hopes for you. You probably suspect who it is that will soon come to us."



I felt so warm and safe with the trunk round my waist, death seemed far away. The coarse furriness felt good in my hands but the best thing was the mammoth's strong and comforting smell. Someone had told me once that nothing had a smell in the spirit-world, they were wrong.

"You know my name. What is yours?"

"Name? No. What would you like to call me?"

"Mammoth, I suppose, would that be alright?"

"Perfect."

The slightly tickling feel of its fur was so attractive that I stroked and stroked its trunk, perhaps it was presumptuous.

"They are playing you back."

I could hear then the sound of strings and

a flute.

"But..."

"Do not linger, we will meet again."

The lovely warm smell faded and I was looking into Ikaseraz's eyes. The concern on his face was replaced by his usual sternness.

Mother sat me up and said

"We were worried, dear, you made such strange noises." I rested against her for a moment then drew breath to speak.

"Say nothing until we have spoken together." said Ikaseraz. He helped me to a quiet corner because I was a bit shaky.

"Tell me everything."

"A flying snake said something about emeralds, I think. It was foggy and cold. Then I saw Death."

"Describe it." I did so and then told him how the woolly mammoth had pulled me away with its trunk.

"That is clear enough. The spirits say that the boy will die and you should not be involved. So I must decide what to say to his parents. You will say nothing at all." He glared at me, as though I could begin to think of anything to say to the boy's family. The responsibility was his, to my great relief. I just wanted to sleep but we had to pack up and go home. Once in the open again and the fresh air I felt better. My first healing ceremony had failed. But it was the will of the spirits and not due to my shortcomings.

Chapter 7

Esonde's son died three days later. Ikaseraz had spent much time at their shelter, mostly keeping the boy sedated I think. He told me later that he had said to the parents that removing the leg might increase his chances of surviving, but not by much. Also, because he was young and only small, the operation itself could kill him. His parents decided not to put the boy through so much pain. At that time I just made the simple assumption that the boy died naturally, but I have wondered since whether Ikaseraz increased the dose of the sedation to a lethal level. Of course I never asked him.

Everybody who could went to the funeral at the stone circle near Vezeru. It was a cold day but the snow held off. I wondered, if Wolf had not woken us all, how many more might have been joining the boy. It would have been company for him. Ikaseraz had that in hand though, we went back from the circle to the cave where he tranced for a long time calling on the boy's ancestors to come and meet him.

It made for a depressing start to a long cold winter. Not long enough to learn all that had to be learned though. We stayed by the fire as much as we could, but there were many visits to illnesses, and one broken leg. A hunter fell on the ice and was carried home with one of the poles strapped to the leg. They had killed nothing.

"You can't be learning all the time. You enjoy painting?"

"Who doesn't?"

"I don't for one. But it has to be done. I've got something for you." He rummaged his things and brought out what looked like a piece of old leather. He smoothed it out and I saw that it was circular and hairy on one side. I would have known that fur anywhere.

"It's mammoth hide." I stuck my nose in it and took a great breath. "It even smells faintly still of mammoth."

"You need to make yourself a prayer mat. I was saving this for my apprentice before you were born. But it does seem particularly appropriate for you after your experience at the healing ceremony."

"It's wonderful. Oh, thank you Ikaseraz, I love it."

"If I were you I would shave off the fur and braid yourself a belt from it. Make it bigger than you need now then you can use it for hanging your talismans on when you are an adult enchanter. The mat will lie flatter then too. You'll see that the inside is marked up in the proper way for the paintings you will add. The circle in the centre is much the most important as the place for your spirit-guide. You will paint that after your initiation and then nobody else must ever see it, except other enchanters of course. But the surrounding spirits you can paint this winter and then you can use your mat."

"Won't the pictures wear out and the paint come off on my knees?"

"No, no, I'll show you the technique that's needed for prayer mats. It's rather like tattooing. We must prepare all the inks and paints first, so I want you to think today what you will paint around the edge, then tomorrow we can start on what you will need for those paintings."

It was exciting to choose my symbols but slightly daunting too. They would be with me for the rest of my life, and would determine the course of it, I did not doubt.

When we were ready, the next day, to start on the paintmaking, I told Ikaseraz what I had decided on and why.

"Though it's a circle, I can always position it in the same way with Earth Mother as the base and support, so a toad to represent her."

"Good"

"Then opposite, in the sky position, Sky Father's symbol, a snowy owl."

"That's your axis fixed well."

"I'm not sure about the positions for the remaining four, but I thought that they should be symbols for what the group needs for life. So for water, a salmon."

He smiled, "Yes, you are the salmon expert." It's true I was proud of that salmon.

"That yellow spider which came from Misumena, to help us catch food. For warmth, a dragon breathing fire. And for protection from harm, my woolly mammoth. Do you think the salmon and the spider next to Earth Mother, and the dragon and mammoth next to Sky Father?"

"Yes, that would be entirely appropriate."

"Do you think that the woolly mammoth might be my spirit-guide when I'm initiated?"

"It's not at all likely that your spirit-guide would appear to you before initiation."

That was a disappointment, I had been dreaming of having the warmth and strength of that spirit always with me.

"There is one curious thing about your choices. Have you had any spirit contacts that you have not told me about?"

"No, you know I need you to tell me what it means."

"Yes, I was fairly sure you would tell me. You have had no signs from an eagle, a stag or a blackbird?"

"No. What's a blackbird?"

"They used to live here but I suppose they've moved south like so many. It's a bird that's entirely black except for a bright yellow beak. Between the size of a ptarmigan and a snow bunting. Some call it the ousel."

"I've never heard of it."

"No, I suppose not. It just seemed strange that you chose the salmon, the owl and the toad. They are three of the six oldest spirits that there are. With the eagle, stag and blackbird they are called the Ancients."

"Have they more powers than the other spirits?"

"Not that I know of. They are said to be the wisest. Wisdom comes with age, supposedly."

"None of those will need my beautiful purple."

"No. With black, white and red and some earthy ochres you'll be fine. Don't look so wistful, we'll paint you yourself in purple at the mid-summer gathering."

"Will you help me with drawing of the six spirits? I don't have to do it all myself do I? I've never drawn a toad."

"Yes, I'll help if you like. We could have a practice first before we punch the outline into the leather. I'm a bit shaky on toads myself."

We spent the rest of that day grinding the pigments and getting all sticky with the binders. Or rather I did, Ikaseraz sat smoking and watching me. That evening I shaved off the fur from the reverse side of

the mat. It was quite coarse and I thought would spin well, but it did not until I mixed it with some goat wool. Three hanks of mammoth to one of goat span nicely though and I got a good long thread with scarcely any lumps. But it was really too short to plait into a belt long enough for a woman (as I was bound to be one day), so I asked Ikaseraz for a suitable length of leather thong. I was pleased with the result when I had plaited together my thread with the leather. And I thought the leather would add strength. We had various sea shells with holes already drilled for threading, but only two cowries had holes big enough, so I used them to tie the ends through. The belt went round my waist twice, just, so that would be fine when I was big, to go round once and leave the cowries hanging. The mammoth fur belt felt good, it reminded me of its trunk round my waist.

It took us several days, in the end, to get the painting of the mat right. We sketched it out in charcoal first, but even that stage took a couple of days practising. Then Ikaseraz punched in the black outlines as he had promised. I did the painting, though the technique he showed me was more like dyeing the leather than painting really. I thought I'd done well, but some ways with paint, that he showed me at the end, made the animals look much more real. We were both pleased with the result, although it had taken longer than expected. I thought it would be just perfect with my spirit-guide in the centre, but it might be a long wait for my blood flows to start so I could be initiated.

I had used my prayer mat many, many times before that long winter ended. Ikaseraz had been wrong, on a warm day when all the ice had melted, Sinotsu's mother came out of their shelter on her own feet. She had survived the winter. Some hadn't, of course. Hankagorri had gone in the bitterest cold after the solstice with the lung disease. And more than usual newborns had died. But many had got through, and there was much high-spiritedness.

When the first eider ducks and grey geese - the white geese came later - were seen returning from the south we held a thanksgiving-for-Spring ceremony in the cave and there was much dancing and general rollicking. I played my stringed instrument but I doubt if anyone heard me.

The ice took longer to melt up on the tundra, but even that went eventually, and I went up and set out our traps again. Later I was kept busy up there. Spring brought such plenty with the nesting birds. It is always said that ground-nesting birds have many predators, and I was one of them. We never took a sitting bird, because we wanted them to return next year, though I'm sure you could just pick a female eider up, they cling to their nests so determinedly. But we took up to half of the eggs and down. It was thought that they could lay more and produce more down. They never stopped coming in the Spring so it must have been alright. The down was so important to us that we might have taken it anyway. Nobody would have got through winter without their down-filled underwear. And fresh eggs were a very welcome treat after all that preserved food.



Summer never really came that year. The white hares never changed to their brown summer fur and we rarely saw the sun, but the mid-summer solstice gathering in its honour was always held, so we set out for Lazcux. All the groups around here would be there, and there was much anticipation, particularly among the single. There was the hope of new partners and possibly even marriages. That would mean some people leaving our group, usually girls, though depending on the circumstances of the families involved young men might sometimes join the new wife's group. Things usually evened out and we would gain some young women as well. The older people were hoping for profitable trades or new and interesting things to see from traders to the east. The children were only interested in showing off and playing. I had begun to stop seeing myself as a child and thought only of the other enchanter's and what power objects they might have.

It was a long journey and fairly slow as everybody came if they could. Ikaseraz had advised Sinotsu's mother not to attempt the journey, her husband's sister stayed with her. The sister had a bad foot and did not really want to walk that far. We all carried temporary shelters and food to last us there and back, and young children and old people slowed us down. I thought that Ikaseraz was walking more slowly than last year. It took us a few days though I cannot remember now how many.

We were not the first arrivals by a long way, but found a reasonable camp place not too far from water. It was near the middle of the day by the time we had all put up our shelters and arranged everything to our satisfaction. Ikaseraz felt like sleeping after we had eaten so I decided to go and look at the cave. I could remember the Hall of the Bulls from last year. It was where the ceremony to the sun was held. But there were many other sections to the cave and I wanted to see them in the light of what I had learned since then. Lazcux is a very much bigger cave system than ours at Gabillou and is held jointly by all the groups in the area, not like Gabillou which belongs only to our group.

It was cold in there, the fires had not been lit. They would be lit this evening I thought. The ceremony lasted all through the night and ended only when everyone came out to watch the sun rise.

I felt more than a little frightened, not that I might get lost in the cave, I didn't think that would happen, but that I might unintentionally pass through the cave walls into spirit-world and meet with evil there and there would be nobody to call me back. The painted spirits seemed to be enticing me to do just that and I did not think them all to be well intentioned. My torch flickered sometimes causing them to look at me. Then I saw a familiar face, it was a mammoth, and I immediately felt good again. It might even have been my mammoth, I couldn't tell from here.

I had brought my purple body paint and my stringed instrument because I wanted the spirits' blessing

on them. Kneeling down and sitting on my heels I put them on the ground in front of me and spoke to the mammoth spirit about them. Even if it was a different one I trusted it. The smell of mammoth came to me very strongly and I knew that power had been transferred to my instrument and the paint.

When I got back to the Hall of the Bulls there was an old woman lying face down on the floor. I could see she was an enchanter though it was not possible to tell which spirit she was conferring with. I tried to walk quietly by without disturbing her but without success.

"Do not pass by. I am in this world." I stopped of course and she sat up with no difficulty, so perhaps she was not so very old. But her hair was white and her face looked aged. It had the look of age having improved it if anything, she certainly must have been fairly ugly even when young. It was rude of me to stare like that.

"I am Kizkur of Gabillou and apprentice to our enchanter, Ikaseraz."

"Gabillou, so you are far to the west. I am Ukitu, enchanter of the Horse Cave people, that is far to the east of here. How is Ikaseraz? He was of the Horse Cave when he was young. He is a fine enchanter, you have a good teacher."

"Yes, I have. He feels age slowing him down, otherwise he is well."

"Come, sit by me and show me your harp." She could only mean my instrument.

"Do you call it that in the east? I thought I had invented it."

"If it's the only one in the west, then you did. Let me see it." I handed it to her. She ran her fingers over the carved decoration.

"My father did that for me."

"He's very skilful. And you've done well to make this by yourself. Did you choose antler over wood or was it what you had?"

"We have a lot of antler and very little wood."

"It will sound different, I'm sure. May I play it?"

"It would please me if you would."

She played a long piece which sounded quite strange to me, using combinations of notes that would never have occurred to me.

"Its sound is lighter than the wood ones I'm used to. Very attractive. Thank you." She gave it back to me.

"I wanted it to sound like the south wind. To sound gentle and above all warm. Ikaseraz wants me to be a weathermonger. He is hoping that I shall be able to make the cold go back to the Ice Giants so we can be warm again, but I don't know how. I'm sure to disappoint him."

"No, don't say that, Kizkur. Nothing is sure. And why should you not be the one to do it? If the spirits favour you, you can do anything. Remember that. What is in that container? Old people are allowed to be nosy."

"It's body paint. The purple colour was a present from Ikaseraz. He said it came from a big shellfish." I showed it to her and she really looked impressed.

"What a beautiful colour. I've never seen that before. What will you paint?"

"I can't decide. But I want something painted on both my arms. I could only do my left arm anyway. I

shall have to ask Ikaseraz to paint my right."

"He'll probably be busy preparing for the sun ceremony. Would you like me to paint your arms? My preparations are all made."

"Oh yes please. That would be wonderful."

"Shall we go out of the cave? Daylight would be better for painting by."

She rose very gracefully and showed up my awkward scramble to my feet. When she made a gesture of reverence to the bulls I copied her.

Outside there was some sunshine which dazzled us at first but she was right, of course, it was better for painting by.

"Wait for me here. I need my brushes. I won't be long." And she wasn't.

"That has given me time to think what to paint. Are you happy to leave it to me?"

"Yes. I can't think what I want anyway." I bared my arms and held them out to her. She started on my left, by painting a snake's head on the back of my hand. It had its mouth open to show its fangs. Then she put its body curling all round my arm several times. It was wonderful, I could almost feel a snake moving round my arm. She had brought some white for the teeth and put a dab in the eye too, but otherwise it was a purple snake.

"I love snakes, so that is for me really. But the right arm will be for you." She smiled at me, and started on the back of my right hand with a tail. It had scales standing up along the back of it.

"It's a dragon!"

"Yes, and it will breathe fire."

It did too, just above my elbow its head appeared and the flames it blew out went all round my upper arm. The flames were red, of course, but otherwise all my body painting was my lovely purple.

"Thank you, thank you Ukitu. I've never seen such painting."

"Then thank you, dear. I'll see you at the ceremony this evening." She waved and went away.

I ran to our shelter to show Ikaseraz. Luckily he was already awake because I crashed in saying

"Look at this. Look at my arms. Isn't it the best painting you ever saw?"

He studied it very closely from all angles.

"It is. Remarkable. Who did this for you?"

"Ukitu of the Horse Cave. She says she knows you, that you used to belong to the Horse Cave. Is that true?"

"Yes. Many years ago now. What did she say about me?"

"She said that you are a fine enchanter and I had a good teacher."

"Nothing else?"

"No, I don't think so."

"How is she?"

"Well, she looks old but moves like a young person."

"Mm. Lucky her."

Ceremonies were not new to me by this time, but that evening's to the sun was the most spectacular I'd ever seen. The size alone was impressive. Despite it's being mid-summer there was the biggest fire I had ever seen. It would have taken anybody quite a long time just to walk all round it. The feasting began before the sun went down, so there was some light from the entrance and we all ate by that, but by the time the trancing began the sun had set and torches were lit. All the spirits, aurochs, stags, horses and my favourite the composite spirit with two long horns, impossibly long in this world, started the dancing in the fire and torchlight. We could only follow them and everyone danced, except the players, round and round the fire. It was exhausting and after a time I was glad to sit with my harp and play it. I made sure everyone could see my painted arms, I was really proud of them though it was Ukitu who should have been. My harp playing was pretty much lost in all the noise - there was chanting and ululating as well - but I could hear it and felt that it was being produced by my purple snake with his teeth on my left hand. My dragon was keeping my back warm. There was even more noise when the ram's horn players went into the passages which opened off the Hall of Bulls and played there. The horns echoed in such a way that the spirit bulls on the walls seemed to be bellowing their accompaniment. All the trancing plants that were being smoked made the air dizzying and added to the rapture we all felt.

There were many enchanters trancing and I wondered if they met in the spirit-world or were each addressing the spirits and asking for guidance separately. I could recognise Ikaseraz easily of course by his mask and other disguising objects, but I would have liked to know which of the unrecognisable ones was Ukitu. After all the enchanters were back in this world the dancing and drinking and shouting all became even more frenzied. The older people were more calm and I saw Ikaseraz and Ukitu speaking together. When I looked up later from my harp, he had his hand on her shoulder and she was laughing up at him. Here was an enchanter that he liked then, he'd seemed very distant with the others. When they had had time to talk through the messages from the spirits - I thought that was what they were talking about but perhaps they were discussing old times - they came together over to where I was sitting.

"We believe the sun is pleased with our offerings." Ikaseraz said "Will you be alright with Ukitu? I have some people to see."

"Yes, please." I showed her my arms so that she could admire her work. She smiled and sat down beside me.

"I have something for you. Let me give it you before I forget."

She gave me a boar's ear that had been made into a purse or small pouch. It was beautiful colours, shorter hair of many browns shading into black with long pale red hairs going down into a point at the bottom. I stroked it and thought that I would keep the pearl Father had given me in it. She quickly silenced my thanks.

"It is important that you should have it I think. The spirits seemed to be saying that. The sun wants to be stronger here, and the spirits were probably indicating you as the channel through which they could work to bring it about. Ikaseraz and I both thought that. My spirit-guide suggested I should give you the boar's ear. My father made it for me, after a very successful hunt, many years ago now. It has acquired much power over the years. I expect you know what the boar symbolises?"

"Oh yes, courage."

"This power-object will give you courage in your fight against the Ice Giants."

I should have told her that it was she who gave me courage by believing in me, but I was too young to express myself.

"My visit to spirit-world was an unusual one this time. My spirit-guide took me to see a blackbird, I haven't seen one in this world for years."

"I know what a blackbird is, Ikaseraz told me a few days ago."

"I don't suppose he told you about the female? Some people think it dull but I love its blend of lovely soft warm browns. But it was a male that I met, a mixture of different glossy blacks. The really striking thing about its appearance though was that it had a white glowing crescent shape on its breast, like a young moon. That is the mark of the blackbird which is one of the Ancients."



"How wonderful for you to meet one of the Ancients. Ikaseraz told me there are only six. Was it very wise?"

"I don't know. It must have been, but I could hardly understand it at all. Even my spirit-guide found it perplexing. I usually remember everything a spirit has said and go through it carefully afterwards. But with this one... no, I can barely recall any of it. But I know there was a lot about scarabs which made me think of you. I had no idea why it should, but Ikaseraz says that you had a vision of yourself as a scarab."

"Yes, I did."

"It was talking about you then. It seemed to be trying hard to tell me something. But it spoke in such a strange way, the words were all intelligible but the way in which it combined them was not. At one point it said "Tooth up down hairy river source boy." Now what do you make of that? I've listened to some spirits that I'm sure were being deliberately secretive. But the blackbird was speaking truth as it saw it, I know that. Its counterparts in this world could come back here if you could force the Ice Giants northwards, so you can see it would want you to succeed. Nothing it said made any more sense to me than that, just a lot about scarabs. But both my spirit-guide and I had the same feeling at the end of it, that it was advising me to help you in any way I could. And I will. Not much physical help you can

expect from an old woman, but I will always remember your endeavours when I'm in the spirit-world."

"I shall take courage when I stroke the boar's ear and think of you helping me." We smiled into each other's eyes. Hers were a beautiful green colour. Ikaseraz joined us again and they began talking about old times. I wanted to listen but think I fell asleep. The next thing I remember was everybody going outside to greet the sun. It was hazy but we could see it just starting to appear over the horizon. We all raised our arms in prayer. The purple snake went up to praise it, I thought perhaps the sun could slide down the dragon's back and come out of its mouth.

When we were home again I asked Ikaseraz why he had left the Horse Cave people. He said he would tell me one day, but he never did.

Chapter 8

When the time came for my initiation I was somewhat more knowledgeable. Though I believe I had done my best to learn, I often got tired and overloaded under Ikaseraz's insistence. But he was probably right to drive me, when I think how ignorant of the world and the spirits I was when he first took me on I can see how well he had done.

Preparation for initiation was more about emptying your mind, he said, than filling it. I was to be completely calm to be as receptive as possible to all help and power that the spirits might be willing to give me. Not easy when I thought of that wolverine, and I'd seen worse since, not to mention Death. Ikaseraz had made me learn all the forms he knew of that Death took, but even so I had to be very wary as it constantly appeared differently.

The Chief Elder and the Chief Eldress supervised the initiations of boys and girls respectively. Ikaseraz only initiated enchanter, so there was just me. It would be in one of the passages that lead out of the cave and into the body of Earth Mother, where I had never previously been. It would be very cold as I had to do it naked, except for a loincloth. The importance of the loincloth was to prevent my being impregnated by a spirit, which was usually fatal. If you managed to survive the pregnancy you would be ripped apart during childbirth.

I had not forgotten the horrors of Sinotsu's birth. Though I had helped at many births since, some of them grim, it was that first one that stayed with me, so my loincloth would be doubly wrapped for my long exposure to spirit-world. Sinotsu's mother had lived two years after that, but she had died while miscarrying her next baby. Jaso had weaned Sinotsu then because she wanted another baby herself and could not become pregnant while giving milk.

On the day of my initiation I had to stay in our shelter all day as nobody was allowed to see me. In time for the start at sunset, Ikaseraz covered me in a cloak and led me to the cave. We had taken up there all the necessary items the previous day; my harp, a lamp and spare oil, tinder fungus, paints, burins, my white bear's claw, the bear's tooth and boar's ear and, at Ikaseraz's insistence, the obsidian mammoth.

The most important thing he had to do for me was to paint a face on my back. It was so that I could leave the spirits without showing disrespect by turning my back on them.

"This is the way. Down there you will see engravings of all the previous enchanter's spirit-guides. You can't come back to this world until you have found your own. Then you carve a picture of yours on the wall where you passed through it. In the future you will always be able to find your spirit-guide by entering the spirit-world at that point."

He handed me the pipe and the variety of herbs and fungi that he had chosen.

"That's the elecampane."

"Yes, I recognise that."

"Go now. And bring us back the power to defeat the Ice Giants." He dropped the cloak by the passage entrance and left. I lit my lamp and looked at each of the painted spirits in the main cave. The last one was Ikaseraz's raven which I asked for its wisdom to guide me on my journey. Then I went down the sacred passage. It was quite long but not difficult anywhere. At a slight widening I found what I was looking for, the carved spirit-guides. Some were painted and some not, others had the marks of paths to the spirits on them. I wondered which belonged to Ikaseraz. With my pipe prepared, using plenty of elecampane in the mix, the last thing to do was to find the six circles of respect. They were a little further down the passage but easily found. I touched each, offering respects to Earth Mother, Sky Father then the third in that row, my as yet unknown spirit-guide. The row below was the Sun, the Moon and the Stars. With all preparations made I returned to the section of cave wall I had chosen. It was

exciting to think that the next time I saw it I would carve my spirit-guide into it, and that I would never be alone again.



I lit the pipe and looked at my boar's ear for courage and the bear's tooth for strength. Then I started to play my harp and chant. But my fingers became clumsy and I was falling down a tunnel that spun around me. Lights sparkled and I heard the sound of the ram's horns being played. I fell into a bright light at the bottom, but I was unafraid because I could smell the welcoming warm smell of woolly mammoth. Its trunk caught me and set me on its neck just behind its ears.

"You knew I was coming?"

"Of course. I know everything." I wanted to believe that, it was so comforting. The mammoth set off at a slow walk and I wondered what would happen if it ran. The earth would shake except that there was no earth here.

"Where are we going?"

"I don't know."

"But you know everything."

"Some everythings are different from others."

"Oh."

"I don't know how to answer 'where' but I know who. We are going to see The Owl."

"Is there only one owl then?"

"There are many owls but this one is The Owl."

"Did you want to see me Mammoth?" There was a snowy owl sitting on Mammoth's head in front of me.

"I can't see you if you sit there."

"Shall I fly down to your trunk?"

"No. I know what you look like."

The owl rotated its head and looked at me with eyes that seemed to have seen everything since the world began.

"No, it was an uninviting place then. But I have been here a long time."

"You are an Ancient."

"Yes, the oldest...But you are the youngest, a new initiate. You have been to spirit-world before though, tell me about that. Mammoth has told me about the time you two met."

I told her all about the wolverine and the occasion when I was a scarab, and the interpretations that Ikaseraz had put upon them.

"He's right of course. He has travelled far. Finding you for a weathermonger may be his greatest insight, *****."

"You know my real name."

"We can do nothing without that. There's nobody to hear us here, you're safe."

"Thank you." rumbled a grumpy voice from below.

"Oh, be quiet you great pile of wool, it's a compliment."

"What's the plan then? I want this little scrap of a thing to push the ice back too, you know. Mammoths round here would be a fine thing, their range is getting restricted."

"Do you know anyone who could help, Mammoth?"

"I couldn't think of anyone except you."

"Her spirit-guide will be the best we can hope for."

"I'll take her there, but you won't get me to go up a mountain. Don't like them."

"Nobody would expect you to. But on the way there I think we should call on the other Ancients. They may have something to say."

"I'm sure they will have. But my confidence in our understanding it is low."

"They can be oracular I know, except Eagle of course."

"That blackbird..."

"Oh, I know."

It was time I said something.

"Is he the blackbird with a white shining crescent on his breast?"

They were both surprised and said together

"Have you met him?"

"No, but an enchanter I met at Lazcux did. She said she thought he was talking about me when he said "Tooth up down hairy river source boy"."

"Oh dear, yes that sounds like Blackbird. It conveys nothing to me."

"I'm hairy." said Mammoth. I nearly laughed but Owl took it seriously.

"You are. He could mean you, or woolly mammoths generally."

"But what about us?"

"What indeed? We must remember what he said. Tell your spirit-guide about what Blackbird said when you find it."

"He may have more to add. Shall we go to him first?"

"Yes." said Owl.

"But why..." I interrupted "Why do you want it warmer Owl? Snowy owls live in the cold."

"It must be confusing when you first come here." Suddenly the snowy owl had become a great grey owl.

"Within some limits we can be anything we want here. I am the spirit of all owls so I can quite comfortably appear as any owl. I am usually a snowy around here as it suits the area, well I tell myself that but it's vanity really because the snowy is so beautiful." It changed back and looked at me with a bit of a swagger.

"Yes, you are beautiful." I smiled.

"No-one has ever said that about me." said Mammoth.

"No I... you are very nice looking, Mammoth." I said, and when it slumped added quickly "And you have beautiful eyes."

It perked up surprisingly and said

"Do you think so?"

"We both think so Mammoth." said Owl. "But we must get going now." They closed their four really exceptional eyes, so I thought it best to close my very ordinary ones.

I opened them again when I heard voices. In front of Mammoth floated a stag which seemed to be as big as a mammoth. That confused me because it was a red deer which is a small deer compared to some. Then I wondered if Mammoth was floating too, I couldn't see from here.

"Yes, it is, in so far as that means anything." said Owl. I had got used to it reading my thoughts by now and was unsurprised.

The stag was impressive. Its antlers were disproportionately large and they glowed slightly, a warm yellow, and with its shining reddish fur, the whole feeling was of warmth. Then I saw that there was a black bird perched at the top of one of the stag's antlers. It had to be Blackbird anyway but I could see that a crescent moon appeared to be hanging round its neck which was confirmation.

"You have brought the initiate, Owl, it doesn't look very big. What might we elucidate for it?"

"All portents have suggested that this may become the weathermonger to reverse the southwards move of the ice. Any help you or Blackbird could give to help its work on that when it is an enchanter would be

useful."

"Blackbird's better at this sort of stuff than I am, though nobody wants the woods to return more than I do."

There were another two pairs of eyes looking at me now, though what they made of me, except that I was small, I couldn't tell.

"I've never seen trees like those" I said. Some large lush trees had appeared around the stag, they were nothing like the conifers I knew.

"That's oak" said Stag pointing a hoof carefully along my line of sight, "Elm there, and that's beech. My wanting their northward spread has caused them to appear." Blackbird flew off and perched in one of them though he continued to look at me.

Owl flew and perched on one of Stag's antlers. It seemed to be having a private conversation with the stag, so I whispered

"Are you a 'he' or a 'she', Mammoth?"

"No."

"No to which?"

"Both. It doesn't apply. I know it does in that other world where my mammoths live, but not to me."

"But both Stag and Blackbird must be 'he'."

"Yes, that is so, the Ancients are different in many ways. That is one of them."

"Then Owl is 'he' or 'she'?"

"Owl is 'she', Eagle is 'he', Toad is 'she' and Salmon is 'he'."

"Thank you Mammoth, I have been calling her 'it', and she knows my thoughts, so it was impolite."

"She won't mind at all, and reading your thoughts is impolite."

"I don't mind, it's quicker than having to say everything. Though I hope no hostile spirits read them."

"If we meet any I will guard both our minds from them. You will learn how to do it, practice is needed though."

Owl flew back to Mammoth's head and said

"Stag believes that business of Blackbird's about 'hairy' and so on is a prophecy and we know how unreliable they are. And we can hardly prepare for something that obscure anyway. Stag, have you any advice?"

"It's not got much velvet on it." He was looking at me again. "No, the trees are always silent as you know. Is it them you want to influence? Perhaps the sun would be a better place to start, but I have no influence there."

"We think the spirits of the Ice Giants should be persuaded to take themselves further north."

"Oh, them yes. I have seen them occasionally but we've never spoken. Blackbird says he has nothing to add."

"I don't know how you can understand him." said Owl.

"Practice I suppose, like most things. He has been perching on me for a long time."

"We'll be moving along then. Eagle is waiting for us at the Mountain. Do you know where Salmon and Toad are?"

But neither Stag nor Blackbird knew so we moved slowly on. I was getting used to Mammoth's movements by then and was enjoying our swaying progress when a peculiar-looking thing appeared. It was a moment before I recognised what I thought must be a trancing enchanter. When I looked more closely I could see that it was a man, but I didn't recognise his two long horns, the strange fur robe he was wearing, or his tail or feet. His feathers were magnificent. He had wing feathers of a bird unknown to me, they were red and pink with some black on them, attached along his arms as if they were wings. Smaller feathers from perhaps the same bird, again various pinks and reds, made a mask which covered the area around his eyes and below that was a short unplaited black beard. The horns were very long and he had them pointing forwards. I found out later that they were from an ibex which holds them pointing backwards. The tail and pelt that he wore as a cloak, I know now, were a giraffe's. The bird he had his feet from, which also supplied the feathers, was a flamingo. He didn't come from round here.



"You have travelled far Enchanter." Owl said.

"Further than I thought. I never saw a furry elephant before."

"I am no elephant, I am a mammoth." Its tone was severe.

"My apologies then. You are related perhaps."

"It must be so, but I cannot understand what they say."

"What brings you so far north?" asked Owl.

"My people are desperate. This is further than I had intended looking, but we are dying from drought, and I search for water, a source of water. The rains have failed again and the sun scorches the earth barren. The prey animals have died of thirst so we are hungry too."

"We have water when the snow and ice melt. But with so little sun the animals and plants move ever further south. They can go no further, they have come to the sea. The ice oppresses us as the sun does you."

"We die from too much sun and you from too little. Have you found any help?"

"No. We have a prophecy, but we do not know if it is a true one. We are taking an initiate to the mountain, we can only hope."

He looked at me then. My look was met by dark eyes amongst reddish-pink feathers.

"You have too little, I too much, perhaps if you and I were to mate we could even things up."

Mammoth trumpeted and threatened the southern enchanter with its tusks. He ran back in fright, they were enormous weapons.

"Here. Whatever's the matter with you?" Mammoth did not answer, so I said

"The pregnancy would kill me and they believe I am needed."

"That happens in the north then? I have come to a strange place. We mate in spirit-world where I'm from."

Mammoth was not placated and raised its tusks again.

"I'm going. I'm going." And he did. I was sorry as I wanted to hear about the southern place where there was too much sun. But Mammoth was right we could not take risks.

The gentle swaying started again as we moved on. I must have slept because I woke with my nose in Mammoth's head fur. It felt good and I lay there a while longer. When I sat up I could see that there was a marsh around us. It was not like the dark pools and peat hags that I knew from home. There were clear pools and many reeds, so it was a more southerly place that we had come to. Owl was perching on Mammoth's back behind me but she occasionally flew up and circled round looking down. I thought she was looking for Toad. Perhaps she would like to perch on my arm, I had a good view from here.

"I would, yes, but you wouldn't. My talons would break your skin." She displayed a footful of them to me, they were quite scary.

"Ah, I think I've spotted her. To your left Mammoth. Can you see her? We don't want her trodden on."

A very large toad suddenly jumped straight up in the air and Mammoth made its way carefully towards her.

"I've been expecting you, whatever took you so long? I heard you talking to that stranger and thought you would have been here ages ago. This is the girl then, looks alright. What have you found out? Did Stag or Blackbird tell you anything useful? Well, Blackbird, that stag knows nothing."

"We spoke to them. Blackbird has made a prophecy." Owl managed to say while the toad was drawing a breath.

"What is it then? Tell me the prophecy. I'm good at prophecies, always have been. Do you remember that one he made about a volcano erupting, I got that one."

"Only after it had though" Owl whispered to me. Aloud she told Toad what Blackbird had said.

"That doesn't make sense. Could Stag interpret at all?"

"He could tell it was a prophecy which was better than we could do. Mammoth thought that 'hairy' might refer to him or to the mammoths in that other world."

"Yes, he certainly is very hairy. 'River' and 'source' could go together if a normal person were speaking. It could be the source of a river that he meant."

"The source of the river Vezer is near us." I said.

"It is." said Owl "But all rivers have a source, some have several. And there are no mammoths near you, that is the problem we are trying to solve."

"Then there's that 'boy'. I don't like that, this is a girl. Rivers go 'down' but not 'up' ". Toad seemed to be getting agitated.

"What about a tooth or a boy going up? Yes, but what then? I've got no teeth, nor have you Owl. Have you got teeth girl?" I showed her them and she moved back a bit. "I don't like the look of them, though some have worse. Have you seen that Wolverine's teeth? I pretend I'm not here if I see him about."

"I met him on the Mountain once. I hope he's not there now." I said to Toad.

"No he's not there. You must see Salmon before going there though. He's nearly as hard to understand as Blackbird but at least he says less. When I saw him the other day he was going on about pearls, it took me the whole conversation to discover that he was laying a blessing on my eggs. Grateful of course but really.... my eggs have all hatched so his blessing worked. How are yours Owl?"

"Too busy this year Toad. Perhaps next."

"What are you so busy with? Oh yes, this Ice Giant thing. They're big aren't they? Have you seen the size of prey they bring down? Oh, sorry Mammoth. Have you found the Spirit Ice Giant yet?"

"No. And nobody seems to have seen it. We thought Wolverine probably worked for them as well as for the Earth's wolverines."

"Yes, and Wolf too. Haven't seen her for years." I was startled but of course they didn't mean Oskol's Wolf.

"They are probably all further north hard at work increasing their influence." said Mammoth.

"Yes, probably." agreed Owl "But we have to get our initiate to the Mountain and safely home again which rules out a trip to the north. We'll leave you now Toad, thank you for your help."

"Can't I come with you? Stag and Blackbird, no... but I could be useful."

"I'm sure you would be Toad, but we daren't risk it. It's very dry up the Mountain, you could desiccate. Better stay here where it's wet, don't you think?"

"Desiccate? Oh no. I'll stay here."

When we were out of earshot Mammoth said

"Quick thinking Owl."

"At least Salmon won't want to come with us. But he is difficult, well we'll see."

Then we were beside the widest river I had ever seen.

"It's deep too." said Owl. " He would be alright out on the bank here of course, but it is more comfortable

for him in there, and since we want him to help us we'll have to go in there. No, don't be afraid, that was just instinct, you know that it is only appearances in spirit-world, you can't drown."

We were underwater then without ever having jumped in. The current just felt cool and refreshing and there was a lovely green light. Immediately in front of us was an enormous salmon easily maintaining its position against the current. It was so big that I looked near its tail for a bite mark. There came a bass barking laugh.

"It would be a foolhardy otter that bit me." I think I blushed, it had been such a silly idea.

"Don't be abashed young human, I admired your bravery in risking a mighty current to end another's suffering."

He turned to Owl and said

"This must be the initiate mentioned previously, and this your beast of burden." Mammoth's eyes widened and its mouth opened, but I saw Owl stick a talon in its head and the mouth closed again.

"This is our friend Mammoth who has consented to take the initiate and me to the Mountain."

"I see. A fellow quester. Please accept the apologies of a foolish fish Mammoth."

"No apologies are required. I may not be looking my majestic self after a long journey."

"Aid in your quest of the Mountain is certainly not my speciality, so I surmise there is an alternative purpose for your most welcome visit."

"Indeed, Salmon, we think this girl may be the one to stop the advance of the cold and ice. We hoped you might have some advice for us in our efforts to prevent the Ice Giants making further ground at the expense of creatures who can only thrive in the warmth."

"I regretted your tidings of yet another expansion of polar conditions. Though a regular phenomenon it is in the interests of most that the powers of Wolf, Wolverine and Ice Giant be curtailed. Whether the use of force is ethical would be a matter of long debate, diplomacy on the other hand is an ever open option."

"Yes, we'd thought of talking to them." said Mammoth.

"We thought you might have some ideas of what to say. Can you think of any good arguments we might use?" asked Owl.

"Bribery or blackmail is always the most efficacious."

"Though you are technically correct, we had hoped to find some common ground where we could agree that both parties would benefit by the change."

"The aroma of hypocrisy has entered our discourse, Owl. You want it warm, the Ice Giants and white bears want it cold. Any search for common ground is fruitless. A compromise, some temperature between, would suit neither party."

"I had thought that we might try to suggest there were few of them with a big area, and many of us with a small area that is getting smaller. A natural justice argument. What do you think?"

"The past record of the natural justice argument's success in overcoming natural acquisitiveness does not inspire me with any hope."

"You have a bleak outlook on life, Salmon."

"Do you think so? I completely disagree. I think life is magnificent. Let all tails shake."

"What would you suggest then?"

"What have you to offer them?"

"The return of the great herds. Horses, bison, aurochs and" she gave Mammoth an apologetic look "mammoths. They would be better off than too. They have only musk oxen now, and they are notoriously difficult prey for wolves or men."

"Owl, that is an infinitely better argument than any I could have originated. All I can suggest is that you should be the emissary of the southern lands to the northern spirits."

"Thank you Salmon, you give me confidence, though the mission may fall to others."

I do not need to say that I was quite out of my depth during the conversation with Salmon and was glad when we were back on dry land. But Owl and Mammoth seemed really cheerful and we pressed on faster. As they obviously thought the visit to Salmon had been a success I wondered if Eagle would have good advice too. A spluttery hoot came from Owl.

"If you want to know the ideal depth for a bath or how to fall asleep in the sun, ask Eagle. He is powerful and very good-hearted, everybody likes him, but advice? No."

"I think you underestimate Eagle." said Mammoth. "More than once I have discussed problems with him and found a good resolution."

Owl looked sceptical.

"That is probably because in hearing yourself telling him the problem the solution occurred to you."

"It could have been that. But I seem to remember his making cogent remarks."

"You're starting to talk like Salmon, Mammoth. But I think there may be something in what you say about Eagle, I'm perhaps thinking of him too lightly."

"Probably a bit of both."

The conversation was ended by Eagle's coming into view and, behind him, the Mountain. It was the same one that I had seen on my first ever visit to spirit-world. Eagle looked at least ten times the size an eagle would have been in the world of our group. It seemed common here, perhaps spirits could alter their size at will.

"You're here at last. I've had a long wait."

"Sorry Eagle. You know how Toad can talk."

"All too well. This is the human who will make it warm here again?"

"We hope that is what the signs have shown. But she is still very young, we must give her time and all the help we can."

He looked at me kindly

"Initiation can be frightening. Are you alright?"

"I am thank you. Just confused." He laughed

"You're not the only one. But the next part is straightforward. Owl and I will fly beside you as you climb and keep watch for anything bad. I'm afraid we can't help you to climb it as that is part of the initiate's task. But we will be right beside you all the way, and we could help you down again if that was needed."

It was the most encouraging thing anybody had said yet and I began to think Mammoth was right about Eagle. He spoke then

"I shall leave you all here. Goodbye young initiate, all strength be with you and I wish you long and happy years with your spirit-guide."

It sounded so final that I said

"But I'll see you again soon won't I Mammoth?"

"Oh yes, I'm too nosy to stay away long." I looked at its trunk and it laughed and left.

Owl and Eagle took up their positions on either side of me.

"Do you feel ready?" Owl asked.

"Yes."

The lower slopes were easy enough. But I tired easily as we got higher and the way was steeper. At my frequent rests Owl and Eagle sat beside me, they seemed in no hurry. They kept a constant watch. Owl's head could swivel round nearly a complete circle, but Eagle moved about more. I was watching carefully for that wolverine, despite Toad's reassurance, but none of us saw anything. It was an uneventful climb if hard, not to say exhausting, and my mind felt numbed when the nest came into sight.

"We will wait for you here. What is in the nest is only for you. It looks like an eyrie. Did you build it Eagle?"

He put one foot on top of the other and looked at his talons before admitting that he had.

"Don't be shy about it. It's very good." I thought so too. The nest had a fiery glow inside it, as I remembered and brought to me the thought that my spirit-guide was just there and soon I would be with it.

The two birds looked at me.

"Strength and courage." said Owl.

"Yes." said Eagle. I started towards the nest, but the distance shrank and I was standing beside it. Eagerness overtook me and I scrambled up the pile of branches and nearly fell in on top of a beautiful white hare. It laughed

"I've been longing to meet you too."

I climbed in with a bit more grace and the hare sprang into my arms. We looked into each others eyes and nothing needed to be said which was lucky because I was crying too much to get anything coherent out. The hare's real name and mine rang in my mind and I could tell that they were in the mind of my hare too. I sat down suddenly and we just looked at each other, gazing and gazing.

There was no doubt that it was 'it' like Mammoth. It had smooth shining white fur with just a little black at its ear tips. I longed to stroke its back and immediately felt the certainty that I was welcome to. It felt so soft and warm and somehow felt white. The hare in turn put its whiskers forward and felt my face. It barely tickled. I couldn't say now how long we spent gently examining each other, it felt like forever and no time at all, as if all my life had been spent looking at this unique and radiant animal.

We came to a sense of our situation at the same moment.

"What do we do now?" I had to ask.

"We must go back to where you entered spirit-world. You must go back to your reality, I sense that you

have already been here too long. Owl and Eagle will help us to get there."

"But then I shall have to leave you. I don't want us ever to be parted."

"No it's not like that. Our minds are one now, so, wherever one is, both are. You can always come to spirit-world at that exact place in your world and I will be there because, of course, I will know you are coming. Then we can be together like this. But you will find I am always with you even in your world."

It was as my hare said. But, when we came to the place where I had to return to the cave, I still just clung to it. I was crying again but not with misery, with the joy of finding my hare. I probably barely thanked Owl and Eagle, but at least there was the painted face on my back, so I was not really turning my back on them.

The cave wall seemed no barrier and I sat for a long time on the floor by my things smiling to myself, though really I was smiling at us. Because my hare was right there in my mind. Only after a good long while did the thought come to me that I was an enchanter now. It hardly seemed real and did not matter to me at all compared with finding my hare. I thought that this is how Ikaseraz must feel, only half in this world, the other half with his spirit-guide in the other world. He could tell me now which of these carvings was his, though I felt no impatience just a certainty in my mind of how I would carve my hare. I took out my burin and turned to the wall of the cave passage. The hare was so clear to me, as I had first seen it, that it hardly felt like a representation. What I carved was the hare itself until I stepped back, then the magic faded and it was a carving again.

It was cold in the rock passage, so I gathered my things together and went back to the main cave. The cloak was lying by the entrance to the passage where Ikaseraz had put it. He had known I would be cold. Wrapped in it I looked round at the paintings and wanted to add to them, something to help all the people in our group feel more connected to the spirits. They only had us to tell them about spirit-world. The mammoth was my friend, but he was there already. It had to be Owl, she had helped all the way though without touching my heart as Mammoth did. I decided to paint her with wings outstretched coming down with all her talons out, she would like that. After carving the outline I filled it with my seashell purple mixed with some black. It looked good like that I thought but she would have to be white. I did her bright yellow eyes next so that she could see what I was doing, that was at Hare's suggestion. Then her yellow feet with black talons came easily enough, but the white was hard. Getting the shapes of the different kinds of feathers took me a long time and many different shades of white. But with patience I found the right colours to mix together and use to contrast up the white. I had thought that black would be the best but it just made her look dirty and it was my purple which finally worked. When I was sure I could do no better I left it and packed up my things to carry back to the camp.

I walked back slowly feeling that I didn't really want to get there and see everybody, but then I saw Ikaseraz walking towards me and felt glad.

When he saw my face he smiled. It looked strange, I had so rarely seen him smile. We both knew nothing needed to be said and we went home.

Chapter 9

The next day I told him all about it. He heard me to the end and then said

"So Salmon thinks we should put it to the Ice Giant's spirit that they would also benefit from the great herds."

"It was Owl's idea really, Salmon just said a few things we might do. I think he favoured blackmail."

"Don't sound so prissy about it. Morality differs greatly in other parts, no I suppose certain basics apply, but attitudes to blackmail, say, may be quite different. Oh dear, now you are an enchanter I suppose I shall have to stop lecturing you."

"I hope not, I enjoy it."

"So do I."

He seemed rather tired though, so I busied myself with the cooking. After a while he asked

"Did your hare have any suggestions?" I nearly dropped the cooking stones.

"Oh no. How could I have forgotten to ask? That was the main purpose of my initiation and I never gave it a thought."

"Don't look so aghast. The ecstasy of joining with your spirit-guide drives everything else from your mind. But you have yet to get used to being two. You can just ask now, can't you?"

I smiled at my stupidity but also at the reminder of the hare's presence. It spoke in my mind.

"I shall put my mind to it now that I know it is our task. Just as a first suggestion though, how about approaching it from the other side? We could work on increasing warmth by empowering the southern creatures. The Ice Giants may prove intransigent. Stag mentioned Sun and trees, but thought them unapproachable. I agree there, to judge by Moon anyway. The great Hare-Spirit is closely allied with Moon but even he is of almost no influence with it. It goes its own way and I would think Sun to be the same. But there are many spirits of the south who could help. I would suggest Starling as a good one to start with. He is very approachable and reasonable, though kept busy with his large flocks."

I gave Ikaseraz a summary.

"Good. Yes, it's often wise to have more than one approach."

"Could your spirit-guide help us? And you have yet to tell me about it."

He gazed into the fire for a while. When he returned to us he was not hopeful.

"Let's have a hot drink and some honey, then I'll tell you about her." I rose to prepare the refreshments but said over my shoulder

"Her? So not all spirit-guides are 'it'?"

"Oh no."

That made me check with Hare.

"I felt you were like Mammoth, who said that gender didn't apply and it was neither."

"I prefer to think that I am both, but it certainly doesn't apply, no."

After our drink Ikaseraz said

"It was warmer in my youth, and in the Horse Cave I found a very tall oak with the nest right at the top. It glowed as if it were on fire though it never burned. In the nest was the most beautiful she eider duck you could imagine. The many lovely browns of her feathers and the softness of her when I held her - oh there is no way to describe it." He listened for a moment then looked almost shy and young.

"She says I looked handsome too. It was long ago." He fell into thought, I imagined that he was reliving his initiation.

I felt glad that we were four now and wondered if I would ever meet his beautiful eider in spirit-world, we both knew Ikaseraz so well, she more than I of course. When he spoke again it was to say

"Now you are an enchanter there are many things to do. You must complete your mammoth-hide prayer mat, then we must get you tattooed. The first thing though is to go and see your parents They know you're back safely but they were worried for you."



"It feels so strange to have to keep things from them. An enchanter's secrets. I used to tell Mother everything."

"Yes it is often lonely. But it helps to think that any knowledge of ours could bring them into danger if they knew it. You are only protecting them by your silence."

"That is a good thought. I'll go now."

Mother was making medicines when I went into their shelter, but she dropped them and came over and hugged me.

"My daughter is an important person now." She smiled through tears. That started me off crying too and we just held each other for a minute or so.

Oskol looked disgusted at our emotional display and turned to Wolf.

"I am practising to be the best hunter in

the group, and Wolf will be too."

"You will be a strong team and bring us much food." I said, though I had not intended to sound like a prophet. They looked at me strangely, but Eraminpe ran up to me and saved the moment by saying

"Have you brought me a present?" Mother saw I hadn't and said

"You should not be always asking for presents, Min."

"She probably hoped for a trinket. She's more interested in clothes and decorations, even at her age, than you ever were." she added to me.

"I know I was disappointing, wasn't I?" She punched my shoulder gently.

"Oh you. I'm so proud of my enchanter daughter. So's your father though he may not say so."

"Where is he?"

"Out gossiping with the other men as usual. 'Honing our hunting technique' it's called." We laughed but Oskol said

"He is. He's the best hunter until I grow up."

He put his arms round Wolf who nuzzled him.

"They still sleep together, as though Wolf was tiny, and look at the size of her." I did and agreed that she was a big animal. I approached her, hoping for I don't know what help from Wolf Spirit. She sniffed my offered hand and let me stroke her, but she was not much interested.

Father came in then looking pleased with himself. His small smile became a huge grin when he saw me and he hugged me hard. He rarely did that.

"Our Kizkur an enchanter. Who would have guessed? Congratulations, dear."

"Thank you."

"What were you looking so pleased about even before you saw Kizkur?" Mother wanted to know.

"It was about her really. We are an important family now. I have been made an Elder."

"Oh! wonderful. They should have done it years ago." She touched his hand.

"They said it was because Kizkur is an enchanter now." He smiled at me, his warm gentle smile.

"Two important people in the family in one day, this calls for a celebration. I'll get out the mead." Even Oskol and Eraminpe were allowed some, watered down. Wolf turned her back on us and went to sleep. We had a good time telling each other how wonderful we were, drank more than we should have, and ended up considerably less than wonderful. Hare was rather surprised, it seemed they had no equivalent to mead in spirit-world.

Ikaseraz indulged me when I got home by serving our meal and cleaning up afterwards. He could hardly preach as his own sobriety had been in doubt on many previous occasions.

Early the next morning I was up and ready for the tasks of the day. I've never had a hangover in my life, just born lucky I suppose because I haven't any secret remedies. Ikaseraz finally roused too and we had a small breakfast.

"The very first thing I must do is to play my harp to Hare." I told him.

"That's fine. I want to go and arrange your first tattooing session with Esonde. I could do it, but he's much more skilful." I knew it would be he who did it for me, but I had hoped for somebody else. I felt bad about his son who I had failed to save with my first ever healing ceremony. It wasn't rational, but I felt I had let him and his wife down.

"Will you come with me?" Then the non-existent blame might be shared.

"If you want me to. Have you decided what you want doing?"

"Yes, as near as possible to what Ukitu painted on me, a snake head-down on my left arm and a dragon tail-down on my right."

"Good, the bringer of fire on your right arm. It would be better to leave your face for now. Give it about two years and it will take better on more mature skin. That's my advice."

"I have not decided what I want for my face yet, so I'm happy to leave that."

"Your arms is enough for now. Later in the year we can get your feet done."

When he had left I got out my harp. Hare knew from my mind that I was trying to summon a south wind, how easy it was not to have to put everything into words. I played everything I knew for Hare, who liked

it as much as I did.

"Shall we make up a piece together?" I suggested.

"Yes let's. Shall we make a piece about Mammoth? It has been a good friend to you and you want the mammoths in your world to come back."

"That would be a lovely thing for us to do. Do you think we should start with low slow chords to represent walking along, then go into something lighter for the effect of its friendliness?"

Hare agreed and we spent a happy morning that produced something we were satisfied with. I played it to Ikaseraz when he returned but he didn't think it very mammoth-like. It didn't matter, Hare and I did.

"Esonde has got a busy day today, so I said we'd go there tomorrow morning. We can take any inks we think he might not have."

"I'll make up some of your shellfish purple into ink, snake and dragon both need that. Will it hurt?"

"Yes, somewhat. Nothing you can't easily stand." I knew he would say that.

At the same time as making the purple ink I made up some colours as leather dyes for my prayer mat. It was a good thing that I had the experience of painting a snowy owl in the cave. White was hard to get right and I did want Hare to be perfect. I had learnt from watching Ikaseraz doing the raven, black is the same problem. He had made me practise my painting a lot when I was younger because it was a sacred act, the producing of the image was itself a ceremony to the spirits. And this one, of my own spirit-guide, was the most important of my life.

He helped me by putting some spikenard on our fire, then sitting still and gazing into the fire. Neither of us tranced, I just calmed my mind and began.

The strange thing was that I had no difficulty at all. I could see Hare there on my mat, in the important central position, just as I had when carving it on the wall of the passageway. The picture just seemed to come, like a ghost behind Hare, then the two merged and my mat was complete. I sighed and sat back. Ikaseraz came across to look and smiled into my eyes. We knew it was right.

It was dry by the evening and I could use it for paying respects to the spirits. First and always, love to Hare, then thanks to Mammoth and all the Ancients. I always remembered Misumena and Anaxa, and of course Vezeru. Lastly I gave thanks to my ancestors for their protection through another day

We arrived at Esonde's shelter soon after first light the next day. He had all his equipment ready and was sitting waiting for us. He stood and greeted us rather formally. His wife came and welcomed us in a distracted way, her main attention was on the pandemonium at the back of the shelter where all the children had been banished to. Esonde ignored them, I suppose he was accustomed to all the screaming and wailing. It took my mind off the boy who fell to the lion, I was grateful for that.

It took a while to tell him exactly what we wanted. There was much describing and pointing. He said he would do one arm at a time, the snake on my left first. We would leave that to heal and do the right arm six days later. It seemed a long time to me. But when he had completed the snake, and my arm felt as though it were on fire, I wished he had said longer. It felt bad then, but I was surprised how quickly it began to feel better. Within two days I would happily have gone back for the other arm, but we waited as he had recommended. When they were finished I was really pleased with them. There were small differences, of course, from the ones that Ukitu had painted for me, but over all they were very similar. The snake was full of sinuous life and the dragon full of fire. We both praised his skill and I thanked him over and over, but he seemed a distant sort of man and barely reacted.



As it was my right arm that was sore now, Ikaseraz did more than his share of the work for a few days and did not suggest I do anything. I was quite happy with that, I was still turning over my initiation in my mind and discussing with Hare what do about our weather task.

The plan we came up with - Ikaseraz wouldn't participate, he said he was afraid of influencing us the wrong way - was to go north with Mammoth's help and put it to the Ice Giant spirit that we could both benefit. The other part of the plan was to visit Starling and ask Stag if he could recommend any other southern spirit who might be able to help, Blackbird was included as a possible advisor but we weren't hopeful of understanding his advice. Our third idea was to ask Mammoth to tell us when Ukitu was in spirit-world and see if discussing it with her would produce anything further to try.

It was several days before I would be strong enough to go to spirit-world so in the mean time I accompanied Ikaseraz on his healing visits. For once there were no serious injuries or diseases to treat so we were soon finished. Ikaseraz told me to go on home while he made one last visit where I could not help. I knew he intended to visit Sinotsu's father. He often did giving them what practical help he could and calling on the spirits to strengthen them.

When he came home he looked depressed. I made us a drink and sat in silence to see if he wanted to talk about it.

"It gets worse every time I go. Jaso refuses to visit them at all. While they were just insulting her she persevered, but last time she was cleaning the children up their father came home drunk and hit her. She thinks that's how he treated his wife when she was alive. So she's left them to get on as best they can with only the father's sister's ministrations. And she's a real slattern, you should see her own shelter, and her children look like orphans." He was silent a while then added

"The older children seem past hope but I've always got on well with Sinotsu. This time I tried to get him to play and he gave me foul-mouthed abuse. How old is he? Four, maybe five? And such language.

He's just copying his father, but what can you do?"

I certainly couldn't think of anything.

When my right arm no longer hurt I started to assemble my enchanter's girdle. If in no other way one could always recognise an enchanter by the talismans hanging from their girdle. I made it from what had been my belt by replacing the leather strip and re-braiding the mammoth's fur thongs with a tougher piece of leather which had loops for talismans to hang from. My grandmother's bear's tooth would stay round my neck because I had got so used to its being there. I became even more attached to it after Ikaseraz had shown me the claw marks made by our local bear at Lazcux. The size of a bear that could make scratches right up there was hard to imagine. I would love to see one. From a distance. Mother had said it was for strength and I could only wonder at how strong that bear must be.

The claw of the white bear was the most important talisman to attach. I got it out from behind the dancing mask. There was no fear now, I was allowed to touch the mask and other taboo objects. The black curve of it was so attractive. Other colours reflected off it as I held it to the fire to see it better. I had borrowed the three-sided blade from Father to make the hole in it that was necessary to hang it from my girdle because I thought my burin might split it. Even the slightest risk of that must be avoided, it would lose its power if it were broken and I was relying on it. Even Ikaseraz found it slightly disturbing still.

The three-sided blade made the hole easily and safely. I threaded it onto the girdle right at the front as a sign to everyone that I had power that must not be slighted. After that piece of bravado I decided on a gentler sign to go with it. We had some antler so I cut off a suitable sized piece and began to carve it into a woolly mammoth, both to honour my friend and in hope of its power of attraction on the mammoths of this world. The carving took longer than I had estimated because on my first one I accidentally broke one of its tusks through having made it too thin. I saved the piece to turn into something smaller in future. The second one worked alright. It hardly looked like Mammoth but you could see what it represented.

Now with my tattoos and my talisman girdle I could go out into the world unafraid.

Chapter 10

The entrance to the cave had just come into view when the longing to hold and stroke Hare came strongly on me. And Hare said

"I want to feel your arms round me too."

I hurried as much as I could in all my winter clothing and ducked through the entrance to the main cave. For this visit I intended to keep all my clothing on because Hare and I were going north. It was cold here and we could only expect worse the further we had to go. We could take nothing with us, but I had brought fuel and tinder and some honey seed cakes for when we got back and left them by the entrance to the passageway. Thick clothes made getting along the passageway harder, I had to be careful not to rip them and let cold air in. At the widening I wanted to look around for the carving of an eider that was Ikaseraz's route into spirit-world, but the longing to be physically with Hare stopped me. I could find it when I came back. After using my lamp to light the trancing pipe I blew it out and put it carefully where I could find it again easily. As I smoked the glow from the pipe lit up my hare carving and it was easy to think that it moved. When the carving was slowly becoming Hare I put down the pipe and stepped into spirit-world. Hare jumped into my arms just as in the nest and we nuzzled our greetings.

"I'll carry you until my arms get tired, shall I?"

"Yes, that's a new luxury for me."

"Which way is north?"

"That way." Hare pointed with a long elegant paw. I should have been able to tell, a cold wind blew in my face as I started walking. My lemming fur hood was very good but eyes and nose must be out in the air. Every so often I snuggled my numb nose into the fur on Hare's back. It was white winter fur of course, Hare told me that it had been white continuously for several years now, though as a young hare it used to turn brown in summer. We both appreciated its density and warmth.

We had been walking for some time when the snow started. Beautiful as we thought the snowflakes we did not welcome them. I had not been able to carry Hare very far but it was an advantage that we were walking in air. With no ground at least the snow could not accumulate or drift. But the weather got worse. The snow came on thicker and the wind increased. We both called it a blizzard when we were forced to stop. We could not see anywhere to shelter, and had not been able to even before it became a white-out. I picked Hare up and put it inside the front of my coat, then crouched down with my back to the wind. We knew we didn't dare stay there long, but a voice came out of the storm.

"You are not welcome here. Go back where you came from."

I rose and turned to face the speaker, there was no doubt it was Ice Giant Spirit. I bowed in greeting to whether he, she or it I could not tell at all. Its face was very unusual, to my eyes anyway. Ikaseraz had described to me a large wide nose and prominent brows but I had not imagined anything this different. And it certainly was a giant, made even larger by thick fur clothing all over. I wondered if its feet were really that big or if they wore thicker boots than we did. The style of clothing was similar to ours, what best keeps out the cold in both cases I supposed. The decoration did look foreign, but not much more than that of other groups amongst us.

"I am Kizkur, an enchanter from the south, and this is the Spirit of the Hares."

"Hare is more than welcome, but you are not."

"Have I offended you in some way?"

"It is nothing personal, I don't know you. But you surely do not expect that I would want to speak to any

of you newcomers after the way you have treated us."

"But our group has not treated you in any way, we have never met you."

"You benefit from the good lands your ancestors pushed us from."

"How did that happen?"

"The newcomers killed our prey and used our resources, we had to move to where we could continue to hunt. They kept coming, more and more of them. And they lived in larger groups than we did, so in any area we were always outnumbered."

I could think of nothing to say, much less do. Hare took over.

"All are suffering now. We were hoping that you would agree that all would be better off if it were warmer. Though hunting methods might need to change, there would be so much more prey for all that you, as well as we, would have easier lives."

"We had easier lives before these others came here and took them from us. I will do nothing to help them. We are alright as we are. It was hard at first to adapt to the cold places we had to go to. But we have done it. If these newcomers cannot adapt it is nothing to me. If they have to go back where they came from it will suit us fine."

"If you could let the past go, your own people would benefit."

"That may be so, but it is a benefit too dearly bought. I do not want to see our oppressors flourish, at any cost."

"I have not oppressed anyone." I said "Nobody I know has ever oppressed any of your people."

"As I said before, you have the good lands. With that you must expect the opprobrium of the displaced."

Hare and I agreed silently that we were not getting anywhere.

"Thank you for your time Ice Giant. We will not agree. We will go now, please think of us kindly."

"Your visit is appreciated. Our visitors are few."

The wind was behind us as we returned and we made better speed the more southerly we got.

"Though we think it cold and harsh at Gabillou, the Ice Giants live in much worse." I thought aloud.

"Yes, I hope he is right and they have got used to it and are really alright."

"But we couldn't move now. Where could we go? And leaving the cave is not to be thought of."

"No, there is nowhere to go even if anybody would, which they wouldn't."

We didn't want to part at the cave wall, but neither had I wanted the mission to fail. Back in the passageway I relit my lamp and went up to the main cave with no energy left for searching out Ikaseraz's eider. I could see windblown snow through the entrance and decided to light a fire and warm myself before setting out in that. The honeyed seedcakes were welcome too. I sat by the fire and thought through our embassy to Ice Giant Spirit for a long time. But even by the end I couldn't think of anything else we could have said to persuade him.

It was with morose thoughts that I made my way home through the snow.

"Shake it off before you come in here." came Ikaseraz's voice. As if I would not have.

"Eider told me you looked bedraggled and woebegone. Tell me all about it." He put a hot drink in my

outstretched hands.

I did and asked him if he could see where we could have done better.

"No. What could you say? Nobody can do better than you two, remember that." That was consolation and I began to wonder what to do next.

Never did I think that three years later we would be in the same position. By then we had done everything, really everything anyone could think of.

We held a petitioning ceremony every full moon. Hare's powers were strongest then, and many spirits expressed support but the weather got colder and colder. Each spring, before the reindeer returned, there were more deaths from starvation as the winter food stores failed to last again. We all got thinner and the weakest died.

Starling was enlisted on our side. Hare said he became highly agitated and they had to soothe him before he went off to see Ice Giant Spirit. But that failed too, it sounded as though it had turned into an exchange of screamed insults. It was probably counterproductive if that were the case. Starling's reporting was confused. But the one clear thing was that Ice Giant was adamant in his intransigence.

The traders from the sea in the south came and Ikaseraz persuaded the Elders - with Father's vociferous support - that we should be allowed to spend a lot on power objects from hot places that they had visited.

Dried dates and figs, olives and olive oil were distributed among the thinnest and weakest. Ikaseraz was given some, I didn't like the implications but he certainly was too thin. Our only hope was to please the spirits in every way we could think of. We bought spikenard and frankincense to send through the air to Sky Father. Two pieces of a translucent fabric, one yellow piece to sacrifice to Misumena because the threads were like her spiders' webs and yellow was the colour of the spider she had sent to us; the other piece was for Anaxa because it shimmered many colours like a dragonfly's wings.

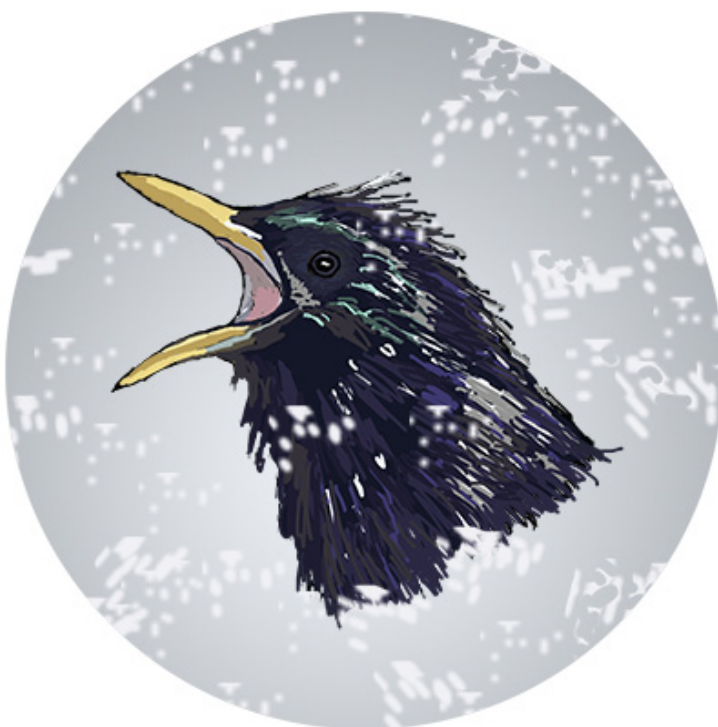
For Earth Mother we bought a large and beautifully patterned snake's skin to bury in the cave. And for my own devotions I bought some red shining wood to make a more sophisticated harp for myself.

Ikaseraz and Eider arranged a joint ceremony with Ukitu and her spirit-guide (a wisent, bison, vizin, there seemed to be many names for it). It was held at the same time in Gabillou and the Horse Cave, begging help from every spirit we could jointly name. All the Ancients appeared for it. Even Ikaseraz said it was the largest ceremony he had ever been involved in. It tired him greatly.

It was perhaps ten days after the ceremony that he returned with terrible news.

"Sinotsu has been caught stealing food."

"No. Anything but food. How could he be so stupid? He can't survive as an outcast. How old is he seven? Eight?"



"Seven I think. He's over five anyway. They can't get away with saying he's too young."

"Who's helping him? His father... well he wouldn't have done it if his father didn't spend all their food on drink. That sister is no use either."

"His mother's family would have helped but there's only one old man left now, and he has to be looked after himself."

"They probably couldn't have done anything anyway. The Elders are getting more rigid. So... we've got to take him as an apprentice?"

"I think it's that or he will quickly die as an outcast. I was really too old to teach you, Kizkur, it is beyond me now. He would have to be your apprentice. So, it's up to you."

"I hadn't even thought about an apprentice yet. But, well... in these circumstances... yes, what else could we do? I can't say I want to." I gave him a wry grin. "We brought him into the world. He was my first. We can't abandon him now."

We looked at each other. I could see he did not really want this either, though he had always said that he thought Sinotsu had the potential to be an enchanter.

"Being an enchanter can be a form of redemption for some. You spend your life helping the group, it can make up for past transgressions." He looked away for a while and then said

"He'll have to have a separate shelter of his own. It would not be seemly to have him sleeping in with you." I was surprised but quite ready to agree. I didn't want him cramping my space either.

"He can eat with us of course." Ikaseraz added "But his father will have to give us some food for him at least."

"At the next meat division we'll have to claim his. That will be more reliable."

"Yes. You're right. I'll go and arrange it with the Elders then. It will save them having to organise a trial."

When he had gone I sat looking into the fire and wondering what I was going to do with an apprentice. The only answer of course was what my teacher had done with me. I was sure Ikaseraz would help, whatever he said now. In my mind Hare offered help and that was a comfort.

The next few days we spent building a shelter for him, near ours but not so near that he could hear us speaking. We wanted to be able to discuss him. He got no say in the arrangements as the Elders would not allow him to go out of his father's shelter. And his father was also confined there to watch him, which we thought was a good thing, though he probably had his drink in there. He might drink less if not in company. When the shelter was finished his father brought him to us carrying his few bits of things. He handed him over formally as if he were a prisoner, which he was in a way. Sinotsu greeted us politely though he only scowled goodbye to his father.

He looked depressed. We tried to tell him that learning to be an enchanter was a good thing that he would enjoy. But he did not think so, he just wanted to run about with his friends. I think he knew that it was better than the only other alternative, being cast out of the group, everyone feared that. I gave him that day to settle in and started his lessons early the next day. Needless to say I overdid it at first and tired him out, but I soon got used to how much he could learn at once. He was sulky at the beginning - I silently sympathised - but after a while he became interested and worked hard if I let him help in deciding what we would do and when. Ikaseraz thought he helped by reminding me about things that I had not forgotten. So the three of us rubbed along alright. Ikaseraz and I were not great disciplinarians but deep down Sinotsu knew we were his last chance, so he never became unteachable. I was able to get away sometimes to be with Hare and to play my new harp, without putting too much strain on Ikaseraz, because Sinotsu and Oskol had become friends. Oskol had only really cared about Wolf in the past but he took to Sinotsu. He taught him hunting skills and could really show off later that year when

he was initiated and then went on his first hunt with the men. I was sure Father had kept him and Wolf out of any danger but Sinotsu was very impressed. He had been afraid of Wolf at first but soon treated her as casually as Oskol did. And all my family were surreptitiously watching Sinotsu to prevent any trouble before it began, I hope he didn't notice.

The following winter was the worst we had yet faced. But the one after it was even worse. The north wind scarcely ever relented and though there was less snowfall the ice reached everywhere, the Vezer froze way further down than it ever had before and we often felt the low temperatures to be unbearable.

Ikaseraz coughed and coughed and his breathing was often strained. Every morning I woke up wondering if he had died in the night. Sometimes he was unable to speak at all and just smiled at me. And when he did speak he was so mild and gentle I was wishing he would be brusque and tell me off like he used to. I think he spent a lot of time speaking to Eider. I hope so anyway, that is easy and a spirit-guide is so comforting.

Sinotsu spent most of his time by our fire. We couldn't afford the fuel and kept the fire in his shelter smooored during the day as well as the night. He was an expert in the lung disease and other age problems by the time Spring came. We held a healing for Ikaseraz each morning and tried courses of every drug we had. It warmed quite well that year and he very slowly got some strength back. I took Sinotsu out as much as I could, both to teach him outdoor things while it was possible and to give Ikaseraz some peace. He was a clever boy and learned easily when he would, which was not always. Once the reindeer came back and there were frequent hunts there was no holding him. He had to be with Oskol to find out every detail. I didn't mind, it was important for him to learn that too. It was certainly an area where I could do with improvement as a teacher and as an enchanter. I knew herbs well though and repeated his lessons on those until he was proficient. I gathered many too that were only for flavouring. Ikaseraz's teeth hurt him if he tried to chew, so I boiled all his food into soups, nearly pulverising the meat first, but all the flavour was lost. So I became quite skilful at finding new and strongly flavoured herbs to try to get him to eat more. It worked to some extent, though he perhaps ate more than he wanted in order to please me.

Summer came, such as it was, and everyone was preparing for the Lazcux festival. Everyone wanted to go if they possibly could, but it had been obvious for a while that Ikaseraz could not and a few days before we were going to go he went down with the lung disease again so I would not be going either. We arranged for Sinotsu to go with my family. It was important for him to learn what he could even if we weren't there to teach him, and Ikaseraz needed a rest from his boisterousness. I arranged for Mother to take a message to Ukitu to ask her to explain anything to Sinotsu that would be helpful to him. I knew she would be glad to help us out. Then the day before they were going to set out for Lazcux Mother went down with vomiting and diarrhoea. She could not go either. But she insisted that between bouts of it she could look after Ikaseraz. Father agreed with her and Ikaseraz was not strong enough to object even if he would have. So it was agreed that Father and I and Sinotsu, Oskol and Eraminpe would go together, and Wolf of course.

We felt the absence of Mother and Ikaseraz on the journey as well as when we got there. Ukitu came to greet us and was worried to hear about Ikaseraz. She and I and Sinotsu held a healing ceremony for him in front of the bulls. They moved their heads in the torchlight to agree to intercession with the Great Spirits on his behalf.

Ukitu admired Esonde's skill at tattooing my arms. She painted my face for me as we discussed possibilities for its eventual tattooing. She advised a feather-based pattern as Owl and Eagle had helped with my initiation. No reference could be made to Hare of course. I mentioned that it might be the right thing also because of Blackbird, but she seemed unconvinced by his obscure prophecy. We went through it again together, but nothing seemed to make any sense.

During the big Sun Ceremony more than one person mentioned to us that their groups had discussed moving south if the weather got any colder. It had not occurred to me that any groups would leave either their own caves or move out of travelling distance of Lazcux. Nobody in our group liked the idea and I couldn't believe that the other groups were seriously considering such a radical move. Ukitu said she



would certainly speak against it in the Horse Cave. But the increasing cold seemed to weigh on everyone's minds and there wasn't the joyful mid-summer spirit of earlier years.

The journey back was slow with none of the invigoration we usually felt.

As we approached Gabillou I saw that Mother was out to meet us. It could only

mean one thing. I ran to her and just fell into her arms.

"I wasn't here. I wasn't here." I wailed to her.

"He would not have known if you had been." she said gently and just held me tight.

Father walked back telling everybody who had not realised that their Enchanter was dead and the whole procession started to ululate with grief. Mother and I joined in.

Chapter 11

There was a very short ceremony that day, held by the Elders, to swear me in as the group's Enchanter. It seemed unreal to me, I had never attended an Elders' meeting before, though I would have to go to them all now. It was informal, and soon over, so I could get away and prepare for Ikaseraz's death rites. He had probably thought, as he taught me them, that I would be doing them for him. It had not occurred to me then and now I felt hollow inside.

The following day most of our group assembled outside our shelter. Ikaseraz's wrapped body was put on a stretcher and Father, Sinotsu's father, Esonde and a fourth man I hardly knew, who had all been appointed by the Chief Elder, each lifted a corner. I had to lead the procession to clear away evil spirits. Behind me came the four men carrying the stretcher and behind that Sinotsu with my family. After those leaders everyone came in any order they happened to find themselves.

It was a long slow walk to the stone circle which was not far from the image of Vezeru at the head of the valley. My new wooden harp was strapped to my back which made me walk more slowly than I might have done. At the circle the four men put the body in the centre on the death rock, then removed the stretcher to a respectful distance and I began the death rites. It was a great relief to reach the end of them without any ill omens and everyone sighed slightly. It was probably in other minds as well as mine that he was fortunate to be going to the spirit-world in mid-summer. The ravens we had called with the rite would come quickly to take him there. There was a long wait for those who died in winter if they froze into the ground. Then I played the carrying songs, those to accompany his spirit, on the harp and everybody sang them with some other instruments playing too. There were many tears and some ululating. Then we left him and went sadly home. Everyone says that we should be happy for him, I try to think of him always with his Eider safely in spirit-world, but the grief of loss in this world overcomes that, for me anyway.



After such a day I decided I would get away for a while the next day. I gave Sinotsu the day off and he begged Oskol to take him fishing which he rather condescendingly agreed to.

The next day started in with wind-driven hail. The sound of its hitting my shelter had woken me early. It didn't last long, but the impression it made on my mind did. I stayed under my sleeping-furs thinking and snoozing until the sun had risen. There was little warmth in it when it did come.

The daily chores gave me time to think through, yet again, everything Hare and the Ancients had said about the increasing cold. We agreed that the wind was mainly responsible for bringing it and that the spirit-power of the Ice Giants was keeping the wind in the north. If I could only turn it southerly, how the reindeer would love the plant food brought by that warm gentle rain and hours of sunshine. My ambition even extended to herds of mammoths. Ikaseraz had said that he had seen them as a child - they appeared to my mind's eye from the paintings in the caves - but it had been too cold for them since. I didn't want to go to the cave to speak to Ikaseraz yet. He needed time to settle in the spirit-world before working on our problems. To give him that peace I knew I must be strong and work alone. I stroked my boar-purse for courage and missed him.

The lullabies my mother had played on her flute when I was a child started playing in my mind. Perhaps it was only because of what I was already thinking about, but they sounded like the wind which had brought this morning's hail. My harp spoke of soft, warm winds. The last time I had played it was at Ikaseraz's death rites, so the power of his passing into the spirit-world would be in it. I knew then what I must do. I would go and play it to Great Reindeer Spirit, who gave us prey when he would, and then he would help me. His reindeer needed the warmth too, he would be my ally.

A trip up onto the tundra was necessary for my plan. I would go up past the shrine to Vezeru and Ikaseraz's stone circle and ask for their blessings on my venture.

It was hard to know what to take in my pack, or rather what to leave behind. The harp would have to be strapped on my back, it was heavy and awkward so other items must be kept to a minimum. My travelling shelter was the single heaviest thing I needed. Lightweight food, so just a little dried stuff. Water I could collect up there. It would probably be peaty but that was better than carrying it. Weapons, of course, though only close-range ones. A dagger in my belt and my bear-claws strapped on one hand to leave the other free.

Once I was in my outside clothing I felt warm for the first time since getting out of bed. One mitten wouldn't fit over the bear-claws so I collected a fox tail on my way out. At my parent's shelter I told them where I was going as they breakfasted. They looked a little askance at the heavy harp on my back, but knew my strange ways well enough and didn't mention it. Mother wrapped the fox tail about my bear-clawed hand leaving the tip such that I could instantly uncover the claws with my other hand. After a shared hot drink I set off.

As always it got steadily colder as I climbed. By the time I reached Vezeru and Ikaseraz my feet were cold despite the body heat generated by the climb. A small piece of white quartz each was all I had been able to carry to give to them. But I knew they would understand and bless my journey.

When I reached the tundra the sun had gone. Grey clouds covered the sky from one horizon to the other. My enemy the north wind buffeted me and stung my face. All I wanted to do was set my back to the wind or even put up my shelter and rest. But it is the difficulty of the travelling which gives the spirit-journey its value. The harder the discomforts which the enchanter overcomes in order to address the spirits the greater will be the blessings they give. I pushed on.

Though I have not got the hunter's eye, where I had reached by late afternoon looked like good reindeer country to me and I stopped to choose my place to address Great Reindeer. It was a relief to get the harp off my back and I set it carefully on a rock. The shelter was soon up and looked inviting. Dried heather stems from the previous year supplied enough fuel for the small fire I would need, though I would not light it until night fell. My tinder fungus flared in the wind as I unpacked it and I hurried it into my shelter.

With everything done I picked up my harp and calmed my mind. When I travelled along the path to the Great Reindeer my hands played whatever seemed right to please him. And I could feel his pleasure in the sounds, time passed though I was not measuring it. My link to him was suddenly broken when I saw a movement. It stopped instantly, but I knew there was something in the grough behind a peat hag not far away to my left. After gently lowering the harp onto a rock I drew my dagger and released my bear-claws. There were other possibilities but I thought it likely to be a lone hunter from another group. I would have known if anyone from our group was up here. One animal, either reindeer or wolf was not at all likely, though it was about that size. There was no reason for me to move, nowhere was any better than here if I had to defend myself. I was more puzzled than frightened as to what animal it could be, and if it were a person why they would hide. The land here was not considered to belong to any of the groups in the area. Anybody might hunt here if they chose, or commune with the spirits. The normal thing, if it were a hunter from another group, would be just to greet each other and pass on. The chilling thought that it might be an outcast came to me. But I had no time to worry about my chances against an outcast with distance weapons because whatever it was decided to show itself. It was a huge man with a javelin. I stayed perfectly still to see what he would do. Instinct told me to be submissive, but how galling it would be if he went back to his group saying that our group's enchanter fell on her knees to him without his even threatening her.

He started to walk towards me without raising his javelin. I calmed a little and studied him. There was something about the way he walked that was not right. He didn't seem to be injured but nobody walked in that strange way. Then he was near enough for me to see his face, a very wide nose and such brow ridges. The shock made me helpless, he was an ice giant.

He looked no more controlled than I was. We both spoke together but neither could understand the other. Seeing our strange situation simultaneously we smiled. That broke the tension and he was the first to think what to do. He put his javelin on the ground with the point facing back the way he had come. I realised that I was pointing my dagger at him so quickly put it down with the handle towards him. First pointing at my harp he then pointed at his ears to tell me that was how he had found me. He made a questioning gesture and I picked it up and showed him how it worked, how to tune it by tightening or loosening the strings. He seemed delighted and urged me to play. I never need much persuading and I played the first things that came into my thoughts. Then I handed it to him suggesting that he try. He looked almost shy and it seemed he would refuse, but I persisted and he took hold of it. He tried to play as I had done but his fingers were too wide. So he tried to pluck with his fingernails but still his fingers were cumbersome. But when he found a thin stone he managed to play the strings with it and I taught him a couple of straightforward tunes.

It was going dark by this time so I lit the fire in the entrance to my shelter and set a drink heating. He watched me but did nothing so I made "go in" gestures. He still did nothing so I went in first to show that it wasn't a trap. He followed me in then and I saw the reason for his doubts. It was not a large shelter and with him in it looked suddenly much smaller still. He made an expressive move with his arms, deprecating his size, and I laughed. The hail started again then so he went out and brought in our packs and the harp.

When the drink was hot we shared that but each ate from our own food. We smiled again to see that it was the same, dried meat.

After we'd eaten we fell to comparing things from our packs nodding at similarities. I think we both felt the frustration of not having a common language, we seemed to both be trying to explain that our things were lightweight versions of the heavy and sturdy things we used at home. Then we compared our sleeping-furs and then our clothes. With nothing else to compare curiosity got the better of me. I removed some of my clothes and showed him the front of my body hoping that he would do the same. He looked startled but quickly did so and I couldn't see much difference from the men I'd seen before. There is no need for me to say what followed, everyone knows how all that goes. I'll just say though that he was as strong and heavy as he looked and it was very good.

In the morning we woke at the same time. It could hardly be otherwise we were squeezed in so tightly.

Smiles and gentle touches got us through what might have been an awkward breakfast. Luckily the weather had improved and we could strike camp without the hail. He helped me pack up the shelter and we were soon ready to go our separate ways. I had had time to think by then and had decided to give him my harp. He tried to refuse, but I could see he really wanted it and insisted. I helped him with the straps to get it on his back and he seemed very pleased with it, though my conscience was making me uncomfortable. My reason for giving it was selfish. I wished to please the Ice Giant Spirit in the hope of his changing his mind about us.

My ice giant wanted to reciprocate and searched his pack for a gift. He brought out the biggest and heaviest tooth imaginable and offered it to me. I was thrilled, it could only have come from a woolly mammoth.

The ice giant was re-packing his things. I touched him lightly to get his attention and clutched the huge tooth to my chest bowing to him. He grinned his understanding and pointed at the harp bowing to me. We touched all four hands in farewell then he started north and I south.



If he was left wondering what I was doing playing a harp in the middle of nowhere, I was left wondering why he would take, on a lightweight hunting trip, a woolly mammoth's tooth. I could barely prevent myself laughing aloud with happiness that such an initially scary encounter had turned out so well. My slight doubts about the existence of ice giants were proved startlingly wrong. But I wondered where were my enemies now. One ice giant at least was not that anymore.

During the first part of the walk back I fondled the tooth to get familiar with the touch of it as well as its appearance. There was no smell to it. When I thought its essence was in my mind I stowed it away in my pack. I thought through where to put the tooth to get the most from it and decided to put it in Ikaseraz's stone circle. While his spirit was still passing - between the two standing stones - to the spirit-world and back to this world he could endue it with even greater power. But

when I reached his stone circle he spoke clearly in my mind saying that I should give the mammoth's tooth to Vezeru.

That did not seem right to me but I was too tired to try to think why he said it. He knew more than I, especially in his present between-worlds condition. I placed it carefully at the stone figure's feet, silently revering Earth Mother.

Back at our camp I went to my parent's shelter to let Mother know that I was back. She tried not to stare at me though I must have been a sorry spectacle. I didn't stay long because she was busy and I was falling asleep.

My own shelter looked welcoming and I greeted the power-objects. Tomorrow was soon enough to start making a new harp. I did no more unpacking than to pull out my sleeping-furs, then wriggled into them with relief. Tomorrow would do for cleaning them too, tonight I would sleep in the smell of my ice giant.

During the night I woke from a dream I was able to remember. Vezeru was giving birth to a woolly

mammoth. Of course, Ikaseraz's puzzle was that simple.

Chapter 12

The meeting of the Elders had been going on for a long time. It was taking place in the cave so that there would be enough room for us all. If the subject under discussion did not affect some Elders they would stay away and the meeting was then held in the Chief Elder's shelter. But today's meeting affected everybody, there was only one topic, whether the group should move south before winter set in.

Many people were getting scared. We could not afford another winter like last one. It had been so long and the coldest anyone could remember, even Ikaseraz. How he had survived it I just did not know. Perhaps he hadn't, his death even though at mid-summer may have been caused by the stress of the cold during the previous winter.

In direct opposition to that was the fact that nobody wanted to leave the cave, or rather the spirits, and move away to where the spirits were unknown. The land would also be strange, making hunting, trapping and collecting foodstuffs harder. The best land would be occupied already, which meant we would have to join another group - they probably would not welcome us - or do our best with unproductive land. The only alternative to that was to fight them for the good land and our numbers were already depleted.

The arguments went one way and then the other. Some people seemed committed to going, but would later argue for staying. So even individuals were half for going and half for staying, never mind the whole meeting. I said very little, just let the meeting know that, whatever the circumstances I would stay at Gabillou. I gave no reason for my decision, but I would never leave Hare. That made their decision making harder, because if they went they would not have the Enchanter.

It was getting dark earlier as we went into Autumn and I could see through the cave entrance that dusk was already falling and the meeting must end soon. Chief Elder rose to summarise.

"No agreement has been reached. I will give my opinion. I think we should move away south while there is still time to do so before winter storms. The child Sinotsu should act as our Enchanter. We should all speak to everybody who is not at this meeting and tell them that a decision will be taken ten days from today. If we cannot agree by then, I will declare my opinion as our decision."

Everybody said "Yes" to agree that that was the outcome of this meeting. I walked back with Father who was upset.

"This is the worst thing to have to decide. And only ten days, then we either go or not. I felt the mood was more for going even before Chief Elder said he thought that was the right thing to do. Several will be swayed by his opinion. You know I don't want to go, if we can't get enough to eat here where we know the hunting, I think it can only be worse elsewhere. But your mother wants to go, she is afraid of the cold especially for Min and Oskol. We have more sense than to argue about it, but that doesn't go for some families."

"I've heard that there have been fights. Families splitting can only make it much worse. I'm not one to talk, but we should be together on this whatever is decided. But I can't possibly go."

"I understand why you can't, dear. And the Enchanter is always a separate case. You wouldn't leave your spirit-guide and on top of that you will still want to consult Ikaseraz in the spirit-world. It is not thinkable to leave him either."

"It doesn't seem possible that you and Mother could be at odds."

"Essentially we are not. Whatever is decided we are quite agreed that we will do that. But I think it will be for going and I just can't imagine what is going to happen to us all, us away in strange places and you here on your own."

"I will not be on my own."

"Of course not." said Hare in my mind.

"Not for company of course, but you will have to survive by your own skills, like an outcast. What if something were to happen, an accident and you were injured? There would be nobody to help you."

"But you always said that life was about managing risk, didn't you?"

"Oh, don't be so sensible. And using my own words against me, I should have said a lot less obviously." We smiled and parted.

I found Sinotsu in my shelter with the meal nearly ready. It smelled good and I was ready for it.

"Do you know how old you are Sinotsu?"

"Ten. I think. Nobody seems to be quite sure."

"I think you are probably ten too. It is a bit young but these are unusual times. Do you think you are ready to be initiated?"

"I... er... I hadn't thought about it. I thought there was a year or two to go yet."

"So did I. But you have learnt a lot and I think you could be ready. But you must say if you think you are not."

"You must be able to judge better than I can. I had hoped for more practice, but I've looked forward to it of course. Yes, I could do it."

"Good. I'm pleased you agree. We will have to work very hard. An emergency has arisen, it was what the meeting was about. You must have heard talk that the group might be going south?" He nodded.

"In ten days we will know. The decision has to be made while there is time to go, if that is what is decided. Whatever the decision I shall stay here. I cannot leave. So if the group goes south the Chief Elder wants you to be their temporary Enchanter. You could do that uninitiated, but I think it would put you in a stronger position if you were an initiated enchanter. Of course they may decide to stay, but that would be no harm except for a lot of hard work which we could have put off until next year say."

He looked stunned.

"So, if we go south, I would have to do everything without you?"

"Yes. I know it seems alarming. But you can do it."

"Do you really think so?"

"I do. You are not afraid to try new things and you have a creative mind. You are going to need it because a lot of what you have learnt is specific to Gabillou and its cave. The spirits here will keep you under their protection as far as they can. But you will have to meet and propitiate new spirits as you move south. Everything will be different for everybody so you may have to improvise. Particularly with hunting rituals."

"Oskol may be able to help, telling me about the hunting as it changes."

"That is good thinking. See, you are the right person for this."

Sinotsu had never worked harder than in the following week. I gave him all my time, though I was always wanting to be with Mother and Father. It seemed all too likely that we would soon be parted and we all faced uncertain futures. I kept to myself the fact that I was almost certainly pregnant. Mother

would have wanted me to stay with them so she could be there to deliver me. And of course I wanted that too, but nothing could make me leave and I didn't want to spend our short time together arguing about it. Oskol and Eraminpe seemed to want to be off on what they saw as an adventure. I went along with them, it would have been cruel to suggest that it could go badly wrong. Somebody needed some optimism.

I think I was even more nervous than Sinotsu when the day came for his initiation. But my own had been so recent that I remembered everything and just did for him all that Ikaseraz had done for me. Though I left more warm clothing by the passageway entrance and food for him when he came out, I remembered how deeply cold I had been.

While he was in spirit-world I went up to the stone circle to visit Ikaseraz. He didn't speak in my mind but I could feel him giving me a sardonic stare. I felt he doubted my ability to cope with pregnancy and childbirth alone and I thought he could well be right.

Oskol saw Sinotsu coming dreamily back from the cave and called me. We went to meet him and each with an arm round him took him into my shelter. I got a hot drink for the three of us but Oskol left soon after drinking his when he saw that Sinotsu was unlikely to speak. He spoke very little even when there were only the two of us. Before he left for his own shelter to sleep he just quietly said

"It's a crane."

It was a surprise, though I don't know why. We often saw them, though more in the past like a lot of other things. I smiled to myself because it seemed so fitting now that I knew. Sinotsu was an elegant dancer and often showed off about it, so like the bird. Perhaps they would dance together.

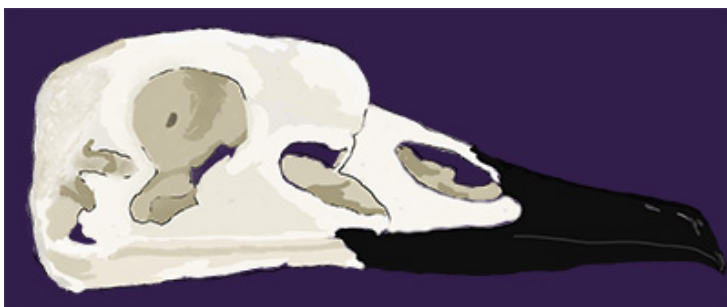
"Neither of us is much of a dancer." said Hare, and I had to agree.

"Cranes are great travellers. He may have to start that too if they decide to go. Do you think they will, Hare?"

"Yes, and so do you."

Father, Sinotsu and I went together to the ten days later meeting of the Elders. Sinotsu was quite excited at going to his first meeting, but Father and I just looked at each other with dread. All our suspicions were confirmed. Many waverers joined the Chief Elder and the decision was taken to go south. I wondered how many other groups might be deciding to do the same thing. Perhaps Ukitu's group would go. I felt fairly certain she would never leave the Cave of Bulls and her bison.

Sinotsu really wanted to go, but now he had the pull of wanting to stay with his crane. I persuaded him that such a strong flyer would be able to keep up with him. He would have to find places on their route where the barrier between worlds was permeable, like our cave, and go through there to meet his crane. I couldn't let him go without an object of power to help him. He would find others on the journey but he had to have something to start out with and to draw them all back here to their home cave. I would have given him the white northern bear's claw, but he had always been afraid of it. After considering all our objects with care I gave him the swan's skull. He seemed overwhelmed and I knew he would use it wisely.



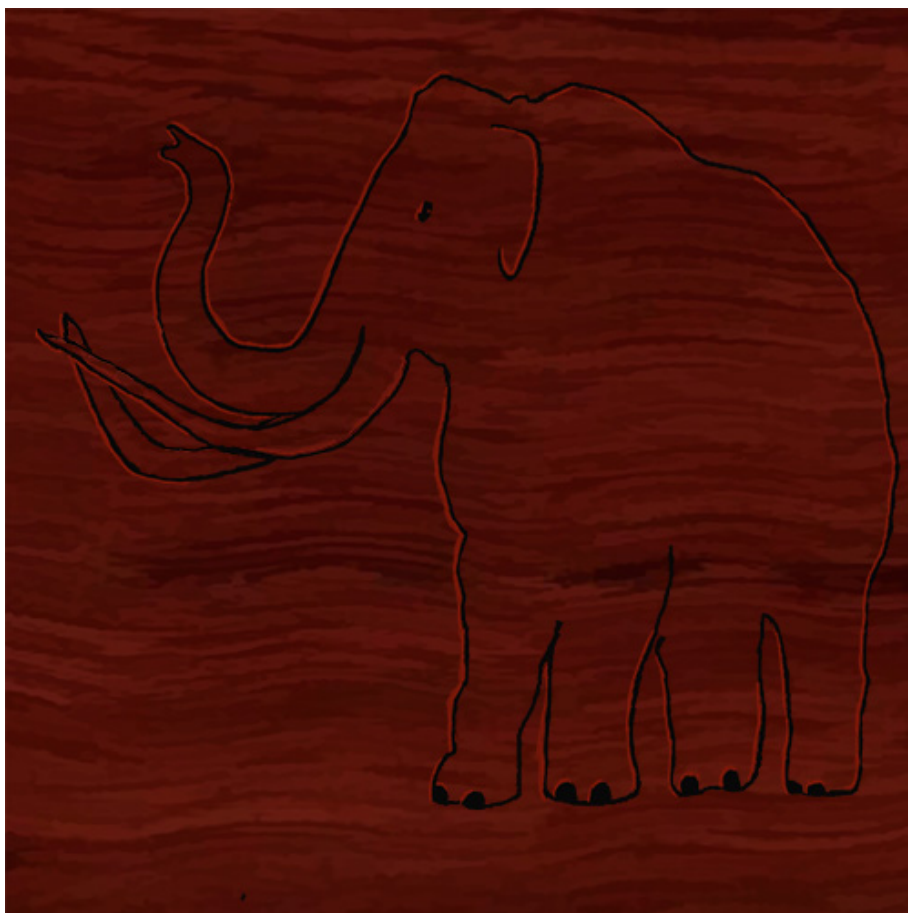
The next few days were hectic with preparations. Sinotsu's things were few and some were in a pitiful state. I replaced such as I could, as I had more than I could need with Ikaseraz's as well. But mostly I spent my time with Mother and Father. Like everyone else they were taking anything too heavy to carry to store in the cave. I helped them to carry some items

and felt happier for it, I would have a slight link to them still and, more importantly, it signalled that they would come back. The intention had always been to come back when it got warmer for a good length of time. But I secretly feared that the group would find a better place than here and decide to stay.

Mother wanted to take at least one trap, but Father insisted that they could make new ones. Even some tools would have to stay behind. He gave me the precious three-edged blade, and spent some time carving on my new harp. He had meant to do it before and now this was the last opportunity. And I thought that concentrating on the carving probably reduced his anxieties. He wouldn't let me see until it was finished.

The last evening came all too quickly. They would all set out early the following morning. Everything had been said over and over and we were just looking at each other. Father brought out my newly carved harp and asked me to play for them. There were carved woolly mammoths walking all round it. I have no idea how he knew to do that. Of course I burst into tears and that started Mother off and then Wolf started howling. It was some time before I could shakily start playing. Mother joined in on her flute and it was a good idea of Father's, a good farewell where we couldn't find any words.

The next morning they all left and Hare and I were alone.



Chapter 13

I watched them out of sight and then my only thought was to get to the cave, enter spirit-world and hold Hare. There were a few last minute gifts to get tidied away first. They were the things that people had found that they couldn't take with them after all and didn't want to be wasted or lost. It might rain or worse so I had to get them safely stored away. Sinotsu's shelter came in useful for that. I wished him well in my mind though I had misgivings about his age, he might be too young for such a big responsibility.

When my boots were on and I'd collected up my pipe and spirit mixture to smoke I remembered the promise I'd made to Mother to never leave my shelter without a pack of weatherproof clothing. The pack bulged when all was in but I decided that the protection of the spirits was important too and put in the obsidian mammoth and the black claw from the northern bear. I smooed the fire, there would be no cooking today.

Hurrying to get to the cave didn't prevent my being slowed by intruding thoughts of what might happen to my family and the whole group. They would be in our territory certainly today and tonight, probably tomorrow as well because they couldn't travel as fast as the hunters would normally go. After that was unknown. The hunters could protect them from any animals, though rhinoceros were always unpredictable. But I think we all thought the greatest danger came from other people.

In the cave the amount of things that people had left surprised me. There was no food of course. Nobody had gone in deeper to the Enchanters' passages and I was not surprised, it was frightening to be so deep in Earth Mother's territory. My preparations went badly, I fumbled lighting my pipe and it seemed to take a long time to enter spirit-world, because I was upset I suppose.

Hare was waiting for me and jumped onto my lap. As I stroked that soft white fur tension slowly eased and I said

"Shall I call you 'he'? 'It' sounds almost rude."

"Whatever suits you best. You know it doesn't mean anything to me."

"No, it doesn't. I shall then."

He stood up a little and put his front paws on my shoulder and I put my arms round him. The side of his face rested against my cheek. In silence he comforted me.



There was no need to speak of the dread I felt for the group as they migrated south.

"I thought Mammoth might be here, it doesn't matter there's no urgency. Do you think he would be willing to carry me south, before I'm too heavily pregnant and the winter sets in? I would like to check for myself that they are alright and to see what spirits they have found to help them."

"I'll come with you of course. Mammoth will be glad of any excuse for a trip."

There was more to be done that day so after we'd enjoyed a few minutes comfortable silence I returned to the world. Though it was still summer I felt cold right through me and stamped my feet to get them warm. With boots on and my emergency pack strapped to my back I left the cave and started climbing up to Vezeru.

There was the expected cold wind when I got up there, but I danced round Vezeru's shrine as homage and that warmed me up. I had come up to see how Ikaseraz was progressing.

The ravens had done better than I had expected at taking him to spirit-world. Perhaps foxes had helped. His bones were disarticulated already. Though I had thought that his skull and thigh bones would need to be buried for some time to clean them, they looked ready for preparing without having to go through that stage. I collected them respectfully, whispering to his spirit. He knew the process of course and would have been expecting me. Then I hurried back to get out of the wind.

At the cave I buried his bones temporarily, near his raven painting. They would be safe there until I had the necessary leather bag prepared.

I could start work on it as soon as I got back to my shelter. A snack that involved no work would do for today. There was plenty of leather. I had had good stocks myself and many people had given me some of theirs. Most still had the fur on, but I found a good large piece without that I could make a bag from. It wouldn't need seams. I hated waterproofing seams and always doubted that it would hold. The decoration came first while the leather was flat and easier to work. By this time I could easily draw a female eider, but the scratching and stippling away at the surface to make the dyes take was a lot of

work, and I finally fell asleep with exhaustion.

Waking the next morning to silence, instead of the usual sounds of the camp, was shocking and dismal. Hare quickly spoke in my mind to comfort me. It was cold and I roused the fire and got a hot drink going. There was the baby to think about now so I knew I must start eating properly and got a good meal of meat and roots going in the cooking bag. Honey and dried fruit made a welcome breakfast before starting on the painting of Ikaseraz's bag. It was work that needed concentration because the right words had to be said at each stage. This bag had to be very different from a cooking bag, although of the same style, and the correct wording made that so.

The colours went on readily enough which meant that I had done enough preparation. This was a spirit eider so not all the colouring was realistic, I was determined to get some of Ikaseraz's shellfish purple into it. The correct words came easily despite part of my mind working on getting the colours right.

By the middle of the day the eider was finished. It was warmest then so I went to check my traps while the painting dried. There were several fishes in the river traps and I prepared them and set them to dry before going back to the eider bag.

I set the leather painting facing downwards on a clean piece of woven fabric, just in case the dyes had not quite taken yet, and set to making evenly spaced holes around the edges with a very sharp awl to pass the needle through. No needle I had would sew through leather. When I had made a double row of holes, I laid a long and strong leather thong between the rows, doubled over the edge and sewed through the holes with twine. I then pulled the thong up tight as a drawstring and had finished Ikaseraz's eider bag.

It was still daylight so I filled the bag with water and hung it from the spit over the fire. The water would be heating up while I went along to the cave to retrieve Ikaseraz's bones. When I got back I added some salt to the water. It was ready then for the sacred herbs. The brank ursine was sometimes used in healing but the germander was never used for anything except to bring the strength of the dead person's spirit into the skull and thigh bones. It was most important to get the next part right so I rehearsed the incantation in my mind and then went through it with Hare so he could correct me if I started to make a mistake. Then it just had to be done. I grasped the right thigh bone, intoned carefully and thrust it into the eider bag. It went well and gave me confidence. When the left thigh was in as well I prepared myself for the climax of the ritual. Both Hare and I felt it to be a very sacred moment as I sank Ikaseraz's skull into the hot water. The longest song of all came there at the end and that went well too, I was word perfect. That could have been the end of the ceremony but I felt it necessary to play the closing song on my harp, which had been part of our lives together.

The contents of the eider bag would be simmering all night. There would be no sleep that night as I had to guard it constantly with words to avert evil. The sky was clear of clouds for an hour or two during the night and I called for the blessing of the stars. Hare called down the moon's blessing on our work and we felt it a good sign that they had appeared to us, if only briefly.

Next morning I took the clean white bones from the bag and arranged them on a piece of rhinoceros skin. The thick coarse fur would help them to dry. Then I went to the cave again carrying the eider bag full of sacred water. It was hard to get down the narrow enchanter's passageway without getting the bag stuck or spilling any of its contents, and I was glad that my pregnancy was not yet making it even harder. I got to the carving of the eider without spilling any and after touching some of the liquid to my forehead, hands and feet I poured it to the ground below the eider thanking Earth Mother for the time that Ikaseraz had spent in the world.

On the way out I touched Hare's carving. He understood that I couldn't go through to be with him today. Back at my shelter I found that the long bones were dry but the skull was not perfectly so. An old piece of lemming fur took most of the wet off, but it had to be completely dry for the glue to work, so I put it outside the door in the sunshine. I turned the eider bag inside out and put it beside the skull.

Everything was prepared for the next stage so I brewed up a leaf infusion and took it outside, with a

chunk of honeycomb to eat and rested in the sun for a while.

The skull felt dry before the bag, I could have rested for longer but wanted to get on with it. With the skull resting on the old piece of leather that was my work surface I put one of the prepared pieces of white quartz up through the base of the skull and held it with my left hand in one of the eye sockets. With my right hand I could then make small marks on the quartz, with a pointed piece of charcoal, to mark the area that would show through the eye socket. Carefully taking out the quartz I then used my boar bristle brush to put the glue around the outside of the marked area, put the quartz piece back inside, made sure it was properly aligned, laid the skull face down on the work surface and put a stone as weight to hold the quartz in place until the glue set.

That was all I could do for that day, it would be the next day before the glue was dry. I was hungry anyway and ate my evening meal quickly. The meat and roots were good but I wanted more. There was plenty of dried fruit, as well as the freshly gathered, so I ate both until I felt less empty. It amused me that that tired old phrase 'eating for two' turned out to be true.

The following day the glue was set and the quartz, even at that stage, looked quite like an eye. I did the other eye in the same way and left that to set. In preparation for the next part I took down the plaits that were pinned up on my head as usual and cut them off with my sharpest knife. I had hoped that the plaiting would stay in and I could just tie up the cut ends but that didn't work. They unravelled before I could catch them and I had a lot of work to re-plait them. You would think it would be easier to do with the hair in front of you where you can see it, but it isn't. I suppose it's the years of practice doing it on your head that make that much the easier of the two. A lifetime's growth of hair is heavy and my head felt ridiculously light, cold too so I put on my lemming fur hood. I realised how much I had depended on my hair to keep me warm. The hood would not be enough in the winter.

A design for a head warmer started to take shape in my mind. The shape of my lemming hood was a good one so I would copy that. I would need two layers of tightly woven goats' wool cloth which I could sew together with the down from eiders between them. There was plenty of goat wool thread, already spun, in my stores but my loom was only narrow. I needed Mother's wider one. It was too heavy to carry over here, so I would need to light a fire in my parents' shelter. The taboo against touching anyone else's fire stopped me for a while, but after a while I could see Mother smiling and telling me to re-light her fire because she wanted me to be warm. Of course she did.

I took my own fuel over to their shelter because if they came back unexpectedly they would need the stock they had there. The loom was against the wall so I pulled it out to see what thread it had set up as warp. It would have been very lucky if it was already goats' wool and of course it wasn't. It was a very coarse flax thread which wouldn't do at all. Resetting it with my wool took a long time because it was a big loom with many weights. But I would be glad of the width of the cloth when it was done and the fine gauge. I enjoyed the work, feeling a strong connection with Mother as I handled her antler shuttle and beating down comb.

At first I sang her songs aloud and imagined her joining in. But later I fell silent as I followed them all south in my thoughts. It was hard to imagine how they would be getting along. They would surely come to forest eventually, but fir trees or beech and oak? There would be boar to hunt, lovely meat and useful tusks, but dangerous. Had anyone been injured? Sinotsu knew all about what to do with wounds. What spirits lived among the trees? There are high mountains to the south-west which was the direction they started in. I would have gone that way too, the sunset feels warmer than the sunrise. Would they be able to get around the mountains or have to go over them. Where mountains came down to the sea, the sea traders went around in boats. Going on the sea in boats seemed very dangerous to me, but was it less so than going up into those mountains? There were a lot of unknowns and I felt so ignorant.

It was a good piece of cloth though when it was finished at last. I put the loom back, doused the fire and went home to eat.

After eating I brought in the eider bag, which was nearly dry by then, and put it to finish drying by the fire. Just before sleeping I carefully place the bag, with the eider facing upwards, where Ikaseraz's

pillow used to be.

The next day would see the work on the bones finished. The glue was set firm and I could start on the painting which I was looking forward to. Eyes first then I would feel that he was here with me. In spite of the hours that I had previously spent trying to get the two pieces of quartz smooth, there were still some uneven parts which made getting perfectly circular black pupils and then dark brown irises around them very hard. I had to use my finest brush and even then there was much reworking to do. It was all worthwhile. After the last touching up I stood back and there was Ikaseraz looking into my eyes.

The hair was comparatively easy. The thicker braids that I had plaited up from my cut off hair were arranged on the top of the skull, and the thin braids with small shells and coloured cords incorporated attached to the lower jaw. A little glue fixed all the plaits when I was satisfied that they looked right. He looked young with dark hair and though I had never seen him like that I thought he would be pleased.

Painting his beautiful indigo face tattoo was the last touch. Or I had thought it was until I pulled up a detailed picture of it in my mind. Then I saw that there was a lower curl of it where he had cheek but no cheekbone, so I had to build up the skull with white clay. While doing it I thought that it could not look right without that grand nose that Ikaseraz had and I modelled that too. Even Ikaseraz hadn't had the fine big nose that my ice giant had though. I set it to dry by the fire though not too close or the bone would scorch. Only at the last moment had I remembered to add that grey lichen, which the reindeer like to eat, to prevent the clay cracking.

That would take a while to set hard, and even then it would need glazing with a mixture of egg white, juniper resin and flax oil to make a painting surface. I would not finish it that day after all.

For the rest of the day we went round checking that everything was prepared for winter. Hare seemed to think he was responsible for all three of us, and I enjoyed being told what to do, it was like being a child again. There was more than enough food even for the harshest of winters with what everybody had given me. And I thought that even well on into pregnancy I would be able to empty the fish traps. Obviously no jumping into the river though. In case of deep snow and blizzards, I built a cold store near my shelter. The ones on the tundra could become inaccessible.

With everything done in camp I went to the cave to check on all the things people had left there in storage. I didn't think a bear could get in through the low entrance but rodents can do as much damage. A last moment decision had made me bring spare clothing, lamps and oil, and a supply of smoking mixture, so that I wouldn't have to carry them to the cave when entering spirit-world. Once the baby was born I wouldn't be able to go into that world. I couldn't leave the baby unprotected in this world.

Ikaseraz's skull really was finished the next day. Painting with the indigo blue was a great pleasure. I marked the pattern out in charcoal first and when I filled in with indigo the charcoal merged into the edges giving an unexpected but I thought very attractive effect. The pattern might be wholly abstract. I had never thought to ask. Next time I met Ikaseraz in spirit-world I would have to ask him if it symbolised something. He might be offended, he treated me as another enchanter now not as his apprentice.

The thigh bones were quickly painted. It was a traditional pattern and done in basic ochre colours.

I could really see Ikaseraz when it was finished, and I had arranged the skull on a base of the thigh bones on the eider bag facing my sleeping-place. When I woke in the mornings he would be there looking at me.

I should have left Mother's loom out. With concentrating on the work for setting up Ikaseraz's shrine, it had gone out of my head that I had got to make the baby's clothes. And some more nappies too. There were some old ones in Mother's shelter but they looked very worn and some more would be needed.

I'd left it set up with the soft goats' wool so started with a baby-sized down suit with hood. I wove it in separate parts so that I could put in inserts as the baby grew. It was tricky to get the pieces so that they

would line up when the down was inside, but I just turned in any bits that were too big and sewed them down. There was a flap at the back so that I could get in for nappy changing. Once I'd stuffed it with eider down and sewed up the stuffing seams there was the underwear finished. Outerwear was skins with the fur on which was hard work. The jacket and trousers I made from back-to-back skins so there was fur inside and out, reindeer fur of course to be hardwearing as well as warm. The trousers had feet on them because boots would not be needed yet. Someone had given me some lovely felt which they had dyed a rich red colour so I made a summerweight jacket and trousers from that. The baby would be born in Spring and the Summer just might be warm. With those made and stored away the only thing left to make was a carrying-sling. There were two in Mother's stores I knew but I wanted the new baby to have a new sling and I had already decided that it would be made from Ikaseraz's sleeping furs. He would like that I thought.

It took a long time to make, with a lot of holes to be punched through leather to sew through and attach the straps to it. Everything had to be double sewn for safety. Anything carrying a baby had to be as strong as possible. But finally I had everything finished and Hare and I spent some quiet moments by the fire.

It was he who brought up the proposed trip south. I asked

"Has Mammoth been asked if he's willing?"

"Willing? He can hardly wait. He's been seen hopping from one foot to another with impatience, then stopping and trying to look dignified."

We laughed but I was sorry to have kept him waiting.

"It's alright" Hare said "he understood that you had to get your preparations done and even more important the ancestral shrine to Ikaseraz. He had no relations and depended on you for that."

There could be no excuse for keeping Mammoth waiting any longer so the next day I went to the cave and smoked to get my spirit through the rock face.

Mammoth trumpeted a greeting when he saw me and I shouted my pleasure to him. We ran to each other and he wrapped his trunk round my waist. But he was only the leader of quite a large gathering which it soon turned out were all coming on the expedition. I picked up Hare for a quick cuddle before having to greet everybody else. Sinotsu's crane was there which I was very glad to see. We couldn't have a better guide to where the group had reached. He was the only crane there so I asked him if it was alright to call him 'Crane'.

"Of course it is. Whatever else would you call me? And it's 'she'."

I hadn't intended to offend her and had somehow thought she might show me the respect expected from an apprentice.

Turning to greet the others I saw Owl and Eagle and hurried over to them, it felt as though they were old friends.

"Salmon and Toad are torpid at the moment or they would have come too." said Owl. Eagle added

"We haven't seen Stag or Blackbird for a while and don't know where they are."

"Starling's here though." Owl said as he flew up.

"Yes, yes, I'm here and you can call me Starling, and have you got everything and are we ready to go now?"

"Not until I've introduced Kizkur and Leopard." Owl flew over to a most beautiful Snow Leopard, I could only gaze and quite forgot my manners. It was definitely a 'she', with longer fur than any I had ever

seen, markings that made me feel weak in the midriff and gorgeous blue eyes. Owl covered for my rudeness by distracting her attention with a long and formal introduction.

"You may call me Leopard." she said. "We will be friends."

"I am very pleased to meet you, Leopard, and glad that we will be friends." She gave me a strange quick look, like a half smile.

That was all of us gathered and introduced and we prepared to start out. I was still holding Hare so Mammoth picked us both up with his trunk and put us behind his head. Crane flew up and stood behind us.

"Are you not flying with the other birds then?"

"I am not other birds."

I supposed I would get used to her and grabbed Mammoth's fur with two hands because I could feel that he was about to move off.



After we had travelled quite a good distance Crane suddenly flew up and was soon lost to sight ahead. The draught of her wings had ruffled Hare's fur and my loose bits of hair so I smoothed us down again. We kept moving on until Crane came back.

"All move somewhat to your right. We're going too far East. Not that far Mammoth, follow me." She flew off and Hare and I were rather relieved.

Perhaps we slept because the next thing I knew we were in woodland. It was oak mainly - the trees seemed very large to me - though there were a few elm and birch. One kind I had never seen before and I asked Owl when we caught up with her. She said it was called poplar. The leaves were the new bright Spring green and all the woodland flowers were out, even bluebells which I know flower later, it looked unreally beautiful.

"Haven't you got used to spirit-world yet?" Hare murmured in my head. Of course, it was not necessarily Autumn here. The scent of it was so intense I nearly hallucinated.

We stopped for a rest much to Crane's displeasure. She just wanted to get out of the trees again and plainly saw herself as expedition leader. With her flapping about and tutting the others of us cut our rest short. Even so Owl had to be woken up. She'd fallen asleep on a branch, leaning against the tree's trunk. Crane had insisted it be daylight so she could see where we were going. Sensible enough though I didn't want to think so. With a shake of her feathers and a quick preen Owl was ready and we set off again.

It must have been a good while later because I was feeling tired and Mammoth was rumbling encouragement to me when Owl and Eagle flew off fast along our line of progress. Crane immediately took off after them though she seemed to be having trouble flying amongst trees. We kept going in a straight line though I think we were all anxious with no birds to guide us. Mammoth seemed the calmest but I could see Leopard's tail twitching sideways at intervals. We were all pleased when we saw Owl returning. She landed on Mammoth's head and told us all that she and Eagle had found Stag and Blackbird in the wood and that they would be with us soon. Crane and Eagle were taking a ride on Stag's back. And poor Stag finally arrived covered in birds, Blackbird was perched on one of his antlers



as usual. Sunlight shining through the leaf canopy hit the white crescent on his breast and he seemed to be moving deliberately so that it would dazzle me. When he saw that he had my attention he flew over and startled me by landing on my head.

"What?" he asked. But he left me no time for a reply in the unlikely event of my thinking of one, and flew down to Mammoth's head, pointed his beak at my middle and said

"When?"

"In the Spring." I said.

He nodded firmly and flew back to Stag's antler. Hare and Mammoth were amazed and said together

"You understood him?"

"I think he asked when I am due to give birth. I assumed that."

"But you don't look pregnant."

"No. But he is very old. The Ancients must have learned so much that we will probably never know."

While we had been talking Crane had got everybody organised. It seemed that Stag and Blackbird were

coming with us and that Stag had said that the end of the woodland was not far away. He had seen our group pass through not long ago.

"Why does nobody listen to me?" said Crane. "I told you that. I told you Sinotsu was beyond the end of this wood."

It was true she had. But I, for one, hadn't taken any notice. I resolved to do better, half knowing that I probably wouldn't. Blackbird was still looking at me as we set off again and I really saw him for the first time. It wasn't the sunshine this time, his beak was glowing golden above his shining silver crescent, and rainbow colours reflected off his black feathers. In that moment of his shining at me, his prophecy fell into place. It ended 'boy', so he must mean that my baby was a boy. The tooth must be the mammoth's tooth that my ice giant had given me, and I had left it as an offering at the river source. Perhaps understanding showed on my face because Blackbird flew over to me and then into a rising spiral over my head. Hare and I laughed together as he returned to Stag. I saw Stag give Mammoth a look, some acknowledgement passed between them.

So, my baby would be a boy. And it could only mean that he would have something to do with the ice retreating.

Chapter 14

It was certainly getting warmer as we moved south. By the time we reached the end of the wood Crane's nervousness was affecting us all. The next time she landed on Mammoth's back behind me I decided to try to get a conversation going with her, despite her spiky attitude.

"Is Sinotsu doing well at his new task?"

"Very well." She looked surprised at being spoken to. "He gets very skittish when anybody is ill. But I do my best to persuade him that he knows what to do and can do it. Otherwise he seems confident enough. He has already approached several spirits of place and two - no three - are now helping the group with warnings and advice."

"I am pleased, though I had confidence in his abilities. He is lucky to have such a well-travelled spirit-guide. I'm sure you are a big help to him."

She raised her beak in pride and started to say something. But then her head drooped and she obviously changed her mind.

"Only in some ways, I think." She suddenly folded her long legs and sat down in Mammoth's fur as if she were brooding eggs.

"More than anything I want to help Sinotsu make a success of our group's trek. But... oh, every day something happens to make me realise I know nothing about humans and their needs. Everything I know is about birds." Looking at Owl and Eagle who were flying high and well forward of the rest of us she added

"Perhaps only about cranes."

"I think I understand you. When Hare and I bonded the attachment was immediate, but I knew little of hares and Hare knew little of people. Knowledge of each other's ways came slowly and keeps coming."

"That's right" agreed Hare. "Love does not necessarily mean understanding."

We were trying, but Crane still looked deflated so I said

"You must have seen so many places that we haven't. Will you tell us about the sea?"

"The sea? Do you think it is something exciting? It's terrible, don't go near it. It is huge, beyond anything you can imagine, and so dangerous, it will pull you in and drown you if it can. There are no thermals over it, you see."

We must have looked blank because she added

"No uplift. You keep going down towards it unless you work hard with your wings. It is said many cranes have died in the water when their energy fails them. You must not set out over it unless you know there is land near enough that you can fly to it if you have to. Always get as high as you can from the uplift at cliffs or mountains, then you can soar for a lot of the way."

"We have no wings, Crane."

She drooped again. "You see what I mean? I know nothing of hares or humans. I cannot think without wings."

"You could practise by walking along beside Mammoth for a while. You have fine long legs."

"Yes. I could hold my wings folded firmly in to my sides and keep repeating 'I can only walk' to myself. Do you think it would work?"

"It's worth trying." I stopped her doing it immediately by asking

"Will you tell us about crossing the sea?"

She hesitated a while then asked

"Do you know the shape of the sea?"

"No. Neither of us has ever seen the sea at all."

"No....I see...right....To the west there is an endless sea. Nobody would cross that. Kizkur you should think about it because I have always thought that it makes the weather. It may be making it so cold. The wind and storms always seem to come from there. You know more about it than I do, but it may need offerings. But that is your task. The sea to the south of here is the one that cranes, many other birds too, cross when the seasons change. Some birds are braver than I and cross it further east where it is quite wide, but I always go at the furthest west possible. At that point there is a very big cliff on our side of the sea where it is the narrowest. You can easily see the south land that you are heading for. You position yourself just so above the cliff and start to spiral up, then comes the joy of feeling the heat pushing your wings up and you tilt them to catch every bit of uplift you can. When you can go no higher you move to face south, set your wings, and soar away over that gap in the land. If the weather is right you can glide to the south land without ever having to flap your wings once. I can't explain the relief when you touch your feet down on the other side of the sea and you are still alive."



"How wonderful to have wings. I would love to try it, if only once."

"Once would be no good, it takes a lot of practice."

"I'm sure it does. But the sea is beautiful as well as frightening, isn't it?"

"Oh yes. When the sun shines, by the shore it is beautiful shades of green merging into each other, then further out they become green/blues, blues to dark blue even purple sometimes, then blacks as it gets to bottomless deep. And then there's white surf crashing into black rocks when it's stormy. Bad weather makes it muddy browns and greys though, I don't like that much. Even at its best I think it is dangerous in its attraction. Perhaps all beauty has some danger."

That made me think of Leopard. She was walking beside us and glanced up as she passed through my

mind. A look passed between us as I thought of her teeth and claws. Despite feeling a frisson of fear I thought that even they were beautiful.

She was plainly nervous though. I had thought it was because Owl and Eagle were away, but Eagle came back then and she became even more agitated, lashing her tail about and circling round us.

Eagle told us that he had found our group and Sinotsu was with my family collecting news and messages for me. He had left Owl there to rest as she was finding daytime waking a strain. But he also said that they both felt that something was wrong. Eagle said he felt it the strongest just beyond the wood and thought we should emerge from the trees carefully. We asked what kind of danger he thought it was, but he couldn't be specific and said we should be prepared for anything.

He was right. It felt cold as the trees became more sparse. We bunched together with Leopard and Eagle in front and I drew my dagger. Starling came and sat on my shoulder.

"It's...um...I've sent for my flock to help."

Though I didn't know what they could do, it felt like something positive. But the cheering effect was negated when I put up my hood against the sudden cold and Starling crept inside it.

Suddenly Ice Giant Spirit appeared and the Spring appearance changed to mid-winter. A bitter wind with spindrift of ice crystals attacked our faces. Starling chattered

"Why is...if...oh...I was rude." And he buried himself further into my hood.

We started to move forward, I thought to get us into voice range. But a huge white ice bear appeared beside Ice Giant, reared up onto its back legs and roared, showing us its savage-looking teeth. Surprise as much as fear stopped us moving and left us gazing at it. Perhaps it thought we were not sufficiently impressed because it roared again and bared its claws. Ice Giant smiled nastily and in case his champion were not enough he was then surrounded by a pack of white wolves facing us and drawing back their lips to show us their teeth.

The message was clear and Leopard roared back. Eagle screamed and flew up extending his talons at them. With watching him the first I knew of Wolverine's being there was when he gave Leopard's tail a strong-jawed bite. She rounded on him but he was too quick at jumping back for her swinging claws to do more than scratch him.

Mammoth started to swing his head from side to side and shuffle his feet preparing for a charge. I was very glad I was on the right end of those huge tusks and grabbed his fur tighter after putting Hare inside my coat. He would be likely to forget he had passengers.

The wolves were watching those tusks as they moved slowly forwards. The outer ones were moving sideways to try to encircle us. Crane saw the planned move and flew up onto Mammoth's back behind me. Eagle flew at the lead wolf which was trying to get round our right with his talons aiming at its eyes. The wolf backed away fast causing confusion behind it and Eagle went for the lead wolf on our left. It worked well but not for long as he could only be on one side at a time. Leopard tried to help him but she had to take care because three or four wolves could easily pin her down on the ground.

Ice Giant moved behind the white bear which had started to move towards us in the centre. Mammoth suddenly trumpeted which I felt resonating up my legs. He was aligning his tusks for an attack on the bear when we saw blood and white fur spray up at the back of its head. It turned with a yelp and I saw Owl struggling to gain height before it could reach her. He put out his black claws to swing at her but she was too high by the time he had got round. The sight of those claws made me think suddenly of mine. Hare knew what I was doing and held my dagger safe from falling while I struggled to get the claw off my belt. Losing track of the fight while I pulled it free and got it held firm between my fingers, I was shocked to find almost no distance between the bear and Mammoth when I looked up. Thinking I would be knocked off when they collided I raised my hands with the dagger in one and the black claw in the other and screamed at my loudest.

The white bear looked up on hearing my screaming and saw the black claw. The effect was instantaneous. It roared again, spun round, grabbed Ice Giant and they both vanished. There was some confused dashing about and growling but then the rest of our enemies vanished as well.

I wasn't the only one left staring at where they had been and not knowing what to think, let alone say. Owl seemed to be quite unsurprised though as she landed on Mammoth's head and said to me

"Well done, quick thinking."

I tried, and failed, to say that I had done no thinking at all and, though I realised it must have been the northern bear's black claw that had done something, it was accidental on my part.

Owl's voice was smiling

"There are no accidents here."

"That was a good talon strike you made on the back of the bear's head." said Eagle.

"I thought it would get me with those black claws."

"Not you."



There was similar mutual congratulation amongst us until a flock of starlings arrived. They performed a triumphal fly-by, turning in unison again and again. When they had settled on the ground beside us Starling told them all about it, making Leopard a particular hero, which she had been it was true, but Starling made as much as he could of the story. We all listened, certainly in the right mood for being told how brave we'd been. I had done nothing at all but still got a prominent place due to the bear's claw having won the day. Everyone agreed that it had although nobody could explain how. It was agreed that it was a supreme object of power and nothing further need be said.

As well as Leopard's badly bitten tail, Mammoth had two wolf bites one on his trunk and one on a leg. Other than that there was only Eagle who had lost some tail feathers. He made more fuss about them than Leopard and Mammoth did combined about their bites. Owl told him not to be such a baby.

Leopard soon pulled her tail from me when I tried to treat her with the medicines I brought with me. Mammoth was more patient and I did a full healing on his bites. Crane seemed interested and tried to help. She wasn't very good at it, she didn't seem to have learned much from Sinotsu.

"I saw you swoop down on a wolf and stab it with your beak." I told her.

"I watched Eagle. But my feet are no use like that, so I thought my beak might do some damage. It didn't have much effect."

"You kept its attention, even if you didn't wound it much."

"But what did they attack us for?"

"It could hardly be that they didn't want us to reach Sinotsu, could it? It's nothing to them. It must be more generally that they don't want it turning warmer. Quite encouraging. They must think my spirit-work is having some effect."

I couldn't tell Crane that I thought it was my baby. Through Sinotsu Mother could find out that I was pregnant.

We journeyed on and, when we found Sinotsu, I wouldn't say it was an anticlimax but it had less impact that it might have done after all the fear and excitement of the battle.

It was a great relief to find that they were all doing well. There had been no deaths at all. But he said the Elders had had some tough negotiating with the groups who held the land they were passing through. It had not come to fighting yet. Our group had been allowed to hunt but the incumbent groups had taken some of the kill as a toll, some groups more than others.

He asked me about a fever case he was struggling with.

"He has all the usual symptoms of a fever. It is not a high fever and I can make him comfortable. It goes in a few days and I think he is cured, but he isn't. After...oh...twenty, thirty days it comes again, with just the same symptoms. And that happens over and over. I don't know what to do."

"Has anybody else got it?"

"No, he's the only one."

"I've never met such a thing. All fevers I know, the patient recovers or dies and that is the end of it. Ikaseraz never mentioned such a thing to me either. Remember carefully all symptoms and what treatments have what effect, for the future. It sounds like a new spirit that we have never seen before. Is that what you think?"

"Yes. But I wanted to check with you. I have made offerings to all the new spirits we have found here asking their help. Will you offer to them too?"

"Of course I will. Tell me all about them."

He did, in considerable detail. I was impressed with how diligently he was undertaking the task of being the group's Enchanter. The swan's skull was the first thing he had tried so I couldn't even suggest that.

He gave me all the family messages, and I gave him mine for them. I tried to keep it light and cheerful, but I ached for Mother and Father.

On the return journey I walked beside Stag for a while to ask him about the spirits Sinotsu had met. He knew them all but couldn't say that any one amongst them would be able to help with the unknown fever. He thought that the spirits of Gabillou, particularly of the cave, would be more help when I got home.

Performing a healing ceremony for the man with the unknown fever in the cave by myself was rather bleak. I missed everybody and even the practicalities were difficult. I had to play the group's sacred drum which I had inherited from Ikaseraz, do the dances and play my harp one after the other. Really they should have been simultaneous. The spirits of the cave would understand I hoped. I paid particular respect to Ikaseraz's raven to ask forgiveness because he had been so strict with me to get everything exactly right.

The first thing I saw as I went back into my shelter was Ikaseraz's skull. I looked deep into his eyes and felt warm all through, he knew I was doing my best.

I slept long and deeply that night but the next morning I still felt drained after the journey in spirit-world. An easy day would be the best thing. Luckily the sun was shining and it even felt quite warm so I decided on a slow walk along the river bank. There would be the last of the nuts and berries to collect before the cave bear got them. He would be fattening up for hibernation now. I knew which cave he would choose, not Gabillou of course, and would avoid the area when he would be awake. It was a very small one that he slept in, it must have been a squeeze to get in, but curled round in it he would feel

snug. I rather envied him for not being here for the worst of the cold, but I had the regular ceremonies to attend to. The group would need all my help now.



The spirits were kind that winter. I couldn't say it was mild, but it was the least cold I could ever remember. With all my preparations made for a wicked one like the previous year's I had a lazy time. The only exception was the midwinter solstice ceremony. There was a lot of work to do for that, it was the most important of the year held in our cave. The midsummer ceremony was equal to it in importance but that would be at Lazcux. The baby would be past the newborn stage by then and I thought that we could make the journey. Ukitu would be pleased to see the baby and we could introduce him to the Lazcux spirits. Ukitu's wisent had already given a blessing on his growth inside me.

By the time the first signs of Spring appeared I was having difficulty walking. I had to lean backwards a bit because of balancing my huge abdomen, but there was still ice about and I couldn't see

where I was putting my feet from back there. Everything I would need for the birth was to hand beside my sleeping furs. I had a cover to put over them to protect them from the mess, all the herbs and tinctures I would need and the sharpest knife I had for the umbilical cord. There were boiled cloths and constantly replaced boiled water where I could reach them easily. Whenever I got nervous I told myself that I had done this successfully many times. I rarely left my shelter at all once the signs showed that it would happen soon.

The day the contractions started coming was cold and windy with some sleet towards evening. But even that poor light would have been welcome when the baby started to come down to be born and it was completely dark. The one thing I had forgotten was lamps, it had always been daylight in my imaginings. I crawled about leaking and lit all I could find, some were still in the cave. The floor of the shelter was a real mess by the time I lay back on my protected sleeping furs to rest, but I was past caring. Ikaseraz's skull gave me a "Trust you to forget them" look, but Hare gave me gentle support in my mind.

When the leaking stopped and I felt what I thought must be the baby's head move into the top of my birth passage the pain became very much worse and I screamed and found myself sweating. My patients had usually tried not to scream to avoid frightening their other children but I had already decided that the one advantage of delivering myself was that I could scream all I wanted. And I did. When the pains became almost unbearable I took the drugs for them that I had hoped not to have to take. They certainly worked. The pain was there but much reduced as my patients had always said.

Valerian and various fungi, that's what's in them. Then I saw that Snow Leopard was there with me. She was clawing my lower abdomen and then pulling at me with her teeth. Even through my pain it was how beautiful she was that struck me first.

"Stop it, Leopard" I shouted at her. "It hurts so much. I can't bear it."

"Well who do you expect to bear it then? Of course you can. The baby's head is positioned just right and it's coming now. That's why it is so painful."

"Leopard you're hurting me. Stop."

"I'm helping you. The pain has to be. Push. Push harder, scream if you want to."

I didn't need her permission for that. I breathed in, pushed down hard then let the breath go in the loudest scream I could manage. Hare whispered that I was doing fine and everything was normal. It seemed unimaginable that this pain could be normal but I knew it was true if Hare said so.

It went on and on until I felt almost too exhausted to care, and then I saw that Leopard was holding something.

"The head's out. Turn a little - yes - now lift up a bit."

"Watch your claws on his head!"

"They are well sheathed. Arch yourself, right, one more push. Right, got him. Relax."

What a thing to say - "Relax". First thing was to check that he was breathing, which he was quite regularly as if he had not just had a dangerous adventure. I pulled myself back from where he lay and reached for the lemming gut fibres and my knife. Much nearer to him than to me, on the cord joining us, I tied two loops of thread knotting them tightly and cut with one fast slice between them. There was already blood everywhere so that bit more wasn't noticeable. Then I washed him, put a nappy on and wrapped him up tight and warm.

Exhaustion must have overcome me, the next thing I remember is waking to find that the cover and I were stiff with dried blood. It was daylight so I had probably slept for hours and Leopard was gone. Atutxa was sleeping, there was never any doubt of his name. It was Father's name. I would feed him when he woke, there was milk amongst the dried up mess so I knew that was going to work, another needless worry. But I had known from experience that the babies of dry mothers never thrived. While he slept I cleaned up as best I could with the remains of the boiled water.

Chapter 15

The night that Atutxa was born was the last of the cold weather. The next day was so Spring-like that it seemed as though there had never been anything but blue skies and sunshine and the start of emerging green shoots. To produce milk I must eat so I prepared a big meal hoping that it would do for two days, then spent the rest of the day sitting in the sun and gazing at Atutxa. It still seemed hardly possible that here was another person. He had bluey-grey eyes, I wondered if they would turn brown as he got older.

After a few idle days I felt sufficiently recovered to put the baby in his sling and set out and see how the warmth had brought on the plants. Hare seemed to be as enchanted with all the new life as I was. Three of us now went down to the river. Winter aconites were flowering everywhere, a yellow ground covering as we came down to the water's edge. There was only one small fish in all the traps, but I sat on the bank looking at it as though it were the most marvellous fish the world had ever seen. When we got home I roasted it over the fire and ate it hot with my fingers. It spat hot fat as it cooked but I thought it could make all the mess it liked, I didn't care at all on such a perfect day.

The next day I had to rest again but decided that it would be the last and the following day I climbed up to the tundra traps. In one of them there was a white hare. It gave me a horrible feeling to see it dead with congealed blood around its neck. Hare joined me in honouring its spirit and thanking Great Hare for giving food. It was a shock and we went down again without checking any more traps. Silent thought gave way to discussing what it meant and what we should do. Hare took its spirit into his care as the most urgent duty upon us. He was away for a while guiding it to its ancestors where he was able to leave it and come back to me.

"We must honour its body too. It must be of great significance. Its skull will be kept as a sacred object, but what do you think for its fur?" I asked him.

"From the timing of its giving itself to you, I think it is for Atutxa. A winter hood would be a protection for his skull. Does that seem right to you?"

"Yes. I'm glad you thought of it."

The next two days were spent preparing the skin, treating the fur and making a small hood. It was a beautiful thing when finished, soft and warm, and the white seemed to glow.

The hare's internal organs were reverently set aside and all bone and muscle put in the cooking bag with water, many herbs and roots and the hot stones. As I finished doing that Atutxa started crying. He so rarely did so that I fed him at once. He fell asleep then. Though I had been trying to feed him at set times it didn't seem to be working. Perhaps just feeding him when he cried or I felt milk building up in me would be better.

Leaving the hare to cook, we went up to Vezeru. I planted some eider duck feathers and one swan's at her feet as an offering and told her Atutxa's name. His real name was still unknown until I took him to the cave. Then we buried the hare's organs inside the stone circle. It had been impossible to bring my harp while carrying Atutxa so I had to sing the songs unaccompanied.

Later Hare and I silently thought of the white hare's spirit with its ancestors as I ate the hare meat. It was good and I deeply thanked the hare for the strength it would give both me and the baby. I set the bones aside for later, because all I could do then was sleep.

When I woke in the morning I could feel the strength of the white hare as I pushed myself up with my legs. Hare gave a mumbly agreement that the hare had always had strong back legs. Perhaps I had been dreaming about it because there was a picture in my mind of it leaping across the tundra. Then it stopped and turned to look at me with its white fur contrasted with the wet black peat. But I had to leave it to feed Atutxa.

Hare suggested that we bury the bones in Gabillou cave in the floor under the mammoth as Mammoth had always been a good friend to hares. As I put the cleaned hare skull beside my obsidian mammoth I felt such a longing to be with Mammoth, to feel his fur and smell his warm unique smell.

"He is thinking of you too." said Hare.

We decided to combine the burying of the hares bones with Atutxa's introduction ceremony in the cave which would include the spirits telling us his real name. It would be held at night and could be only on a propitious one. A half moon was necessary to symbolise the bright world of the spirits where his real name would be known, and the dark physical world where it would not. The position of the Evening Star had to be right as well, so it was some time before we could perform it. During daylight hours before the correct night I carried my harp to the cave. I had found that it was much easier to do such tasks if I tied Atutxa to my back. He seemed quite happy there and my hands and the front of my body were free for heavy work like carrying my harp or bringing water.



The light slowly faded in a colourful sunset. It was Atutxa's night so I knew that the reds and purples would guide him through life, and held him up to see them. When the sun had gone into Earth Mother I checked the moon and stars, they were right for the ceremony as I knew they would be. I put the mask on in my shelter to leave my hands free to carry the sacred objects but unfortunately had to go back and take it off again. It restricted my view of where I was walking and I couldn't risk the dire omen of falling on our way to the cave. Re-arranged we had an uneventful journey to the cave. Getting through the low entrance was hard going though and I wished I had brought everything to the cave during the day.

I got us through with all our stuff in relays. A thorough preparation of the cave, for this critical ceremony to introduce Atutxa to the spirits, was needed. It consisted of incense sticks of spikenard being lit and offered to all the Great Spirits painted on the walls. I touched each painting with my forehead then planted a smoking stick in the floor before it. After the fire was alight and blessed I lit a torch from it with viper venom poured over it and circled the cave waving it, taking particular care at the entrance. That would keep away any evil spirits that might be listening with the intention to harm him.

We buried the hare's bones in front of the mammoth painting. Atutxa was asleep, but Hare and I both felt Mammoth's pleasure at becoming the hare's guardian. Then I put on the mask and hooves and was no longer Atutxa's mother but his intercessor with the spirits. It was a short ceremony because they told me his name almost immediately and all that remained then was to thank them and retreat to this world.

In the safety of the cave I whispered Atutxa's name to him, though he wouldn't remember.

By Midsummer of his first year I thought he was strong enough to go to Lazcux. He showed none of the signs of failing that are so often found among the newly born.

I took as much as I could carry in the way of nappies and food, and gave us plenty of time to get there before Midsummer. The weather was settled fine and warm and we had an easy journey. It was longer than I remembered but that was probably because of caring for Atutxa, feeding, washing and nappy changing always took up more of the day than I expected. We all enjoyed it and barely needed the travelling shelter at night, though I always put it up in case of rain. I fished for eels in every stream that we came to, they are so easy to catch and make a good meal. Once or twice I managed to catch a lizard, but more often our meat was frogs and snakes. And of course I set our moth trap using the light of the fire at night. There's not much meat on moths but they taste so good roasted and crisp.

More time was taken up showing Atutxa all the flowers. He always laughed and reached for them, and I let him put them in his mouth so that he would know that they tasted sweet.

It was about mid-day when we reached Lazcux. Ukitu had seen us coming and was waiting for us at the mouth of the cave.

"Well, who's this? A boy or a girl?"

"Atutxa, meet Ukitu."

"Hello Atutxa. A boy then, let me see him properly." I undid the sling and gave him to her. She examined him closely and then they looked into each other's eyes, getting to know each other.

"Are you tired from your journey?"

"No. We took it very easily. But we've still arrived too soon for Midsummer. I allowed too long."

"I'm glad you did. We shall have longer together." I smiled agreement.

"I thought you would be here. But it's you who looks tired."

"Well I might at my age. Come on in and rest. I'm staying in the cave as there's nobody else here, not yet anyway. If more come later it will be time enough to put up shelters outside. Here's a surprise, I'm finding it too hot outside and it's nice and cool inside the cave."

"It's not often I've heard anyone complain about the heat."

"Come along."

We settled comfortably with our backs to a wall and I gave Atutxa a feed. Ukitu watched in silence for a while, then said

"Are you going to tell me about his father?"

"You've noticed his brow ridges then?"

"He didn't get those from you."

So I told her all about my ice giant up on the tundra, stressing how it fitted with the prophecy.

"You think Blackbird was telling us that Atutxa will send the ice back north?"

"I do. I met him again and his words and actions seemed to confirm it, as far as one can understand him."

"He is obscure. I don't think it's deliberate though."

"No, he seems to be trying hard to communicate."

"This is the warmest summer we've had for a long time. Is he doing it just by being in the world?"

"I don't know. And I can't seem to find out. I was hoping the spirits here might be able to tell me something."

"Shall we hold the ceremony this evening, in the Hall of the Bulls, to introduce him?"

"Let's."

When we had rested a while we made the preparations for his ceremony. Then a small meal, I wasn't hungry and Ukitu ate very little. I asked her to lead the ceremony because I had led the one at Gabillou and she agreed that would be proper.

There was a quiet sunset which we watched in the open air. The lack of clouds meant it was not the spectacular kind but clear sky gradually darkening was gently beautiful. We returned to the Hall of Bulls when it was fully dark and performed the ceremony. Ukitu did it perfectly, as I expected, and I supported when necessary which gave me time to watch the movement of the bulls. They welcomed Atutxa, though he was asleep and perhaps dreaming of them.

After we had finished Ukitu seemed tired and, as I helped her to sit, I was shocked to see that there was blue around her mouth.

"You are more ill than you have told me." I accused her.

"Just old."

"It is not that is it? Your mouth is blue."

"You can't go on forever. I'm very tired."

"Have you taken your fig and foxglove?"

"I finished the last I had a while ago."

"You have been taking it though?"



"Oh yes, it helped a lot. But I ran out of figs, the traders won't come now. I could have collected and dried the foxgloves but it just seemed too much, you know?"

"I do. But it's not too much for me. How lucky I arrived when I did. There's a lot of it back at Gabillou. Everyone who needed it has left for the south taking their own supplies with them. I'll pack up some dried food now, with only that and the baby to carry I can get to Gabillou and back here in - what? - six days, perhaps seven and we'll still be in time for the Midsummer ceremony."

"You can't do that Kizkur. You've only just arrived. And there's Atutxa to think of."

"He's fine. He enjoyed coming here and anyway he sleeps most of the time. Have you got enough food and everything until I get back?"

"Of course. I didn't know you were coming did I?"

"Bet you guessed I would though."

"I very much hoped."

"I wanted to see you too. And now I can be some use. I'll carry in a lot of water before I leave then you'll barely need to leave the cave. Just rest and save your strength. I'll soon be back and I can lead the Midsummer ceremony."

The next morning I was up very early. Luckily Atutxa didn't cry and I set out leaving her sleeping. Then I just made all the speed I could for Gabillou. I was very worried about Ukitu, everyone knows that people with the blue mouth must keep taking fig and foxglove.

It was dark on the third day when I got back to my shelter. I had had plenty of time to think where everything was as I walked home. I lit the fire for light as much as warmth and collected everything

together. There was plenty already made up as I had told Ukitu and I packed that first, then I found all the figs and dried foxgloves and put them in a strong leather bag. The plan was to make them up into medicine when I got back to Lazcux. The bag looked like every other, so I put my paints and a couple of brushes in too, to make it distinctive for her to find easily when she felt bad. That could all be done once we had some of the medicine in her. It would be a good use for the last of the shellfish purple that Ikaseraz had given me, for it to help his old friend.

With everything ready for an early start I fed the baby and put him down to sleep, then lay down myself and slept the sleep of the exhausted.

The one good thing about a crying baby is that you cannot oversleep. We were on our way back to Lazcux as it came light the next day. The spirits were with us because we reached it by mid-afternoon on the sixth day after leaving it. I went quickly into the cave and found Ukitu resting, she had not been expecting us back so soon.

"First thing, get this down you." I had got the dose prepared before we got there. She smiled at my bossy attitude but swallowed it down. It was a relief to see that her mouth returned to a normal colour after a short time. Not that night, but the next one was Midsummer so we could relax for a while.

"When you've just done so much for me it seems selfish to ask for more, dear. But there is something I very much want done, here at Lazcux, but I find myself too weak to manage it. Did you know that there used to be a group who actually lived here? None of them are left now. It was a long time ago. But, although I always lived at the Horse Cave, I came here to be instructed and initiated by the Enchanter here. She was a wonderful woman and I loved her. But she had the bleeding cough and died even before I returned to my own people. When she died she gave me her most sacred object, a crow's skull. I have always carried it with me - here it is. It's very fragile but I've kept it safe. In one of the enchanters' passages here there is her spirit-guide carving of a lion. Perhaps this is the last time I shall be here, so I wanted to bury the skull beneath her lion. That is where it should be now."

I didn't contradict her. We both knew in detail the meaning of the blue colour around her mouth.

"I think I know which passageway you must mean. There are several lions in it."

"That's the one, it's about as far in as you can get at Lazcux. Her lion is the one directly below the aurochs's head. It is kicking its back legs up in the air. It's the only one where you can see the breath of life coming from its mouth. She carved that later when she had saved the lives of several newborns by getting her lion to breathe in their mouths. The only consolation I could find at her death was to go and touch her lion and think of her being able to be together with it all the time. I shall see her again soon. It's to be hoped Lion doesn't attack Bison!"

We laughed, but I could see she was sorrowing over the early death of her beloved teacher. A personal bond I thought, not only teacher and apprentice.

"I'll go as soon as you have said your farewells to the skull. But is there something we could use to protect it? I may have to crawl in that passageway."

"Yes. There's a clam shell over there that I always keep it in. Can you fetch it while I take the crow to show to the bulls for the last time?"

Though I was deliberately slow over the task she took longer. When she returned I thought she had been crying. She smiled as she handed the skull to me and kissed my forehead. I put it reverently in the clam shell and fastened it securely, then set off for the passageway of the lions. Nothing needed to be said.

As I had remembered it was necessary to crawl for part of the way and there was very little room for digging into the floor in front of the breathing lion. The edge of the clam shell made a good digging tool. When I had said the blessing words over the skull I covered it up and made all tidy. The shell was easily cleaned.

Back in the Hall of the Bulls I found Ukitu tickling Atutxa's tummy and both of them giggling. I handed her the shell without speaking and we all three smiled at each other.

That evening we sat by the fire and sang ordinary songs, not the sacred ones that were nobody knew how old and must never be altered. We would sing those at the ceremony the next day, but tonight we just sang to please ourselves and made up new bits for the songs if we felt like it. My harp was at Gabillou, much too heavy, but Ukitu had a small pipe which we could both play to some extent. She sang as I piped and then I sang as she piped. It was relaxing and comforting.

The Midsummer ceremony went well except for one break in the middle where I had to feed and clean Atutxa. Ukitu continued with everything which had to be done continuously until I could take over again. Our changeovers were seamless and we were sure it was all correct.

"It may even be extra reverent to the sun that you attended to Atutxa's needs." Ukitu suggested. "If Blackbird is right it would seem that Atutxa is the sun's representative in the world at the moment. Don't you think so? So care of him would be considered care of the sun."

"That could be right. The sun's representative, what a fine way to look at it."

We both slept well after greeting the rising sun, but when I woke nearing noon I found myself worried. Without certain knowledge, but from things which had been said, I thought that the Horse Cave was more than twice the distance to the east of Lazcux that Gabillou was to the west. Yet Ukitu had walked here alone and was now packing her things in preparation for the walk back. It was four days or so from here to Gabillou. So it would be twelve, I thought, to the Horse Cave. But that was twelve days for a youngish - I supposed I was about twenty - woman to walk. Ukitu was seriously ill, so I would have to say twenty five days. Perhaps even that was optimistic. I went to find her, and as I thought she had begun packing up.

"I would love to see the Horse Cave. Ikaseraz told me a lot about it. What do you think?"

She gave me a sad smile.

"I wondered what story you would come up with. You've no desire at all to see the Horse Cave. You just want to help me to get back there."

"That transparent am I? You're half right. I want to help you on the journey and make sure everything is alright for you when you reach it. But I would love to see it, especially the horses."

"It is a very spiritfull place. I would like you to see it. Specially the part that I painted. I added some lions in honour of my teacher, you could tell me how good they are."

"That settles it. I'm coming to see your lions."

"No. You're not. I was only joking. You've already been to Gabillou and back just to get me some medicine. That is enough. I shall be quite alright. I'll go slowly and take rests all the time."

"Yes, we will and I can help you carry stuff. I'm not a bad hunter of small things, so we won't have to carry much food. It would take you even longer if you had to hunt as well, and it's that or carry it all. No, I'm coming too."

"You'll make me feel terrible, taking you all that way in the wrong direction and you producing milk too. Think of the distance back to Gabillou from there carrying a baby all the way. The winter might come on before you got home."

"No. It won't. I calculated it all before I suggested it because you know I can't endanger Atutxa. The spirits spoke to me in my dreams last night and told me it is what I must do."

I half-believed that myself, so managed to convince her and it was agreed we would go together. But

we decided to put off departure for another day. I hadn't yet painted her medicine bag and I could leave my paints in Lazcux cave if I did it here and pick them up on the way back.

She watched me marking out the leather and said

"Is that a fig there?"

"Yes, and this part is the leaf of a fig tree."

"How do you know what they look like? Have you seen figs growing?"

"Oh no. Wouldn't that be lovely, to see them? No, I asked one of the southern traders what they looked like and he spent quite a bit of time painting them for me. He gave me the painting, said he didn't want anything for it. It cured his homesickness for a while he said. I think he was just a kind man."

It took less time to complete than I had allowed and was soon dry. We put all the medicine and the ingredients for making more into it and I packed it at the top with the food which we needed for the journey. Everything that wasn't known to be necessary for the journey to the Horse Cave and back I bundled up and hid amongst some rocks. We would travel as light as we possibly could. It was a fine balance between more nappies or more washing and drying on the journey.

Everything was well prepared and we got a good early start the next morning. It was a dull cloudy day but it didn't look as though it would rain. The thing weighing most heavily on me about going so far east was that I would be out of contact with Hare. We could speak, with difficulty, at Lazcux but I felt sure that I could not go much further without losing touch. He had agreed that I had to go, but neither of us was happy about it. It came even sooner than I had thought and we said goodbye for a while during the afternoon of the first day. I hope I managed to hide my distress from Ukitu.

The journey was long and slow. But I was surprised by how much I enjoyed it. There was time to look at everything closely on our frequent rests, either for Ukitu to get her breath back or for me to see to Atutxa's needs. Also I was most careful to memorise landmarks and directions because I had to do the reverse journey alone. Though generally moving east we occasionally went south too. Ukitu knew the way too well to be much help at seeing it through a stranger's eyes.

We arrived at last. It had taken us just under thirty days, but I knew that the return on my own would be much quicker. It was evening and we were both tired, Ukitu probably more than she was saying. We left our things packed up, just pulling out our bedding. I filled the water pot and after asking for the Horse Cave spirits blessing we fell asleep.

Both of us felt better the next day. Part of that was with Ukitu being safely home where she could rest all she wanted. After our breakfast and a few sighs of relief, Ukitu wanted to show me the cave almost as much as I wanted to see it. She took me first to the eponymous horses. After introducing me and Atutxa and paying our respects to them, I examined them closely. It was hard to believe that someone had that much skill at painting. The four horses looked the most alive of any painted spirits I had ever seen. It was obvious why the cave was named for them. The other paintings were very good too, and I could truthfully tell Ukitu that her lions were the best I'd seen. I was glad of the daylight in the cave, I thought that they would be frightening by lamplight.

"How it must have hurt Ikaseraz to leave".

"It was unspeakably painful, I know. He wasn't cast out you know. He left before the Elders could meet."

But that was all she could say about it now that he was dead, so I would never know the circumstances.

There was a small entrance to a passageway with the six dots above it to touch while reciting the prayers to Earth Mother, and beside it was a natural rock altar. On the altar was a bear's skull, it was our large local bear. It held so much power that I knelt and touched my forehead to the ground in front of it. I whispered Atutxa's real name to it and held the baby towards its eyes.



"You feel its power too? It's been there as long as I can remember."

Its power held me for a long time and when I was able to leave it I felt much stronger. How glad I was to have come here and invoked its protection for Atutxa.

We both knew that I must set out on the return journey the next day. It was a long, long way to Gabillou.

That evening, as I was collecting my things, Ukitu looked into my pack.

"I'm gauging the spare space. There's something I would very much like you to have, but it's rather large."

When she showed it to me I knew I would leave anything behind to make room for it. It was the top part of a horse's skull, I mean that the lower jaw was missing. On the long front of it was attached a dried seahorse and there were small paintings of sea creatures around it.

"Did you make it?"

"No. My father made it for me as an initiation present. It's yours now, if you can find room. It's not as heavy as it looks."

"It's wonderful. Thank you Ukitu."

"We've known each other too long for thanks to be necessary.

It should be yours."

I looked at it for a long time. Without having to say anything we both knew it was a parting present. Even if she were alive next Midsummer we knew she would not be going to Lazcux again.

In the morning we hugged for a long time and then I left and did not look back.

Chapter 16

We got back to Gabillou as the Autumn was beginning. It was a long mild Autumn and, as it happened we could have taken a lot longer over the journey. The snow and cold did not come until just before Midwinter. We were well supplied and had plenty of reindeer dung for the fire even if we couldn't get the reindeer themselves. I had cut and dried a lot of peat too, expecting a much longer winter.

That winter was the first of several which got steadily milder while the summers became warmer and warmer. After two or three I began to think that our group would come back now at any time. When they didn't come I thought they must have found a very good place to live if even the cave did not draw them back.

One morning, Atutxa must have been six by then, we were up on the tundra at our traps when I turned for some reason and saw in the distance a herd of woolly mammoths.

"Look Atutxa, mammoths!"

"Oh...oh".

We were transfixed.

"Can we go closer?"

"Yes. Come on let's."

So we spent the rest of the day following them. We got quite close to them, they didn't seem to think we were dangerous. They were right, we only wanted to gaze at them. There were one or two big males, as big as Mammoth but mostly they were smaller females of various sizes, and ages we supposed. The calves were kept away from us by all the adults. I wanted Ikaseraz to have been there, he would have loved to see them. Of course I told him all about them when we got back to our shelter. I thought I saw his eyes light up.

Not long after the return of the mammoths it began to seem to me that Atutxa was old enough to defend himself if left alone. Since his birth, the desire to hold Hare had sometimes been so strong that I had almost gone through the cave wall to be with him. Fear for Atutxa had always prevented me. Remembering those lions inside the cave entrance was enough. I could see them so clearly in my mind, but it was Atutxa they were attacking not Esonde's son.

He must have been thoroughly bored and annoyed with all the instructions I kept repeating at him. We took far too much stuff up to the cave, his knife and whistle and wood, bone and antler for him to carve, charcoal sticks to draw with and a lot more beside, so that he would not be tempted to leave the cave. I pretended to be calm and cheerful as I left him and went down the enchanter's passageway. Once I got through the wall Hare jumped into my arms and I held him and held him. Then I sat down and he sat on my lap. I stroked him and we were silent and happy. But I started to get cold because we were sitting in snow although it was summer in the world I had left.

"Get up and let me brush the snow off you." said a familiar raspy voice.

"Hello Snow Leopard."

"Hello Kizkur. Just Leopard will do in this region, those brown ones don't like it." We looked into each other's eyes remembering when we had last met.

"Thank you. You did so well to bring him into the world safely. And all I did was scream abuse at you, I'm sorry."

"Don't apologise. It was to be expected. It's happened to you often enough I imagine."

"Yes, you're right. I hope to be more understanding next time I deliver someone, if I ever do."

"I don't know anything about your group. But I think Crane must be with them, I haven't seen her for a long time."

"Is Mammoth around here?"

"No. I haven't seen him today either."

"That's a shame I wanted to see him too. But I must go back now."

"Yes, Atutxa's waiting, he hasn't left the cave."

"I didn't think he would, but I must go."

I crawled back up the passageway as fast as I could and found Atutxa waiting for me. He looked strangely wide-eyed and I grabbed hold of him.

"Are you alright? What's happened?"

"I don't know."

We sat down and ate some honeycomb together. I smiled at him as I chewed and he gathered words silently. He loved honey as much as Oskol had.

"You didn't leave. I watched you stroking Hare. But I was a leopard."

His words thrilled me. Though I had seen one or two things which led me to think he would be an enchanter, that he could be so advanced at his age had not occurred to me.

"I am so happy Atutxa. You have found your spirit-guide even without being initiated. There is no need for you to be now. You are an enchanter."

"Like you, you mean?"

"Yes just like me. We can go together into the world of the spirits. Not today though, we are both tired and it is very important to be alert there. There are bad spirits who would harm us."

"Leopard is telling me that all will be fine."

"You will find it a wonderful thing never to be alone."

We walked slowly back to our shelter.

"You see that plant there? That's called enchanter's nightshade."

"I don't like that. What mouldy flowers."

"It's very dull isn't it? But it can give you exciting dreams. Only ever take a little of it, no more than a pinch."

"There's a lot to learn."

"I'm afraid there is. But there's plenty of time, we'll just do a little each day."

And that's what we did.



Two summers later he was a big strong boy with plenty of knowledge, but our group had still not come back. That worried me. I longed for Mother and Father and they were getting older. Also all of Atutxa's learning was theoretical, he needed some real patients. We had performed all the necessary ceremonies together in the cave and for each Midsummer we went to Lazcux. Two of the other groups had come back and most people seemed glad to be home. They had left behind some who had decided to stay in the South, mainly those who had married into southern groups. Ukitu never came.

One day that summer we were up on the tundra checking out our traps. It must have been quite early in the season I think because in one trap we had a lovely bushy fox which was still almost entirely white. A beautiful pelt which I would not trade with unless there was something very special to be had. But our attention was caught by movement to our North. It was something fairly big, but we had seen no mammoths, aurochs or bison for a few days. There had been some horses though and we guessed that it might be one of those. That seemed unlikely on reflection as it was plainly in a peat grough which was wrong for a horse. Also it was alone which couldn't be right for any of the animals we could think of that were that size, unless it were a lone hunter such as a leopard. We needed to know what it was, but approached with caution. As we got near it gave one high-pitched scream and then was silent. That indicated that it was afraid of us which was encouraging, but it also probably meant that it was injured or stuck since it had not run away.

"It's a baby mammoth." Atutxa called, he had run on ahead.

It was in a very bad state, stuck in the peat up to its shoulders and I was surprised it had had the energy to scream. How long it had been there there was no way of knowing, but I guessed a few days for the herd to have given up on it and moved on. But it was alive so what we had to think about was how to extricate it. Even if it died after we got it out it had to be done, we could not leave it to die terrified and with its legs trapped. There was no blood so it had been lucky so far in not attracting predators.

"You're faster than me. Run to the shelter or the cave and get some long strips of leather and anything flat that we can use as stepping stones. We don't want to sink into the peat ourselves." He was off at once while I stayed to deter any predators. I tried to calm its fears by muttering soothing nonsense and not looking directly at it. Its fur was wet and flat to its skin but even so it looked rather thin, poor stuff. Perhaps that was normal and it would thicken up for winter, if we could get the animal out. If it had been weaned we would stand more chance of keeping it alive.

Atutxa approached slowly, laden with stuff. He'd found a couple of quite big shelves in the cave which looked promising but were certainly awkward to carry up here. Hanging round his neck were various lengths of leather.

"There are more of these shelves but these two were all I could carry."

"They should be enough. I hope so."

We slid the shelves out towards it, one on either side, then timidly tried leaving the firm ground and putting our weight on the shelves. They held us alright, but the mammoth tried to struggle away. Its movements only sank it further but I felt relieved that it had the energy to try. There was nothing to get hold of to pull it by, its fur looked as though it would just come out by the roots and its ears would probably hurt it too much. Its neck was clear of the peat but we would throttle it if we pulled there, so it had to be the leather straps. With Atutxa one side and me the other we managed to get two straps under its abdomen by passing them to each other. I had realised we would get our arms wet and black, but bending down like that our faces and hair were soon covered too, it felt slimy and smelled of decay.

Any attempts to pull the mammoth up from there just started our shelves sinking, so we retreated to firm ground pulling the animal round so that it was parallel to the bank. We had to recover the shelves too as they were not ours. The mammoth had stopped struggling and was trembling, whether with fear or cold we didn't know. The front end was more massive so I took the pulling strap there and Atutxa took the back one. We pulled and pulled, rested and pulled more. It started to come up but we couldn't ever let go or the sodden peat seemed to pull it back. Before long I felt exhausted and was very surprised to realise that Atutxa was actually stronger than I was. We changed places with difficulty to give him the front end to haul out. That worked better and I was less surprised when I remembered his father's enormous muscles, I had never seen such things.

Slowly it came out and I think it realised that we were trying to help it rather than eat it. With a foot on dry ground it was able to help by pulling itself and then at last it was out. We found it some of the grey lichen to eat, that looked more digestible than heather. Then we tried it with bilberry shoots. It ate them which meant that it was at least part-weaned. But digesting such stuff must be a long process so I gave it some honey, we always feel better for that and it seemed to do so as well.

Tired as we were our work was only beginning. It was wet, cold and very weak and only had us to help it.

We rubbed it down with heather to get some of the worst of the black wet peat off and luckily the sun was shining which would help to dry it. And us for that matter. But it had to be able to walk. It was bigger than I thought and we could not possibly carry it down to our shelter, but it couldn't stay here either, wolves or lions would get it.

"It's got to walk down to our shelter."

"I know."

It just lay on the ground on its side with its legs stretched out. We sat and looked at it. Hare and Leopard could think of nothing either. When we pulled and pushed at it to get it up on its feet it tried and tried but then just collapsed again. It was obviously exhausted.

"You stay with it this time. I'll go down and get two travelling shelters. We can have one and put the other up over the mammoth, it should be big enough. We've got weapons, but we'll need a fire and food and water for three. The water up here is foul."

"We can eat those lemmings from the traps."

"Good thinking. I'll take the fox down with me and at least gut it."

We camped up there for two nights, but on the third day the little mammoth was walking well enough to be able to get down to our shelter. By this time we had found out that it was a girl and she now showed no fear of us at all. I suppose we were her new herd. It took a long time to get down even then, mammoths are not made for going steeply downhill. She seemed to trust Atutxa though and would make better progress with her trunk around his neck.

"I shall call her Tlez." he said at one point on the way down.

"Woolly. That's nice." She did look woollier now that she was dry.

So Tlez she was and you couldn't wish for a nicer animal to have about. And a constant supply of fire-dung too. She could only manage soft leaves at first, but I pounded anything more fibrous in the pestle and mortar and she was happy with that. Anything we were eating she wanted some, except meat which I think she disliked the smell of. Her trunk was into everything investigating. I had to put the sacred objects away to avoid sacrilege.



She was soon too big for our shelter and we put her in Sinotsu's for a while. But she outgrew that too and we thought that she was so big by then that she could defend herself outside and from then on she was an outdoors animal. She never went far though, her herding instinct probably.

It wasn't long before Atutxa started to ride her. She helped him up and down with her trunk. They had a wonderful time, running everywhere. At the river she would throw water over him from her trunk which they both thought a great game. He was always brushing her coat, she was probably the smartest mammoth in the world. I thought of Oskol running about with Wolf. Poor Wolf must have died of old age by now though.

She was even bigger by the following summer though not full grown and it was from high up on her neck that Atutxa saw people coming up from the South. I had been disappointed waiting for our group so many years that I didn't want to hope, but of course I did anyway. I only stopped to arm myself and then we set out to meet them. Tlez's tusks were quite big enough to scare anyone off if it was strangers. Atutxa dismounted to make himself less of a target and we walked one on either side of her.

The details are vague now. I was in tears as soon as I saw it was them. Mother was out in front, but even through tears I could see from her face that something was wrong. I checked behind her and saw Father and Oskol. So I knew it was Eraminpe before she spoke. What hurt most at the time was that she had been dead for over a year and I had not known. We hugged each other and wept. Then Father and Oskol came up and I clung to them.

What an introduction for Atutxa. I must have told them he was my son somehow. They welcomed him to the family as warmly as I had known they would.

It's confused in my memory now. But I remember that we could not hold the ceremony for Eraminpe's skull in my parent's shelter that first evening because everyone wanted the ceremony of return to take place immediately in the cave. They had time to tell me some of the details though. She had married a son of Esonde and had been happy for a while, but then he had died of the recurring fever that Sinotsu had told me of in spirit-world. When he died she was pregnant and then both she and the baby died during childbirth. It made me feel so hollow inside that such a carefree lovely girl was gone.

Mother and Father looked old as I had known they would, but Oskol looked such a strong and

handsome man, I had not expected that, and he looked so like Father. The big shock though was Sinotsu's appearance. He should have been big and strong by then, he was twenty or about I thought but he looked nearer forty. He was quite tall but so thin you could see his bones, and his eyes had sunk into his face. His hair was thin and straggly and he hadn't plaited it. Worse, he was hunched and walked like an old man. I ran to greet him and though he looked at me he said nothing, just walked slowly to his shelter and went in.

Father said that he had been ill but it seemed to be something worse, that he rarely spoke and if he did it was to warn people of an evil spirit that was going to kill him.

"So many died and he couldn't save them. He says a spirit lammergeier wants to kill us all, but especially him. No enchanters that we met in the south had ever heard of this spirit, but he said that they could not see it."

He did not come up to the cave for the return ceremony, that worried me more than anything else. Atutxa and I managed between us but I had expected help from Sinotsu.

The next day I saw nothing of him as I spent all day with my family in Mother and Father's shelter. They had made Eraminpe's skull beautiful. I was sure Father had done it though it was not something that I could ask. While I made all the preparations for Min's ceremony Father told me and Atutxa about their life in the south. Mother and Oskol broke in sometimes with additional things they had thought of.



They had been fairly lucky on the journey. There were no deaths. They came to a fine place and thought themselves to have been well guided by the spirits. It was a large area with nobody living in it and the Elders agreed, with no gainsayers, that they would settle there. The climate was mild which pleased everyone after the painful cold they had all been through. It was watery country with vast reedbeds and quite outside their experience, but there was very abundant food with water birds and fish so they thought all was well. The reeds were doubly useful, as roofs for their shelters and they could be woolded together to make rafts both for getting about and for fishing. Sinotsu performed all the necessary ceremonies and said that his spirit-guide was particularly at home there, so they thought they had found an ideal place. But slowly they noticed that more and more people were getting ill with the recurring fever and Sinotsu could find no spirit to help him. But nobody wanted to move on, nor could they have easily moved because the fens and marshes stretched for uncounted miles.

They rarely saw anybody, but one year a group of traders came. They told them that the place was called Kamag and many people had tried to live there because food was so good and easy, but all had been driven away in the end by the recurring fever. None of those groups had been able to find any spirits which could drive that away. Our group had stayed on but they failed to thrive. There were more and more deaths and after the Chief Elder died of the fever they decided to return.

Chapter 17

By the following evening Sinotsu had not come out of his shelter. Apart from general worries about him, there was the fact that I knew there was no food in there. I walked in with no warning call.

"You're coming to eat with us."

He stood up listlessly without looking at me and made slowly for the door. Deciding on the spot, I picked up his sleeping furs and followed him. In our shelter I saw that he was looking into Ikaseraz's eyes which pleased me. His strong link with Ikaseraz might keep him in our shelter and he could only gain strength from the skull. I had to call him away from it to eat. I put as much good food into his bowl as would fit and, during the meal, put extra pieces in. He seemed too absent to even know that he was eating and just finished everything I gave him.

Atutxa and I cleared up and got on with our evening tasks. When we decided it was time to sleep I showed Sinotsu where his sleeping furs were and with no surprise or words at all he went to sleep.

Hare and I discussed him before I slept and we agreed that the lammergeier must be a spirit of shame and depression that was making him think the large number of deaths was his fault. We decided that the first thing must be to get as much food in him as possible to hide his bones.



The ceremonies in the cave for each person who had died in the south kept Atutxa and me busy for quite some time. Tlez made friends with everyone and was quickly accepted which I was glad to see. It was asking much of them to have such a huge animal in the camp but she was immediately accepted as one of the group. Nobody tried to ride her except Atutxa though.

The rams' horns were played for the Chief Elder's ceremony, though not for anyone else's. There were so few elders left that we had enough rams' horns for each of them to play one. The deep tuneless

sounds echoed round the cave and anyone not downhearted already certainly would have been after listening to those. Sinotsu came to that ceremony though he joined in nothing.

He came to Eraminpe's too. Atutxa and I played harps and Mother played flute. I looked away when I saw Sinotsu's tears, he would not want me to see him crying. He refused to have anything to do with his father's ceremony and did not even attend it. His father had disappeared one night in Kamag. Nobody knew what had happened. The last time he was seen he had been very drunk and most people thought he had probably drowned. The dead man's sister came to the ceremony and I hardly recognised her. She was clean and tidy and, even more surprisingly, she quietly thanked me for performing the ceremony. She had been such a loud-mouthed slubberdegullion too. When we returned to our shelter after his father's ceremony Sinotsu smiled for the first time.

The first time he actually spoke was to ask me if he could come to the family ceremony for Eraminpe's skull that we were holding the same evening in Mother and Father's shelter.

"I would be very pleased if you would come. But I shall have to ask Father because it is his ceremony."

"Of course." I didn't remark on the fact that he had spoken two sentences, let him consider it normal.

Father was pleased that he wanted to come and told me to tell him so. We all, that is our family and

Sinotsu, gathered that evening in front of Eraminpe's skull in Mother and Father's shelter. It was beautifully done but she seemed absent from it. The ceremony was for the unnamed baby too though his skull was not there. Everybody spoke remembering the light-hearted girl who I don't think had a serious thought in her life before they went south. Father also spoke in praise of her husband, Esonde's son Gogoruppa. I hardly remembered him. When everyone had spoken we sang the carrying chants in case any of the three spirits had not yet reached the Ancestors. As we chanted I heard Min say

"Don't look so glum. We are all three with the Ancestors, and they are a jolly lot I can tell you, you'll enjoy it here."

I smiled with delight and caught Mother's eye, she was smiling too. When I looked back to the skull Eraminpe was there.

Oskol held Sinotsu back when we were leaving and that seemed right. He might succeed where I didn't seem to be able to.

What was said was between them of course, but Sinotsu came to the next hunting ceremony and took part. The next day he set off with the hunters.

Hare confirmed that he was improving.

"Crane has re-appeared. Nobody had seen her for a long time. We thought at first that she must be moulting but it was much longer than that. She said that there was no lammergeier spirit to worry about, Sinotsu believed in its malign presence but he had imagined it."

"I don't know if that is good news or bad. We didn't want to have to confront a lammergeier, but it speaks badly for the state of his mind."

"On balance it may be a good thing. When he and Crane are not attacked he will slowly begin to think it has gone away and perhaps eventually forget it."

"That would be a good outcome. I won't tell Oskol that there is no baleful spirit in pursuit of Sinotsu though. If he believes in it he can sympathise better." Hare agreed with me.

The hunt was not very successful. All the hunters agreed that they were too few.

When we heard that the wester group had returned also, a delegation of the elders went to talk to them. They reported back to us at a general meeting which was held in the cave. Even less of the wester group had returned than of our group. I thought that might help Sinotsu and stressed to him how well he had done to get the people through a hard time. Perhaps he was beginning to believe it. The wester group had gone to the foothills of the great mountains in the southwest but had been forced higher and higher by the local groups there. Life had been a struggle between the cold and meagre vegetation of the mountain slopes and attacks by the hunters who considered the area as theirs. Most of their elders had succumbed to cold and too little food, several hunters had been killed in the fighting and few women had become pregnant. Our elders said that they seemed too dazed to put up any resistance to their idea that the two group's hunters should in future hunt together. It seemed the only thing to do, but I foresaw arguments over how much of the kill should go to each group.

I was wrong though, it worked out well at first anyway. The bargaining was very diplomatically handled with our group's access to their honey trees included in it. That was not so important to us now as bees had made nests in a few of our trees, but they still had considerably more than we did.

That cave meeting of the whole group was the first time that Atutxa had been with all of us. And I think it was the first time he realised that he looked different. I had stressed to him from the earliest age that he must be proud of being half ice giant. He was a handsome boy, or Mother, Father, Oskol and I thought so even allowing for our being biassed. His brow ridge was large and strong, increasingly so as he grew and he was less dark than most of us. If he behaved differently from the other children I put it down to being an enchanter from such a young age and having no children to play with when he was small. His

integration with the other children was slow. They teased him, naturally, and shunned him as being different. But after he had thrashed the bullies in their first attack they never hit him again. They had underestimated his strength as I had. At that age he preferred the company of Tlez to the other children's.

We all of us tried hard to get back to the old routine, all except Sinotsu who wasn't up to trying at anything. But doing the old things just showed up to everybody all the people who were gone and had done these things with us the last time we did them. It was a melancholy time for us all. I took Sinotsu through the cave to spirit-world whenever I could. He seemed better for being with Crane. They spoke little but sometimes she would put a wing round him, in response to their shared thoughts I supposed. He wanted to visit the ancestors. Privately I thought he wanted to ask forgiveness of the spirits of those who had died in the south. He wouldn't tell me if that were the reason because he knew how hard I was trying to persuade him that it was not his fault. But a visit to the ancestors is so rarely allowed, and certainly not in his present condition.

Little by little his mind did improve. The lammergeier came gradually less into his conversation. By the following summer he was prepared to admit that there was no lammergeier spirit at all. He always ate with Atutxa and me, though he had moved back into his own shelter, and his face had filled out as well as his body. Oskol told me that he was showing more strength and speed on the hunts. That pleased me not just for Sinotsu's improvement but because they needed strong young men for hunting, even with the wester group they were too few.

Hare and I had been saying that we hadn't seen Owl and Eagle recently so we decided to go and visit them. It had also occurred to me that Atutxa needed more responsibility as an enchanter. So one day when Sinotsu was away with the hunters I left Atutxa as the group's acting Enchanter and went to spirit-world. Without telling him I had asked Mother and Father to keep a surreptitious eye on him because he was still young and, I thought, over-confident.

Luckily Leopard wasn't about when I had passed through and Crane was too distracted by shrieking encouragement to the hunt to bother with Hare and me. So we slipped away north to where Hare thought Owl would be. I wanted to see Eagle too of course but only in a general friendly way. It was Owl I needed to consult about Atutxa. It might have been a mother's natural aggrandisement of her own children that was afflicting me, but I thought that Atutxa was responsible for the wonderful warming that we had experienced. My worry was that if anything happened to reduce his influence we might return to that barely bearable cold.

They were both preening when we found them, so after a quick greeting we sat quietly by to allow them to finish all their feathers. Hare sat on my lap and I caressed his ears.

"I'm glad you've come Kizkur. Is all well now your group has returned?" Owl's beautiful white feathers were finished first.

"Yes and no. They suffered many losses in the south. Some whole families are gone and with them their particular skills. We have no basket-makers now. There is one old man in the wester group who makes quite good ones and the elders have sent three youngsters as apprentices to him. It will be a long time though before we get baskets as good as the Ekarken family made. We are getting to be half amalgamated with the westers, they lost even more than we did."

"Nobody will ever know, but you would have lost many if they had stayed, more perhaps."

"It would be comforting to think that worse was avoided."

"It may be so. Many were dying of cold."

"Mmm" Eagle agreed from amongst his tail feathers where he was finishing his preen.

"Crane says that your hunts are less than satisfactory." continued Owl. "I have thought up a good plan for that, but it is too soon yet so I'll tell you about that later. When Atutxa is safely independent I'll hope

to get that going. You're moving in that direction leaving him to look after them today?"

"Yes, I can't believe how fast he is growing up."

"He will be a fine man."

"Man! He's only a boy yet."

"No. He is nearly a man." She seemed sure but I didn't want to think that.

"Just immediately though we should try for something to help your two groups. If possible I'd want it to help Atutxa grow his abilities too. I need to think. Talk to Eagle for a bit." She flew off and Eagle and I looked at each other.

"She's... well... What shall we talk about?"

"Tell me what you've been doing, Eagle."

He did, and was still doing so when Owl returned.

"I've been to see Salmon because he's the expert. He's added some good ideas. Where shall I begin?"

I knew her well enough by now not to say "At the beginning". When no-one replied she said

"Crane has told you that a long way to the west the Vezer joins the sea. Crane is an experienced geographer but she told you one thing that was wrong. She told you that the sea in the west is endless, but it is not, there is more land at the further side. It is a scale problem, I think, that sea would seem endless to her. That's not cogent anyway."

"I can always tell when you've been talking to that salmon." said Eagle. Owl had the grace to laugh.

"Alright then, Salmon and I think that you and Atutxa should take a journey down the Vezer to the sea. You can ride on Tlez. Crane is quite right that the sea is responsible for the weather to some extent and the sea spirit should be thanked for sending warmer winds."

"Owl! I should have remembered that. I've been distracted recently, but it's no excuse. The Enchanter should use all available knowledge."

"Don't blame yourself, you're only human." she said sounding rather smug.

"Salmon's main idea was a really good one. He says that you have a seahorse in a sacred object which would make a very good offering to the sea spirit."

"I have, yes, Atutxa and I will go and offer that in thanks to the sea spirit." I hid my dismay as well as I could. I did not at all want to lose Ukitu's parting gift.

"She would want you to use it in that way. You can remember her at her beautiful lion image. And you carry her snake and dragon with you always."

I looked at my arms. Esonde had captured Ukitu's paintings so well. Ukitu smiled at me in my mind.

"Yes, that is what she wants."

When I got back Atutxa came up at the run.

"Kizkur! You've been away so long. Faltuva cut his foot in the river and it took me ages to stop the bleeding, and I was still doing that when we thought his mother was going into labour. But it was alright she wasn't."

"I'm sure you did fine. What's all this 'Kizkur', couldn't you call me 'Mother'?"

"Too late for that. It must have been your idea anyway."

"It was. But a girl can change her mind can't she?"

He laughed and I told him about our proposed trip to the sea. He was as excited as I was.

"We'll see how Sinotsu is after the Midsummer gathering. We can't go until he's strong enough to have charge of the two groups."

The Enchanter of the wester group was old and her mind was not clear.

That summer at Lazcux was more like the old gatherings. Several groups had returned including the Horse Cave people. My enquiries for Ukitu had the expected answer, they had found her body in the cave when they got back. It was lying under her lions. They had prepared her skull and put it where her body had lain and it was revered there every day. The Horse Cave group had gone east before turning south and had done well. They had reached the sea but found all the shore occupied and strongly defended. Further inland they had found warmer conditions and fairly productive hunting. Like everybody else though they were glad to be back at their cave.

The larger number of us meant that the ceremonies were performed with more enthusiasm and the singing and dancing had more energy about them. I think we all felt the joy of survival. As soon as I got some time to myself I went through the back to the passageway with the lions. Beneath the one that showed the breath of life I buried a pair of bison horns that I had brought as an offering to Ukitu's beloved teacher. They were together now, they were Ancestors. I seemed to see a lion and a bison asleep and curled up together.



We had not brought Tlez, thinking she might be disruptive, but it made no difference she followed us anyway. She had such a friendly nature that nobody actually complained when she knocked things over. On the way back she was helpful in giving rides to the oldest and youngest, so we made good time.

It seemed to me that Sinotsu was enough himself again to take the responsibility of acting Enchanter for us and the wester group while Atutxa and I went to the sea. He had performed in all the ceremonies for Midsummer and I had seen him speaking to people. That combined with his greatly improved physical appearance decided me. As soon as we were rested and cleaned up Atutxa and I packed our things and set off.

The plan was to follow the river as far as possible. We strapped our packs and weapons onto Tlez's back and walked light. The weather was fine to start with. It even became too hot most afternoons and we cooled our feet in the river. Tlez felt it particularly with her thick fur and often walked all day on the riverbed. If one bank of the river became impassable we climbed onto Tlez's back and she would take us across to the other bank. Only on two occasions were both sides impossible and then we all made a detour away from the river. Tlez's strength was always enough to clear a way. I often remarked to Atutxa on how beautiful the valley of the Vezer was, specially where there were gorges cut by the river through white cliffs, but he was more interested in beetles. We saw the entrances to several caves in the cliffs and I wondered if there were people in them. If there were they stayed hidden, we saw nobody on the whole journey. Not even the river traders, they must have moved away when there was no-one left to trade with.

We had brought food with us so didn't have to hunt every day. I always put a fish trap in the river before we slept though and we usually had a fish breakfast. We only made slow progress because there were many stops for Tlez to eat. It was the first time I realised just how much she ate, she was a big animal by this time. Her thick fur was useful in one way, it protected her from the biting midges which were a constant annoyance to us.

As the river widened approaching the sea it became muddy and unpleasant on the banks so we left it and headed directly west. We both got up on Tlez's back and she made easy work of the brush and scrub. Even from our raised position we heard and smelled the sea before we saw it. The west wind brought the strong smell of seaweed. It was strengthening all the time and the clouds were passing fast over our heads. So our first sight of the sea was of white spray flying high in the air as huge waves of water hit the rocks. But we barely noticed that with the shock of the size of it. We agreed afterwards that the way we thought of the world was changed in that instant. Our imaginations could not have produced anything near it before we saw that. We just sat looking at it for a while to let such an immensity become part of our minds.

Our hair and Tlez's fur was blowing about everywhere but Atutxa and I had one thought at the same moment. We laughed at each other and got down to the ground so that we could run to the shore and get a closer look. We looked at each other startled to feel the smashing waves through our feet. Tlez followed us looking excited but unsure. I don't know how long we spent there just watching wave after wave broken to flying white drops. Neither of us gave the sea spirit we had come to visit a thought I'm sure.

Only when it started to go dark did we consider our exposed position and hurried away back the way we had come. We had come though a small valley, on the way west, of a tributary of the main river which offered some shelter from the wind. It was further back than we thought but it made a good windbreak. Near the sea it would have blown down our travelling shelters in a moment.

The next morning was quite different. The air was absolutely still and it was warm by the time the sun was up just a little way. That brought out the midges so we hurried over breakfast and collected up our things and set off back to the sea. We left Tlez behind as she had found some grass to eat, she didn't seem to like the bushes and plants that grow by the sea. On the way back to the shore Atutxa and I speculated on what the waves would be like now that there was no wind. We both thought that they would be less than last night but probably still quite high. But we were quite wrong. The tide had gone out leaving a white sandy bay and far away beyond it we could see small waves, hardly the height of my hand, breaking gently on to the sand and then drawing back before the next one.

No words were needed, we took off our boots and left them in the marram grass. Then we ran hand in hand across the sand and splashed our feet in the water. We chased each other through the wavelets until I was too tired to go on and then we sat on the sand and trickled it through our fingers.

"This is no way for two enchanters to behave" I said but he knew I didn't mean it.

As the sun got high though we decided we should go and look for a suitable place to honour the spirits of the great ocean. To the south of our beach was a rocky headland which we scrambled over to the

next bay. We walked slowly round the bay noticing that the tide had turned and the sea was slowly covering the lower part. There were caves at the base of the headland on the far side and we wanted to explore them but there would not be much time. The line of seaweed showed that they would be under water when the tide came in. The animals in the rock pools delayed us further. We had never seen crabs or shrimps alive before and the anemones were wonderful colours. The caves were a disappointment when we reached them, dark and dripping and one smelled bad. But a wonderful find at the entrance to the last one made up for it. Atutxa picked up a shell to show me. It was alive and it was the animal that makes the beautiful purple which Ikaseraz had given me as a girl. I had long ago used it all, but here was the very animal to get some more from. If there was one there would be more. We left that one there because the tide was rising and we had to climb up the headland. It would surely dry out and die if we took it with us. The headland was not steep but it was awkward to climb and we sat down to rest on a ledge of grass. As I chewed on a grass stem and looked out to sea I began to think that the sound of the waves was not right. It should have been coming from in front and below my feet, which it was, but it was coming from behind me too. I turned and saw that Atutxa was already on his feet and investigating.

"There's a deep hole here."

"Be careful."

"I am being careful."

We lay on our fronts and peered down, but it was all black. The sound of the waves pulling the sand and shingle came up magnified and entranced us for a while. The sound of the water breaking against the rock walls of the cave below us sounded like the Vezer at home. Atutxa was up first to see what was further back in the rocky cleft behind the hole, so it was he who found the sacred cave. The entrance was a tall and narrow slit which led into a taller and very narrow cave. We prostrated ourselves on seeing that there was an altar at the back where the side walls joined. Centrally towards the back of the squarish rock forming the altar was a very large shell of the purple dye animal and several scallop shells formed a semicircle round it near the front. So we had accidentally entered a place sacred to the Enchanter of another group and lay face down for an appropriate time begging forgiveness of him or her. The ceremonies held here were unknown to us but we adapted one of our own to placate the sea creatures' spirits who had been invoked here, and didn't stop until we both felt that they understood and forgave us.

It was a shocking thing to have done, but as we walked back to our temporary camp I began to feel better about it. Atutxa ran ahead to greet Tlez and in the moment of seeing their mutual delight I knew we had found the right place for our sea gratitude ceremony.

That was our priority the next day. As I carefully unpacked the horse skull with its seahorse attached I spoke aloud to thank Ukitu for the perfect offering to the spirit of this great sea. It was a slow walk to the headland and an even slower climb down to the cave with our delicate sea gift, there was much passing of it between us at awkward places. That was a good thing and part of the offering.

Before entering the cave we burnt spikenard to Sky Father to ask his help with our ceremony. Then we went in and listened for guidance on the placing of the skull. It was nearly mid-day before we were both convinced that the spirit of the sea wanted us to move the big shell forward a way and lean the horse skull against the back of the cave so that it was resting on the back part of the altar. Most of the afternoon was spent thanking the sea spirits for the warmth they had sent us. When we came out again into the light the sky had clouded over but we both wanted to go down to the sandy bay where we had first seen the sea. The tide was too far in to go down the cliff and along the shore so we went back over the headland keeping to the dunes. It was easiest to walk where the roots of the marram grass had consolidated the sand. Our bay was nearly covered by the sea so we sat at the edge of the dunes to gaze outwards. The wind was not strong enough to chill us but it was raising waves that were breaking a long way out. Watching the waves soothed my mind in a similar way to the smoke mixture we used to enter the spirit world, though that did not happen. I would have stopped it anyway, if I could, it felt dangerous to do so here. Atutxa said he felt the same and it was he who saw that our offering was

accepted. He saw a horse in the white foam of a wave far out in the sea. By the time he had alerted me to it the horse had dived. So it must have been a sea horse and a sign from the sea spirit that it was pleased with our gift.



We both saw the next one and grinned at each other. There were several more as we sat there until late in the evening. The sky had cleared to some extent by then and it put on a glorious sunset for us. As the reds and yellows darkened to purples we felt that we were the only people in the world.

Tlez met us as we hurried back to get to our camp before dark. She definitely didn't like the sea.

With our thanks made we were free for practical tasks. Tlez was persuaded to come as far as the dunes the next day which we had decided to spend exploring rock pools and collecting the shellfish which made the purple dye. I dug out a pool high up on the beach to put them in as we found them. There were not many but that only made the search better as we whooped with pleasure on finding one. By the time the tide was turning we had a good collection, though none was as big as the one on the altar. We had found a good large shell to use as a collecting dish. Getting the purple required patience but was not hard in any way. Patience was needed at several stages but mostly at the beginning when one of the animals was removed from the pool I'd dug they retreated into their shells and it seemed a long time before they would put out their foot again. When they eventually did I tickled the sole of it with a piece of marram grass which caused them to shoot a stream of purple into the shell Atutxa was holding underneath. At first we put one that had contributed back into our pool in the hope of a second squirt, but it never happened so we returned used ones to the sea. We thanked each one for its gift before releasing it, in remembrance of the sacred one in the cave.

When the sea returned up the beach I tied a good piece of leather over the shell to avoid spillage. The following day we made some resin and sealed the leather to the shell in preparation for the journey back. I couldn't go back without a present for Mother, I thought she would be pleased with some salt. If I could get enough we could have some for ourselves. We scoured the nearby beaches for large shells and driftwood. There was plenty of driftwood and we added brushwood from inland to make a good sized fire. The limit to how much we got was set by the number of suitable shells we could find to boil the seawater in. They were left overnight on the dampened down fire and we had quite a good amount. It seemed rather less by the time we'd pulled out bits of dead seaweed and such, so I wrapped it all to give to Mother.

The river traders used to bring edible seaweed and I would have liked to take some of that back too. Much searching of the area didn't produce any that I could be sure were the right ones. I didn't know if any of the ones we found might be poisonous, so I had to give up that idea.

The journey back was uneventful though rather tiring and we were both glad to be home. Mother was very pleased with her salt. She said that while we were away there had been a hunt and Oskol had arrived home with three wolf cubs. That should keep him occupied and happy. I knew how he had been missing Wolf.

Chapter 18

Owl's idea was that when Atutxa was old enough that he would have been initiated if he had not already been an enchanter - 'a man' she said but he was still a boy - he should journey north alone to find his father. Not alone really, he would go on Tlez and Leopard could find out in spirit-world where he should go to find him. When I said

"Whatever for? We've got on fine without him." she was dismissive.

"No, you haven't. Even merged with the wester group you are too few. You've lost skills and you'll get inbred. Your numbers have fallen below the critical level, your group is diminishing instead of increasing. And what's more you know it and are doing nothing."

That was me told. She made me angry, but that in itself was enough to show that she was right.

She was right...but...but

"It's too dangerous, he's too young."

"And when will he be old enough? He will have Tlez in your world and Leopard in ours, do you think either would let him come to any harm?"

"I'll go with him to protect him."

"No you won't. This is for him to do alone. What could you do that he could not do himself?"

It was unkind, but I could see that she was right.

"But I don't see what use he could be if Atutxa managed to find him."

"You're being deliberately obtuse Kizkur. You know how strong he is, and there are lots more like him. They are all superb hunters, the women too. That'll make you jealous, I know you've always wanted to go hunting."

She knew how to put the knife in.

"You must realise that I want you to join up with his group of ice giants."

"That's what I thought but will they want to join with us if they are such good hunters without us?"

"I don't know. Your group may have skills that they would appreciate, and just more people when it comes to a fight is a benefit to them too. Who can tell the future except Blackbird? I've asked him about it of course, but none of us could understand what he said, I'll not bother you with it."

"I worry that the fights might be between them and us, and it's clear who would win."

"Diplomacy, Kizkur, diplomacy. What do they want? You know what you want."

"But we can't even speak to each other."

"You seemed to do alright last time you met him."

I had to laugh. She won as always.

Our preparations began in late Spring of the year that Atutxa was twelve. He was bigger than all the other twelve year olds and more mature in his thoughts as well. Owl was right, he was a man.

The practical things came first to give us time to think about which objects of power should go with him. We had a few tussles over what needed to be done and taken, but we both agreed the most important

thing was to get Tlez prepared. She must be strong and well-fed. Her favourite food, apart from what she found for herself, was a mix of seeds with honey. That was lucky as I was sure that would give her strength and energy for what could be a long journey. We fed her some each day and packed up a good large amount to take with them. The three apprentice basket-makers were back by this time and we commissioned two wicker and rush panniers to strap on Tlez's back. Seed cakes for Atutxa were packed at the bottom of the other pannier to balance Tlez's food.

She had to be exercised every day to get her fit, and even minor scratches had to be thoroughly cleaned. Special attention was paid to her feet and she was groomed and groomed. We had a specially large nit comb made to clear her of insect parasites and put that in one of the panniers when we were sure she was free of them.

It could hardly be too cold for Tlez however far north they had to travel, but we packed all Atutxa's warm furs and down clothing. I made a short thanksgiving to Ikaseraz's skull and the spirit of his eider duck for the good warm feathers. The water on the high ground north of here was drinkable but not pleasant, it was a dirty brown colour and tasted of reeds. It might be better further north, but in case it wasn't I had the leather-makers design and make-up two large water carriers. One to go on either side of Tlez, she was so strong she probably wouldn't even notice that they were there. They also made us a very strong plaited rope to tether Tlez at night, she wouldn't like it but we couldn't risk her being attracted off by other mammoths.

I had a long soap-making session. They needed enough for one very large mammoth as well as what Atutxa needed himself. It was a job I hated, smelly and messy and needed so much time and concentration, a real bore. But with that and his comb packed we just put in one bowl for eating and drinking and various tools including needle and thread, with all his weapons and lightweight travelling shelter, the practical aspects were covered.

The spirit objects he would need were much more important and harder to decide on. I put the bear's tooth, from my grandmother, around his neck. As well as providing protection from the spirits that had a practical use. I thought his father would recognise it and understand that this was his son. He had seemed very impressed by it. We discussed his taking a harp for a similar reason but decided it was just too awkward an object to manipulate on what could become a very long journey. The white bear's black claw seemed a definite choice after the effect of its appearance during the battle in the south. It should protect him from hostile spirits of the cold regions.



We decided that he should take two power objects for each of earth, air and water. The black claw was one for earth and for the other we packed a scarab beetle. For the air we chose the swan's skull which Sinotsu had taken to the south. We felt that it had acquired much additional power from the spirits of the south. Also for air he packed a pair of raven's wings. He had found a desiccated raven's body near to Vezeru quite recently. He had put the skull below Ikaseraz's raven painting in the cave. We were both in awe of the wings.

For water he took two very powerful objects we had brought back from the sea, the case of a sea urchin and a small but perfect fish skeleton. He left the vertebra of a dolphin here to protect the group.

Very early one morning we got it all strapped onto Tlez's back. The last thing to go in was his tinder

fungus. Then he left. I smiled and waved and tried to look happy, but then I went back into our shelter and wept.

This is the story he told me when he returned:-

The journey didn't go too badly I suppose. I'm not saying I could have got there without the spirits, obviously not, but they could be confusing at times. Leopard would tell me a definite plan to follow, then she would say that another spirit had said we were going wrong and we'd have to backtrack or something. And it got colder and colder, that was really hard sometimes.

One time we really pissed Leopard off. Both Tlez and I were exhausted and we just lay down and I snuggled up into her fur and slept. I must have been asleep for longer than I'd meant to, because when I woke up it was the next day. Leopard was marching up and down and lashing her tail about. There was no sun so I asked her what time it was. She wouldn't speak to me, so I hurried up and set off again. She calmed down later and said she had over-reacted, but I knew it was my fault really. But it was alright for her in my mind, it wasn't her paws freezing in the snow and ice.

Later the going got even harder, it got quite mountainous. It was lovely to look at, but Tlez kept slipping on the ice. I got down and walked to see if it would be easier for her, but my feet got so cold that I was slowing us down even more. It was much better when we were through the mountains because on the other side there was no more ice, just long grass going on forever. There were no landmarks so I suppose the ice giants find their way about using the sky.

Then one day we were just going along like every other day when from nowhere we were surrounded by ice giants all pointing their spears at us.

I couldn't go for my weapons, so I just sat there. Tlez made a growly harrumph and showed them her tusks, that was brave. While she had their attention I remembered what you'd said about the black claw, so I pulled that out very fast. It was out before any of them could think I was drawing a weapon. You were right about it, they backed off and lowered their spears. What a relief, my heart was pounding.

One of them spoke, but it sounding like clicking and throat-clearing to me. I spoke back so that it would be clear that wouldn't work. They didn't seem to know what to do and neither did I. Tlez took the initiative and started to walk and after a moment's discussion they walked with us. Their talk went on as we walked, they didn't seem to be arguing exactly but they were worried. After a while several of them started to gesture to me. They were pointing more to the west of the line we were walking. We mostly couldn't understand each other's gestures either, but I just guessed that they meant their camp was that way. When I turned Tlez that way they smiled and we all set off together. But I didn't know if they saw me as a guest or a prisoner. And I couldn't find any way to gesture to them why I wanted to go with them.

I had a long time to get a look at them, we must have been walking for half a day at least. Except that I was darker we did not look so different. Most were either blonde or red-haired, though some had light brown hair, and several were quite freckly. Some were dark-eyed but most pale blue or grey.

None of them had their hair plaited and put up. They had it just tied back with pieces of leather, or some with strips of fur and some with carved antler decoration. I couldn't make out what the carvings were of and think they were just abstract. But I realised later that some of what I had taken to be leather strips were actually the thinnest plaits you could imagine, wound round to hold the rest of their hair back.

The biggest surprise I got though was when I noticed that some seemed to walk a bit differently from the others. I realised that they were women. I had assumed that this was a hunting party so they would all be men. But I was right, it was a hunting party, they all had weapons and they were carrying a few kills. So the women went hunting too, how strange.

They started chattering more and looking at me, so I thought we must be getting near their camp and it soon appeared. It was much bigger than I was expecting though there didn't seem to be many people about, and most of those were small children. The bravest of them came running up to Tlez, who is used to children of course, and did just the right thing. She took each of their hands in turn with the tip of her trunk and they were soon giggling and running round her. A few women came up slowly behind them, some of them holding babies. They spoke to the hunting group for a while, I assumed about me. While they were talking I got Tlez to help me down to the ground, but that seemed to cause some consternation. The women with babies moved backwards as if I might be dangerous. I showed my hands to them palms forward and at least they stopped retreating. One of the hunters signed to me to show them the bear's black claw, we were all getting better at gestures because I knew at once what he meant. I put my hand out slowly towards them, to try to avoid frightening them, and then opened it to show the claw. Their fear seemed suddenly to be gone and they clustered round me to get a look at it. They all made the same gesture to it, bowing their heads and touching their foreheads. So we all felt the same about it, that it was a very powerful object. Nobody tried to touch it.

When everybody had seen the claw, though most of the children were more interested in Tlez, they signed that we were all going to sit round the fire and eat. I should have described the camp because it wasn't like ours. In the middle was a really big fire which everybody used. Their shelters were arranged round it in circles with the fire in the centre. Their shelters were mostly small compared with ours and had no fire in them. They were mostly just for one person and seemed to be only used for storage and sleeping in. I don't know how they arranged it but there always seemed to be food ready on the fire and no fixed meal times. We were eating because we had arrived at camp. Another group of hunters came in when we had nearly finished and when they were ready they ate too. The food was mostly roast meat of many different kinds, I didn't recognise some of them. There were stews too, but they were mostly meat with just the occasional root or stem in them. Everybody helped themselves and it all seemed very relaxed. A hot drink was passed round which I liked, it tasted a bit like fennel.

More and more ice giants kept arriving, they were a big group. I got some curious looks, I suppose I looked dark and small to them, but they all seemed more interested in Tlez. I had put the braided leather rope round her neck and tied it round my waist because I didn't want her to do any damage and start a fight. I don't think I need have worried though because I saw no signs of anybody looking as though they might fight.

As the groups came in and joined us round the fire I looked at each face. I had the rather silly idea that I would recognise my father because he would look like me. But they all looked so much alike to me that it might have been any of them. He would be one of the older men, if he was in this group at all, but I found that I couldn't even gauge age easily. Many times they asked me to show the claw, and the reaction was always the same, amazement perhaps, surprise anyway followed by head bowing and forehead touching.

The evening was spent around the fire, people broke up into groups some talking, others singing or gambling. I stayed with some of the group I had arrived with and they tried to include me in the talk, but I felt so strange and ignorant that I thought I would put off until the next day any attempt to find my father.

One or two of the group who had brought me in looked at what I had in my pack and when they saw my travelling shelter showed me a place in one of the outer circles where I could pitch it. I hammered the stake I had brought into the ground and tethered Tlez to it. Though I felt I had to stroke her trunk and explain that it was necessary. She seemed quite happy about it anyway and I think really if she had wanted to she could probably have pulled it out. But she is too good mannered to let me know that my efforts were useless.

Though very tired I slept badly. It was partly the thought of being surrounded by strangers and partly that I was puzzled as to how to proceed. It was all easy in my plan. I had been going to ask to be taken to the Chief Elder and I had gestures and signs worked out to convey that I was looking for my father and hoped to be considered a diplomatic representative for my group. But they were all so casual that

they didn't seem to question why I had come, nor did there seem to be a Chief Elder, in fact I couldn't tell even if they had any Elders. And my idea that I and my father would instantly recognise each other and run into each other's arms was just so much wishful thinking.

I didn't want to upset them in any way. Though I could easily win any fight at home it was obvious I couldn't match up to anyone here, never mind several. Going round the camp peering into each face hoping for one that looked like mine might easily cause offence. Also the fact that I could not readily tell men from women was awkward. Suppose I suggested to some woman that she might be my father. If these men grew hair on their faces they kept it well shaved, I had not seen one beard.



Breakfast the next morning was as casual as eating had been the day before. As each person came out of their shelter they came to the central fire and took whatever they wanted to eat. I did the same and it seemed that everyone just assumed I would. Your bear's tooth, Kizkur, had been against my skin but I brought it out so that it hung down the front of my jacket. My hope was that my father would recognise it and find me rather than me having to find him. But that didn't work, nobody even seemed to notice it at all. Not surprising really, they all wore teeth of one kind or another, I was horrified to see that several had what seemed to be leopards' teeth. It looked as though they would hunt anything.

It was pure luck that I found him in the end. Most of my group, as I thought of them by then, had gone off somewhere without inviting me with them and I was left alone wandering aimlessly round the camp. And what do you think I heard? One of your tunes being played on a harp. It was coming from one of the shelters. I didn't know whether one could go to a stranger's shelter, so I sat and waited for him to come out. It was a long wait and when he did he was definitely a woman, carrying a sleeping baby. I'd had enough by then so I went up to her and started signing my whole story. She was very patient, although she signed several times that she didn't understand. She understood that it was to do with the harp though and went back into her shelter and brought it out. It was a different shape from ours but the strings seemed the same. I played to her the tune she had been playing and she certainly looked surprised. She looked at me closely then took the harp back into her shelter. When she came out again she smiled at me and took my hand to lead me across the camp. At another shelter she made an odd cry which was answered by the man inside giving the same cry. She went in leaving me outside. There was some talking then they both came out. My father was carrying a harp with a zigzag pattern surrounding swirls carved all round it. I exclaimed at the harp and he exclaimed at the bear's tooth. He laughed and hit me on the back. I think I've still got the bruise. But I managed to grin at him. He and the woman spoke for a while then she laughed too and giving me a big smile she left.

We both realised who the other one was of course, and gave each other a good looking over. Liking what we saw must have been mutual too because we both laughed at once from pleasure at meeting, also I was laughing at how we didn't know a word of each other's languages. He made a gesture of discontent at his shelter and drew me to the fire. There he made a general announcement which caused everyone to smile and make a gesture with both hands. It must have been him saying that I was his son and them showing their pleasure. Three women then came to me with their children of various ages and, on being told to, each child approached me with hands outstretched palms forward. When I copied their gesture they touched their hands to mine. It could only be that these were my brothers or sisters and the gesture was one of greeting to kin. I was more moved than I could have imagined being

and had to wipe away tears. The children wanted to show me something I think, but I wanted to stay with my father. The lack of language only made us more determined to ask questions and try to understand the answers. His first questions were of you. I tried to convey that you were healthy and happy and an important person in our group. We played tunes that we both knew on his harp and sang as best we could. Neither of us was much good at singing. I said that it was you who was the good singer and he said yes, you had sung to him and it was good. Or I think that was it. He indicated how much he loved the harp you had given him and something else as well which, perhaps I am flattering myself, I thought meant he liked the son you had given him too.

I was just getting started on how I wanted to ask him if he thought our groups might get together in some ways, when the group of hunters who had found me came back to the camp and he pulled me up to go and greet them. There was much talking and laughing and they all wanted to hit my back. I had to let them of course though I would much rather they hadn't done. I hit them on their backs too as that seemed to be the thing to do. While this was going on I was surprised that I understood a few words that were being said. I thought I would try the one which I thought was 'hello'. They howled laughing though I could tell there was no unkindness in it only pleasure that I had tried and merriment at the silly sound I made, I could tell myself it was all wrong. They patiently said it over and over until I had got it right, or as near right as it ever would be. Then they insisted I teach them to say 'hello' as we would. It was my turn to laugh then, but they soon had it. We went back to the fire and much eating, drinking and singing followed.

My father and I managed to get some quiet talk together amongst it all, their group seemed to treat everything as an excuse for a party. I continued with the idea of our groups getting together for some things, where we might each benefit. He seemed to take it for granted that we would, he was very casual as though there was no need for discussion. He was picking up some of my words too and we got on well. He asked me to show him the sacred claw from the white bear, and of course I did. We tried to talk about spirit-world but it was very hard. He asked about the mammoth's tooth he had given you and I tried to indicate that it was kept at our most sacred shrine. I also tried to say that I was an enchanter but that you were our group's Enchanter. Some of it got through because I'm fairly sure that he said in return that in their group everybody was an enchanter. We both knew that there were probably misunderstandings of what each was trying to say, but I'm sure we both knew that we had agreed that the next day he was going to take me somewhere sacred to their group - or perhaps only to him - and that we would make an early start.

Wanting to be sure that we understood each other about their group coming to meet ours, I started gesturing about that again. My father signed 'Stay here' and went off somewhere. When he returned he had two handfuls of seeds, one kind in one hand and another kind in the other. He put them on the ground and between them made a row of triangles from pieces of grass. He pointed to the distant mountains and pointed to his triangles so that I would see that the two heaps of seeds were meant to be our two groups. Then he moved his group over to our side of the mountains and made a question face about whether the two piles of seeds would be near but not touching, up against each other though separate or completely mixed up together. I made a question face back. He laughed and then indicated that he and I would go over the mountains to see our group and sort out how it was going to work.

I noticed then that a little girl was playing with Tlez. To avoid any accidents I went over to them and recognised the girl as one of my half-sisters. One way that I had found to tell the ice giants apart was by their necklaces of teeth. Every one of them wore one but each seemed different in choice or arrangement. The children's were of the smaller animals, lemming, rat or fox and all had a snake fang in the centre. I thought it too cold for snakes round here and assumed they must trade for them. Mammoth tusks would buy them anything they wanted I should think. So that I would always be sure who she was I learned her tooth necklace.

She made the universal gesture to find out Tlez's name, pointing to herself and saying very clearly

"Miklin"

then pointing to Tlez and looking questioning. We said "Tlez" back and forth a few times until she had

the pronunciation right. Then she remembered her manners and asked for my name. She had even more trouble with my name than my father had had. And I still didn't know if what sounded like 'Groohk' was his name or just meant 'father'.

Miklin wanted to ride Tlez of course. I got her to understand that she must get her mother's permission. While she was away I spoke soothingly to Tlez who I thought must be finding all this strange, but she seemed quite calm. Then I saw Miklin coming back pulling her mother by the hand. I thought her mother would be worried by it, but it was me that kept repeating that she must hold on tight to Tlez's fur. Her mother just felt Tlez's trunk and laughed her way through gestures about that being how Miklin would get up and down. So we all made a tour of the camp, with me fidgeting and worried and Miklin and her mother calling and laughing to each other. All the children wanted a ride then of course. My father came over to organise it when he saw that I was overwhelmed. He made sure that my half brothers and sisters went first which seemed fair. After they had all had a go he put the others into groups of three and Tlez and I took three round the camp at once. It all took a long time, but the adults seemed to be having as much fun watching as the children were having riding.

I don't know if Tlez was tired by it all but I certainly was. I went to bed early, knowing there was an early start the next day, and slept very well.

The next morning I got laughed at again. My father had given me a choice piece of meat to take to my shelter and eat for breakfast because we were to leave early. But I had to show him that it was frozen solid. Amidst amazed amusement he signed that I should have taken it into my sleeping furs with me overnight.

It thawed out on our journey and I had a late breakfast. Tlez would have come anyway but my father wanted her to, I couldn't tell why because he had very little with him so didn't need her to carry. I was taking all my sacred objects as I had understood only that this expedition was to do with spirit-world and wanted to be prepared. My special talismans were hanging from my belt as usual, I mean that I took the other ones that we chose together for me to take. With those, our bear's tooth hanging round my neck and the ice bear's claw readily to hand I felt prepared.

It was a long way, we were going back almost the way I had come but slightly more westerly. The mountains that I had hated coming through looked very impressive in the sun under a blue sky. It became hot as the sun got higher and I had to take off fur layers. We hadn't brought shelters with us and in the afternoon I realised we couldn't get back to camp before nightfall. I nearly asked my father about it but he seemed withdrawn and we could sleep amongst Tlez's fur so that was alright.



At early evening we came to a small ridge of the mountains which stuck out onto the plain. We left Tlez on grassy ground and scrambled through some large rocks. Behind them was the very well hidden entrance to a cave. It was tall enough to walk upright through and well rounded, I was really surprised that we hadn't been able to see it from below at all. It felt strongly of the spirits and I revered them before following my father in. He went towards the back of the cave which was very dark and I took a moment to let my eyes adjust then followed him. I could hear water falling to our right and that was the way he turned and went through a narrow opening. The space opened out and as my father fell to his knees touching both hands to his forehead I could see over him. The sight hit me in the stomach, I don't think I've ever been so startled and I fell full length touching my face to the floor of the cave. It was a few moments before I could look again and see what the sacred object was. It was the skull of a mammoth with the tusks in place and the backbone stretched out behind it. The face was painted with swirls of black and red and the tusks carved similarly. A crack in the rock wall let light in and it came in such a way as to shine through the eyes so they glowed the colour of fire. Father told me later that the wonderful substance they were made from was called amber and came from the far north. I've left out the clicks so that we can say it. Amber.

We didn't speak at all. The effect of it was like being in spirit-world. I couldn't make myself go near the skull so left the raven's wings as an offering in the place I had seen it from, then I backed out of its shrine. Father came out backwards too. We looked into each other's eyes not saying anything. He put his hand on my shoulder and we went back to Tlez.

It was going dark by then so I brushed her down and tethered her near some good grass. We went back to the outer cave and slept soundly, I knew we could have no better protection than the mammoth spirit of the inner cave.

The next day we spent travelling back to their camp.

Chapter 19

That evening there was to be a special meeting of everybody, but I couldn't tell what made it special. I asked my father if I should come to it. The question obviously surprised him and he said "Yes, everybody."

The preparations began early and Miklin took me in hand when she saw I had no idea what to do. Everybody was outside their shelters messing about with feathers. It took me some time to grasp that the adults were dressing as bustards and the children as ruffs. They were all male birds so it seemed some sort of communal display would be made. Miklin did her own dressing first. It was a head-dress of smaller feathers with the larger ones making a tail. Her three-toed feet were woven reeds with large carved claws. She did a little ruff display to show the costume off to me and it was very realistic. Then she took it all off again and laid it carefully aside while she scrutinised me. Perhaps she was wondering if I was a child or an adult because she then approached her mother who was preparing her evening's outfit. They spoke for a while and then Miklin brought some spare feathers from their shelter. They were bustard so she thought I was an adult, that was satisfying but then she was very young. But there were only two spare toes and they were very worn. We sat down together and mended them as best we could. They didn't look too bad when we finished. But then we found that the straps that her mother had spare, for fixing the feathers in, were too small for bustards' feathers, they were for ruffs'. It would be a long job to modify them and Miklin consulted her mother again. They both looked at the straps for a while but seemed to reject the idea of making them fit an adult with bustards' feathers and Miklin took my hand and pulled me up. We set off for someone else's shelter and when we got there I recognised the woman I had first asked for help. She smiled and hit me on my back so I returned the greeting. It seemed to be well received. Miklin explained our problem and the woman brought out her spare items. There were several adult straps, though very worn ones, but only one more toe and two more feathers. But she had a beautifully worked leather beak so at least my face would not be bare. It had perfectly made nostril holes for breathing and the hinge was so good that normally the two halves were shut but one hand easily opened it if you wanted to say something. I had never seen such leather-work but wasn't able to say so. I thanked her several times for the loan of such a wonderful object but she seemed to think nothing of it.

We started to return to Miklin's shelter but I signed that my father might have some spare toes or feathers. She looked scandalised and hurried me onwards, so I guessed that I could borrow from women but not from men. It seemed odd because everybody was dressing the same way.

Later, as it started to go dark, people moved towards the fire and were collecting in groups. The group which Miklin and her mother formed had several adults and many children. But none of the other children were my half brothers or sisters. I saw that the teeth of their necklaces were all the same on the right hand side of the snake fangs and the same as Miklin's right teeth. I checked her mother's necklace and saw that the arrangement of teeth on the right of hers was the same only made from larger teeth, fox, wolf, bear and lion I was able to identify. So it was plain then that the teeth on the left identified someone as the child of a particular father and those on the right as of a particular mother. These adults must be the children of Miklin's grandmother, though I could see no-one old enough who might have been her.

When I checked the teeth arrangements of the other groups, which were loosely gathering by the fire, my idea held. Each group had the teeth on the right in common and my half brothers and sisters were scattered amongst the different groups. I gestured to Miklin that perhaps I should join my father who was in a group that I guessed were his mother's relations, but she wouldn't have it. So I guessed that an outsider could be in any group.

The evening started with what you would have to call singing, though it was very different from ours. There were no instruments to accompany it as there had been on previous evenings. The pipes, flutes, horns and drums were left in the shelters. It was a deep song with a lot of strange rhythms but little tune. Some people went over to a storage tent and returned with armfuls of something that I at length

realised were dried mammoth tails. They were distributed, one per person and people organised into pairs. Miklin was my partner of course as she had taken on herself the job of seeing me through the evening, which I was quite relieved at. She held the other end of my mammoth tail and I held the other end of hers so we were joined by two bands. I just copied what she was doing for the dance which was vigorous and involved a lot of whirling round so that I was quite giddy. After that the sound of the singing changed and the rhythm slowed. The pairs split up and everybody then held one end of their own mammoth tail and one end of someone else's, so everybody was joined in one long line which danced around the fire and all through the area of shelters. Perhaps it represented a snake.

The bird dancing followed that. The children went first with their ruff dance. Some of the older ones were making moves very like ruffs though I think the younger ones were just enjoying themselves making it up as they went along. I knew it was serious though because nobody was drinking and I hadn't seen that before. The adults then danced the bustard dance while I sat out with Miklin. I didn't want to make a fool of myself. It was very impressive particularly when they all gave bustards' calls together. It ended with them in a circle round the fire shaking those huge tail feathers. After they had settled to sitting round the fire an old woman appeared and moved to stand near it. Her face was painted in patterns of white, black and red dots and was very wrinkled. Her costume was elaborate and had no feathers at all. From her shoulders down she wore what looked like a wicker cape which turned up slightly near her feet. But it had no fastening, it was something like a basket and she must have put it on over her head. There were two holes for her arms



to come out of at the front and she held a large bowl covered with a red cloth densely embroidered with pale yellow thread in patterns similar to her face painting. I found out as the evening went on that the bowl contained a large number of rounded pebbles. Her head-dress was very elaborate, made of the seeding stems of reeds which looked like papyrus to me. I wondered if the ice giants travelled further than I had thought, but perhaps they had traded for them.

There were a number of people gathered at the opposite side of the fire to the woman and at a call from her they all went round and put their hands under the red cloth. They were a mix of people, young and old, men and women and I was quite puzzled at first to guess what was happening. She spoke to them and when they assented she gave a loud cry and they all took their hands out again. Each was holding a pebble and they all studied them until one found a mark on his. All but he returned to their previous position at the other side of the fire.

The man with the marked stone then stood beside the wickerwork woman and spoke for quite a long time. Even I could tell that it was a prepared speech though I couldn't understand a word. He ended with what sounded like a formal phrase. At that three other people from the general gathering joined him and he passed the pebble to one of them. That was a woman who spoke quite excitedly though not for long. Despite it being short one of the other women in the group of speakers had been hopping up and down impatiently, but she didn't speak until she had been handed the pebble. They all got a turn to speak but obviously only the person holding the pebble could speak at any one time. It slowed down the

discussion but seemed very fair as nobody could be interrupted and over-ruled as it were. Miklin tried to explain to me what they were discussing but I couldn't grasp it.

When they had all spoken - and some several times - it was put to a vote. All who agreed (or disagreed for all I know) with the first person's suggestion stood up. Everybody counted the people standing up, including all the speakers and everybody either standing or sitting. There was general calling and shouting until all agreed on the balance of numbers for and against. Some looked pleased and some didn't. They must have agreed to whatever the first speaker proposed because he looked pleased. He went and sat down with what I assume was his mother's family, after returning the marked pebble to the woman's bowl. The remaining people who wished to speak then drew pebbles again and it proceeded in the same way until everybody had either had their suggestions accepted or rejected. The only slight difference that occurred was when someone suggested something and nobody spoke against it. There was no vote then and I assume it was accepted. My father was one of those. I think he was saying that he would return with me to Gabillou and act as ambassador, reporting back to them so that they could decide what relations they might choose to have with our group. I was pleased that nobody spoke against him. It suggested that they might be generally willing to join us, or semi-join us anyway. Perhaps they had previously spoken about enlarging the group or the need to get in new skills or something.



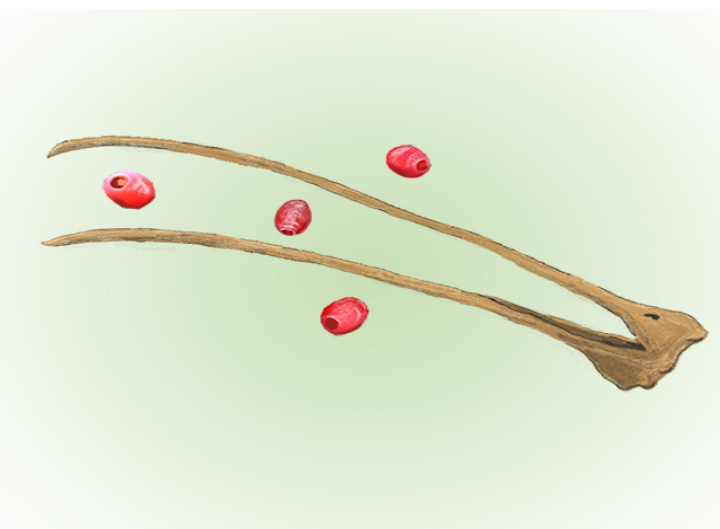
Once everybody who had a proposal for the group had spoken, and everything had been decided, the old woman sang at length to a fairly simple tune. When she had finished the whole group sang the same thing back to her. Miklin explained that it was making the decisions final and if anyone went against any of them later the group would jointly sing the song to them to show that they were wrong. At that point the drinking began. Some people seemed to be making up for lost time because the evening ended with some very drunken bustard dancing.

Nobody was up early the next morning, but I hurried to the fire as soon as I was ready because I had promised to go with Miklin to see something she wanted to show me. I half understood that it might be something sacred to her so I went prepared with power objects. She wasn't there when I arrived so I had some breakfast. I was expecting it to be leftovers from the previous evening but there was new freshly cooked food and I felt surprisingly hungry. Miklin arrived while I was still eating, but I was quite

happy to carry on eating with her. It seemed we had to wait for some others and when we were all gathered it was a group of half brothers and sisters. I could recognise them by this time even without checking their decorative teeth. They took me by the hands and pulled me off more or less north-westerly. It was not far to go, about half an hour perhaps, though it would have been faster without the inevitable children's games and messing about. They quietened down as we approached two large rocks with a space between. The two rocks touched at about the height of an adult and what would have been space at the back was filled in by small rocks so it made an artificial cave. They all touched their foreheads before going in so I did the same. At the back against the wall of rocks was a flat stone serving as an altar, that is how we would interpret it anyway. It was covered in skulls all facing forward, they seemed to be looking at us. I recognised sable and fox but couldn't be sure what the smaller ones

were. None of them was decorated in any way. From the sides of the altar two curving low walls of woven wicker came forward and nearly met in front of our feet. Inside the nearly circular enclosed space was a most surprising, and obviously very powerful object. It was the beak of a curlew and the surprise to me was that there was no skull. I don't think we would ever remove a bird's beak. The two pieces of beak were touching each other where they would have joined the skull but were widely separated at the other end. Between them were a lot of red berries, some yew though I'm not sure what the rest were. But it was not the right time of year for berries. These must have been last Autumn's and still red. There was a shiny glaze on them which looked as though it might be sticky. Of course I wanted to touch to see if I could tell how they had been preserved, but that was unthinkable as it would certainly be sacrilege. I wondered if they represented the curlew's lovely bubbling song.

They performed no ritual, so I guessed that the making of the shrine and coming to visit it was the offering to the spirits. As they moved to go I gave Miklin our sea urchin and signed that it was for the shrine. They all gathered round it to look and seemed amazed. One signed a question, did it come from the sea? Miklin was holding it very reverently and, though one or two of the others looked as though they wanted to touch it, they didn't. They all made the gesture to it that I had seen everyone making to the northern bear's claw. After some discussion they put it down carefully, with many gestures, between the front ends of the wickerwork dividers. Then we all left the shrine walking backwards.



On the way back to camp I thought through their contacts with the spirit world. It seemed to me that all together round the fire they sang and danced for the spirits. I thought the ruff and bustard dances must have been to ask the spirits to help them make good decisions in the organisational meeting. But they also seemed to contact the spirits privately, each adult alone and the children in groups of father-related siblings. The children had been in groups of mother-related siblings the previous evening so it might indicate that contacting the spirits was more to do with the men and social organising more to do with the women.

Miklin interrupted my thoughts with something, but I couldn't follow her signs. It was something to do with Tlez and she obviously thought it important because when we got back she went and found my father and brought him over to me and Tlez. She was talking very fast and pleadingly as they came up and my father grinned a greeting to me while trying to listen to her. Then he sent her to get her mother. While she was away he drew the triangle mountains on the ground again and indicated that Miklin wanted to go with us over the mountains riding on Tlez. I smiled and tried to show that I was happy with the idea if her mother was. She looked quite resigned to the idea by the time she and Micklin joined us. She spoke to my father about it obviously agreeing, she pointed to Tlez and said something then they both laughed. I wished I understood but all the time I was there I found jokes impossible.

The four of us spent the rest of the day getting everything ready. My stuff was easy as I just packed up everything as I had brought it, but it was seen as a joint activity so we all got in each other's way, fell over things and I failed to understand almost everything. I did understand though that the whole enterprise was seen as an exciting and lighthearted adventure and mostly one joke after another. But both Miklin's parents took very seriously warm waterproof clothing for her and strong straps to hold her onto Tlez's shoulders. Some things they packed after much discussion, which seemed useless to me, I guessed they must be offerings to Gabillou spirits of place.

We four, and Miklin's mother's other children, formed a group by the fire that evening. Several people came up to us saying things I couldn't altogether understand but thought from glances at me and Tlez that they were asking my father to find out how we did particular things, perhaps how we hunted particular animals or which spirits we asked for help in which circumstances.

There was no drink for us that evening and we went to our shelters early. I slept the whole night through and remembered no dreams, but I was up and dressed the next morning when my father banged on the outside of my shelter to make sure I was awake. I called that I was. By that time I had worked out that 'Groohk' was his name, 'father' was an even more unpronounceable word.

Miklin's mother looked less certain about things that morning and hugged Miklin tightly before smiling her up onto Tlez. The holding straps were checked worriedly several times, but Miklin looked overjoyed and kept hugging Tlez's head. We got our packs up onto Tlez's back behind Miklin then my father and I took our places standing on either side of her tusks. A lot of people had got up early to see us off and we walked south to the sound of them singing. My father and Miklin sang the same tune back to them, so it must have been a song of departure, but by the time I had learned it we were no longer within earshot.

The journey back was easier and quicker than my journey there had been. I didn't recognise some of it and there seemed to be much less snow and ice, so I guess that my father knew a better route through the mountains than the one I had come by. Leopard appeared and helped us through a couple of awkward places. It was not long before we were approaching Gabillou and the rest you know.

Chapter 20

I do know the rest so I will speak again now.

Life was constant anxiety while Atutxa was away. After one particularly bad night when I got very little sleep I decided to go to the cave and see what I could find out in spirit world. If I could find Leopard she might be able to tell me some news of him. But she was probably busy helping him and I didn't want to stop her doing that. I had to do something though.

Everything seemed to hinder me in my desire to get quickly to the cave that morning. I shouted to Sinotsu in his shelter where I was going and that he was to deal with any problems while I was away, but it was a long time before I got a mumbled response. Then I had got quite a way before I remembered that I had forgotten to pack the smoking mixture of all things. So I went back for that but finally got down the passageway to my carving of Hare. How glad I was to get through and hug him. He had to gasp at me not to squeeze so tightly, but we were both relieved to sit together quietly for a while.

Mammoth came up then and it was further relief to hug his trunk and tell him of my worries.

"Perhaps you could take me on your back to where Atutxa and Leopard are?"

"You're not going anywhere in that condition. You're far too distracted to defend yourself if anything should happen. I'll go and see what I can find out. You wait here with Hare, though I don't think you should be in spirit-world at all. I'll go as fast as I can."

He set off before I could object, but Hare said he was right and we must be vigilant even here. They were right of course as I saw after having had time to think. I felt as though I had been there forever by the time Mammoth returned, though being able to stroke Hare soothed the worst of my nerves.



"Atutxa is fine, in fact I think he has grown a bit. He has just set out from the ice giants' camping place.

The man with him is his father and his name is Groohk. There is a little girl with them, a really small girl, who is called Miklin. She is riding on Tlez with the packs and is Atutxa's half-sister."

"Oh. Thank you Mammoth. I can't thank you enough, I should have asked you to help me earlier." Hare thanked him too and he looked pleased with himself, as well he might having had to cross those mountains that I knew he hated.

"How soon do you think they will get here?"

"Oh, I don't know. It depends on whether Groohk knows a good way through the mountains. Leopard says Atutxa was to-ing and fro-ing there for a long time. With a good route through the passes they could be here in four or five days I would think."

"You're a real friend, Mammoth."

It was a wrench to leave Hare but I had to get back, not just because of sensibly limiting spirit-world time, there were preparations to make. The next day I would move up onto the tundra and live in my travelling shelter so that I could see them coming and be there to greet them.

I nearly ran, as near as I can these days, when I saw Sinotsu outside his shelter. After I'd got my breath back I told him all about it and asked if he'd mind doing Enchanter's duties for a few days. He just smiled gently and said

"Go on and get packed. I can cope here, and let me know if I can help you carry your stuff up there tomorrow."

He was so calm about it, but then Atutxa's not his son and he doesn't realise.

The packing went badly. I was constantly getting distracted and unpacking to make more space for things, I realise now, it was almost certain I wouldn't need. If I could only have concentrated.

It was a beautiful day the next day and I set off early. I shouted to Sinotsu that I was leaving. A tousled head came out of his shelter door.

"Do you need any help?"

"No, I'm fine, go back to sleep. I won't be back until they arrive."

"That's fine." He looked nearly asleep already, and his head disappeared again.

I stopped in quickly at Mother and Father's shelter to say 'goodbye'.

Mother smiled uncertainly and said

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to meet Atutxa, Mother. I told you last night."

"Oh yes."

I knew she didn't remember, but at least she still knew who I was. Father gave me one of his heart-rending looks and wished me well. He was so good with her. There was nothing that could be said so I left.

Climbing up to the tundra I soon found that my jacket was too hot and stopped to take it off. I was glad of the rest and was almost wishing I'd accepted Sinotsu's offer of help with the carrying. It took me much longer than I had thought to get up there but I found a very good spot for my shelter on a firm peat hag quite near where we had found Tlez. It made me smile to think how tiny she had been then.

The days passed slowly in my impatience. My traps had never been so well attended. They didn't produce much though and of course I'd brought up far too much food so I didn't need what I caught. Drying the meat and preparing the pelts gave me something to do.

It was a little before mid-day on the fifth day that I saw them coming. I was looking the wrong way at first and they were large enough for me to see them individually when I first saw them. Atutxa looked small compared to his father.

When they were near enough I ran, very awkwardly through the heather, to Atutxa. He ran forward too. I didn't want to embarrass him by hugging, but he threw his arms round me so that was alright. Then his father came up grinning and we hugged too, then stood back to look at each other. He was older but perhaps I would have known him. I read the same thought in his face and then he hit me on the back, he must have been careful because it didn't hurt, and I did the same to him.

Then Groohk said something that sounded like

"Hello, Kizkur."

I embarrassed us all by bursting into tears.

After I recovered Atutxa taught me 'hello' in Ice Giant and I responded. Then I called up the strange word to Miklin. When she could stop laughing at my pronunciation she called it back properly. She looked as though she might be going to get down from Tlez but Atutxa stopped her. He had been looking at my temporary camp.

"I suppose you've been up here for days. Leopard told me you had sent Mammoth to check up on me." There was no need to say it wasn't like that, he wasn't serious. I asked him if he thought Tlez could manage the steep descent, but he didn't and neither did I. We tried to explain to Groohk that we would pack up my travelling shelter, get my stuff up onto Tlez and then take the long gradual way back to camp, going by Vezeru's shrine. He could hardly have understood much but signed a sort of 'go ahead all's well' gesture.

Groohk looked very interested when he saw Vezeru and made a reverent gesture. I showed him the spring and he nodded understanding. That was a sign we had in common then. He saw the mammoth's tooth, a bit licheny by this time, and asked if it was the one he gave me. I told him it was. We looked into each other's eyes and understood each other.

When he saw me give Vezeru a scarab, and Atutxa give her a dried seed head, he extracted an unusual-looking striped stone from a pouch and gave her that.



Oskol was out to meet us as we approached. He hugged Atutxa and then me. We introduced him to Groohk and they had an awkward moment, not knowing whether to touch hands, hit backs or what. Finally Groohk mangled

"Hello Oskol."

in his throaty way of speaking and Oskol responded so they got through it that way. We helped Miklin down from Tlez and she showed that she had been watching by hugging everybody. She wasn't at all shy about staring at Oskol so he picked her up and carried her back to camp where everybody who could was out to greet us.

The children ran out to greet Tlez, they must have missed her. The adults were trying not to stare but couldn't help it. I wasn't surprised, one's first sight of an ice giant is a shock. Miklin eased the meeting though by being such an open child and hugging anybody who went near her, and luckily her name was easy for us to say.

The new Chief Elder felt it necessary to greet Groohk on behalf of the group. He made a speech, it was a good one really but I can't imagine what Groohk made of it.

We dropped off Atutxa's things in our shelter, made sure Tlez needed nothing, then we all went over to Mother and Father's shelter. They were really too old for getting out much now. They hugged Atutxa, relieved too to see him safely back. Then it was introductions of Groohk and signed explanations to him of all the relationships. I think he understood, it was probably obvious anyway. It certainly would have been anyway when Atutxa gave me back the bear's tooth ceremoniously and I then gave it back to Mother. She remembered it and didn't want to take it, but I insisted. Father formally welcomed Groohk to the family which he certainly seemed to understand and accept with a gracious gesture. Then we were all shown Oskol's wolf cubs which were well grown now and overly boisterous for my taste. Groohk managed to ask why the wolves were part of the family and Oskol got onto hunting. I knew hunting talk would go on forever and went and sat quietly with Mother. Atutxa acted as interpreter, he seemed expert with signs and a few words.

We left after that to get Groohk settled. I was pleased that he put his shelter near ours, but it was too small really for Micklin as well so we put her in ours. She was taken aback by the objects of power and Atutxa explained gently to her that she must not touch them, though if I followed it right she said she wouldn't dare do so. We had told Groohk to come and eat with us when he had arranged his shelter and we soon heard him making a strange cry outside the door. Atutxa made the cry back, it sounded identical to me, and he came in. Unfortunately the first thing he saw on entering was Ikaseraz's skull

which seemed to frighten him. He jumped backwards and cried out. I was surprised because Miklin had not reacted at all when she saw it. But I gathered my thoughts quickly and threw a coat over it. Atutxa said and gestured very fast something I couldn't follow and then Miklin's strange child voice said something which made Groohk smile, though a little groggily. I just smiled at him and urged him to sit with us by the fire, but he insisted on an explanation which I couldn't understand and what looked like an apology which wasn't necessary. Then he sat with us and we all ate. The occasion called for mead and we all toasted each other. We gave Miklin a small amount well diluted with water and she seemed to like it. She fell asleep then so I put her to bed in her tiny sleeping furs.

Atutxa and I wanted to show Groohk the cave so I went and found Sinotsu and asked him to sit in our shelter in case Miklin woke up, then we three set out. Atutxa did most of the talking, I didn't seem to be very good at it besides which I was feeling a bit awkward with Groohk after all these years.

He looked askance at the entrance to the cave but then laughed and wriggled in. He seemed to be very lithe and got through more easily than I did. The paintings obviously took him by surprise and he gazed at them long and hard. He said something to Atutxa who nodded. We took him over to the mammoth and he touched his forehead to it. Then he signed something about painting with a brush. Atutxa said

"He asks if you painted the mammoth."

"Oh, no, no. I painted this one" and showed him my snowy owl. He touched his forehead again and looked carefully at every feather and claw.

"Good." he said and took hold of my hand. With my other I took Atutxa's and we walked back to our shelter like that

The next day we called at Groohk's shelter to invite him in to breakfast, but he had already eaten. He came back with us while we had ours. Miklin had been trying all the different food while we were out so she had had enough and Groohk and she played together as Atutxa and I ate.

We had decided to take Groohk on a walk around the area that day and to show him our traps and what food plants grew around here. I had packed up some smooth pieces of leather, small pots of paint and bits of charcoal as a sketching kit in my waist pouch. It was my habit to do that, in case I wanted to sketch something for a later painting, whenever I went anywhere which wasn't often lately. It would have been nice if Sinotsu could have come with us but we didn't want to leave the group without an enchanter. Oskol was busy with some hunting business so it was just the four of us.

The traps on the tundra were the first place to go. Luckily Miklin found the climbing hard so we went slowly and it wasn't obvious how old I was getting. Perhaps I was fooling myself and they were kindly ignoring how slow I was.

The traps had a good catch which pleased me as I wanted our area to make a good impression on Groohk for when he reported back to his group. There was a fox, a sable and several lemmings. The fox was the red/brown one, its fur is nowhere near as dense as the that of the one which turns white in winter, but it is so beautiful that I wasn't disappointed. The sable was a wonderful catch, they are plentiful here but rarely trapped.

The day's catch had to be taken back to camp and Tlez came to meet us. Of course we gave her a treat, a honey-cake. Then we had to give Miklin one, so we all had some. It saved carrying any food with us anyway. The next stop was the fish traps in the river and for a wonder there was a good catch in those too. We gutted them and threw the guts into the water. The flesh went into the fish bag and we took that with us as we walked on down the river bank.

At a side stream that we reached later Atutxa wanted to show his father a dead-fall higher up the stream which they used for hunting bison. Miklin was tired so she and I stayed behind and dangled our feet in the stream. They were a long time away so I looked for something to sketch. There were some lovely wet pebbles but I already had several sketches of those. Further along I could see some

honeysuckle growing through a bush. It was in full flower, so there were closed buds and some berries, that was a really good find. I settled to sketch and Miklin 'helped' by passing the paints. We learned each other's words for the colours at the same time. It confused me to find that they used the same word for both blue and green. It was probably mutual because Miklin seemed to be having difficulty as well and she was very quick with new words.

I had nearly finished when the men got back. They seemed pleased with their expedition to the dead-fall though I couldn't follow what Groohk was saying about it. Though I recognised the gesture of reverence he made to my sketch. Whether the gesture was for representations in general or specifically for honeysuckle I didn't know. Between us we conveyed to him that I did sketches so that I had a copy for later painting in the cave.

The sketch was still wet so I put its protector over it and Atutxa carried it for me in his backpack. It was getting late by that time and we turned for home. We decided to return on the other bank of the river to be sure Groohk saw everything which grew along it, so went a little further down the river to where there was a shallow crossing-place. We had to cross back later of course but it was worth it as we had been able to show him the best place for hazel and filbert bushes.

That evening we ate the stew that I had left cooking over the damped down fire and then relaxed for while.

But Groohk couldn't settle. He was trying to convey that there was something he wanted us all to do, but even Atutxa couldn't make it out. Then Miklin joined in trying to make us understand but only confusing us further. I made an exaggerated question sign. He looked around and pointed to my pouch and Atutxa's pack. Neither of us had unpacked yet so the day's things were still in them. We both took things out one by one and at my first container of paint he nodded and pointed. Then when Atutxa brought out my honeysuckle sketch, which I'd almost forgotten about, he took it with what seemed unnecessary care and put it with the paints, then made a sweep including paints, sketch and all of us and pointed in the direction of the cave. It was clear then that he wanted us all to go and paint honeysuckle in the cave, we wondered why we hadn't understood before. When we had repacked the pouch and pack, found warm jackets and got Miklin into hers, I just filled a water-bag for us and off we went to the cave.

There was nobody else in there so we could start right away. Groohk had an idea he wanted us to do. His signing was quite clear this time, he was asking if I would paint the honeysuckle under the mammoth's feet. I was only too pleased that someone had thought where to do it and started an outline in charcoal. The sketch was as realistic as I could make it, but for the painting I would do it more stylised. It was to be the spirit of honeysuckle and I almost hoped that people might think that they could smell it. Halfway through the outline it came to me that it would be much better if Groohk painted it himself, so I signed this to him. He looked alarmed and indicated that he had never painted before. I wanted to sign that there was a first time for everybody but couldn't think how to. Atutxa came to my rescue with some words and signs and Groohk agreed to try but said I must finish the outlining.

We only had yellow, red, white and black so I had drawn no leaves. A yellowish grey would have been



alright but I'd preferred to just do flowers and berries. He looked questioningly at the paints so I mixed up several shades of what I thought would make good pinks and pale yellows and gave him a choice of brushes. He felt them and then tried each on the surface of the cave wall to get a feel for them before dipping in any of the paints. Then he studied my sketch for a long time before deciding to apply colour to the wall. While he was painting the flowers I mixed a small amount of the purple, which Atutxa and I had made from the shellfish by the sea, into the earthy red of the ochre to better resemble the berry colour. Groohk copied techniques from the paintings on the walls as well as my sketch and when the first flower was done we all admired it. I was impressed, it was good for someone who had never done it before. He seemed happy for us to watch him, that surprised me as I don't like to be watched painting. When it came to the berries I showed him the colour I had mixed and he nodded agreement. He added a touch of black to make a rounded shadow on each and I showed him with a bit of white how to make one shine, he liked that and added it to them all. That was it done and we all stood back and admired it. We all thought it was good, but I had the impression that Groohk was happy that the honeysuckle was there and not so much that he was taking pleasure in his work.

We sat enjoying the new painting and Groohk laughed at the mess he had made getting paint all over his hands. Then he became serious and signed that he must get ready to return to his own camp. It had to be of course but I had been enjoying having him around and Miklin was good company too. If only we could have spoken to each other.

We agreed between us that we would spend the next day making preparations. I wanted to think of a present to send to Miklin's mother to show that we appreciated her letting Miklin come to us, it was very trusting of her. Miklin could never walk all that way, and it would be awkward for Groohk to carry her on his back through the mountains, so we thought that Tlez should go to carry Miklin and their packs. But Atutxa wouldn't let her go without him so we agreed that he would go too. I wouldn't be worried about him with Groohk to look after him, but I didn't say so because he thought he could look after himself.

The preparations all went smoothly the next day. Atutxa thought that a shell bracelet would please Miklin's mother as they didn't seem to have many things from the sea. I could easily make one, but it involved getting Atutxa to go and keep Miklin and Groohk occupied while I did it. I was going to make a small one for Miklin too but wanted it to be a surprise when she got home. They were soon made and wrapped. I put them in Atutxa's pack, he could be trusted to choose the right moment to give them to them. I didn't want to embarrass Groohk by giving him anything because I knew he had travelled light and had nothing he could give me. And present-giving might have different connotations among ice giants.

I didn't want them to leave at all the next day. Sinotsu, Oskol and I went with them as far as the tundra. We went the long easy way for Tlez's sake and I left my honeysuckle sketch as an offering for our party to Vezeru. The three of us watched them for a long time getting smaller into the distance. Groohk seemed confident that his group would vote to come south to at least try out being with us, I hoped he was right.

Chapter 21

It was a little before mid-day that we saw them coming. We had been keeping a watch at the edge of the tundra during daylight for several days, since the time that the Elders thought it possible Atutxa might get back, with or without the ice giants.

The sentry waved the agreed signal that they were coming and everyone young and strong enough went up to join her. It can't be said that I was either young or strong, but I was determined so Sinotsu helped me where I needed it. We had a long wait, or it seemed so. Then we could distinguish individuals. I could pick out Atutxa in the front with Tlez, and walking beside him must be Groohk. He looked to be the only man. All the rest at the front were women carrying babies. It was well done, a very obvious gesture that they were peaceful.

The new Chief Elder went forward then and, assuming Atutxa's father was their Chief Elder addressed him with welcoming signs. I went forward to join him and hit Atutxa and Groohk on the back, hoping to make the ice giants feel they were among friends.

"Where's Miklin?" I asked Atutxa.

"She's further back somewhere. She said only the babies were riding on Tlez."

She was right I think except for one obviously very old woman. I wondered if she was the person who had worn the wicker cape and I wondered too how she would get down from there.

Then I just happened to be looking in the right direction to see something most unusual. An ice giant woman - they had loosened their clothing in the heat so it definitely was a woman - was gazing in a very fixed manner at Sinotsu. I would guess that she was quite young but she had the biggest legs I'd ever seen on anybody, man or woman. I turned to Sinotsu to see what he made of it only to see that he was gazing at her in just the same way. They were all moving off down the hill now towards the camp and I stayed with Atutxa and Groohk to take Tlez down the easy way, but when I could look again Sinotsu and the woman were hurrying downhill hand in hand.

It could only mean one thing, which was confirmed when Groohk, Atutxa, Oskol and I got back to our shelter. From Sinotsu's shelter were coming the woman's very loud grunts. They could be heard all over the camp. I know for certain it wasn't Sinotsu making that noise, but there's no need to go into that.

We all raised our eyebrows at each other and laughed. A good moment with no language difficulties.

People who I took to be the parents of the tiny ones on Tlez's back came clustering round to reclaim them. There was a lot of shouting and laughing as Tlez sat down on the ground to make it easier and they got bumped about. Then more giggling about her fur getting up their noses and her trunk swinging each one to the ground or into the arms of a waiting parent. Though the most giggling was done by the old woman who seemed to take it as a big adventure to be picked up by a woolly mammoth's trunk, carried through the air and set down on her feet. She seemed remarkably lithe and didn't even stagger. Chief Elder had made himself understood that they were to put up their shelters wherever they pleased and they went off to do so. Groohk was putting his up where he had put it before, near to us. As the shelters went up I noticed that there were two or three larger ones in which two people were living together, so they did sometimes live in pairs. The great majority were singles though or mothers with their children.

Oskol was trying to help Groohk get his shelter prepared, but as far as I could gather he was only hindering. The design was different from ours. When it was erected and his stuff inside we all went over to see Mother and Father. Father greeted us warmly and made us a drink, but Mother looked flustered. She tried to pretend she knew who everyone was but it didn't work, though of course we pretended that it did. We left as soon as we could so that Oskol and Father could calm her again. None of the spirits was able to do anything about old people's memory loss.

We called Sinotsu and his girl in to share our meal and were all eating when a lad came in to say that a meeting was called for that evening in the cave and please bring extra torches for the ice giants. Atutxa told Groohk what was happening.

Before the daylight faded all the ice giants had their shelters up and their belongings stored in them. Except Sinotsu's girl who seemed to have decided to share his.

Getting some of the larger ice giants through the low entrance to our cave wasn't easy. It only made them laugh even more than they did normally. They must have thought us a very sober lot. The ice giants all seemed very struck by the paintings on the walls and roof, some didn't want to look away. Groohk went to pay his respects to the mammoth and he seemed satisfied with his honeysuckle. Then we all gathered round the fire.



It became obvious that a treaty of friendship was being drawn up. Our Chief Elder spoke, with Atutxa as his appointed interpreter - partial probably - for longer than I thought was necessary. When he sat down I saw him looking at Groohk obviously thinking that he was his equivalent among the ice giants. It wasn't until the old woman who had ridden on Tlez got up and spoke that our people started to realise that they had no leaders. Atutxa did his best but I suspect he was guessing in places, I certainly couldn't follow all her gestures. When she sat down I thought I had better say something as our group's Enchanter. I said the usual flowery stuff about how we welcomed them and so on and hoped for joint hunting, trade and exchange of skills. Then I went on to say that Atutxa

personified our friendship and hoped that the spirits blessed our meeting, then sat down quickly because I wanted to hear from the ice giants again. A young ice giant stood up then and told the story of meeting Atutxa and seeing the claw of the white bear. He said that Atutxa was a fine young man and the claw made it obvious that the spirits wanted us to co-operate.

I kept one ear on him and tried to quietly say to Groohk that the Chief Elder was our leader and it would work well if he, Groohk, acted as theirs. He followed my meaning eventually and when the young man sat down he stood, made a slight bow to the Chief Elder, and said that he spoke for his group in saying that they would all be happy to be friends with our group. The Chief Elder made a much longer and more formal reply and that settled it. We ate and drank, sang and danced together and then all went back to sleep in our respective shelters. Some of us were in our own shelters anyway.

The next few days were spent getting to know each other. It went well overall, one or two fights broke out but everyone seemed determined to stop them. It seemed very hard to provoke the ice giants to fight, though that didn't stop our rowdies from trying.

On a suitable day we held a hunting ceremony in the cave. It was explained to the ice giants that anyone going on the hunt should come to the ceremony and nobody else. It was an alien concept to them but they were quite happy to do what we normally did and the ceremony went well. Sinotsu's big leg girl was there, I wasn't surprised, she was bigger than half the men, the ice giant men I mean, she was about twice the size of our men. She and Sinotsu went everywhere together and a funny-looking couple they made. Sinotsu was thin even for one of us, it was lucky he was quite tall or they would have looked even odder.

The hunt was a big success. Atutxa was full of praise for how brave the ice giants were and Groohk was very pleased with the way the wolves worked.

There were all sorts of surprises about the different ways of the two groups. The biggest one to me was that the ice giants had never tasted honey. It is so much a part of our lives, half of us would never get going in the morning at all without it I'm sure. When Groohk first tasted it his face was wonderful, he looked like a child that has finally got some longed-for treat.



"What is it?" he asked, and I was even more surprised that he had never even seen it. I tried to explain and ended up drawing a bee on a honeycomb and pointing to the cells. Atutxa came up at that point and suggested a honey-gathering trip. Oskol was off somewhere so us three and Sinotsu and his girl went. I'm not going to try for her name, it was very long and as well as clicks had coughs and barks in it. We only went to our local trees because we thought it rude to take strangers into the wester group's territory. Groohk was stung early on and refused to go up any trees, but Sinotsu's girl was first up them all and didn't seem to notice whether she got stung or not. We got a good catch but were feeling quite high-spirited and ate it all ourselves at the foot of the trees.

Groohk started rummaging through his things when we got back and came out of his shelter looking pleased. He handed me the most wonderful thing I had ever seen. It was about the size of a duck's egg, a similar shape too, a shiny substance the colour of fire so I knew it must be amber. Light shone through it in the most beautiful way showing the thrilling centre of it where there was a bee. What power it had. I fell to my knees and touched my forehead.

"Yes." he said, to say he felt it too.

I gazed at it for a long time then, unwillingly, tried to give it back to him. He wouldn't take it and indicated that it was a gift for me. But how could I take such a thing? We nearly fought about it. I took it in the end, though I didn't know how I could thank him enough. As I held it I had the strange feeling that I had always owned it, though I had never seen such a thing before.

The organisation, which I thought would be so difficult, sorted itself out. It could have been more difficult under the previous Chief Elder but the new one was more easygoing and willing to try new ways. We still held Elders' meetings but the formality was relaxed so that anybody who wanted to discuss anything could come to them. They were long at first with so much interpretation needed.

The children were soon speaking each other's languages, but the adults never got really fluent. Our group always had problems with the ice giants' clicks. A pidgin slowly grew up though which we could all understand. It had started with the hunters as lives depended on being clearly understood during the hunt, and I suspect myself that a great deal of it was invented at the drink and boasting sessions that followed. After that the Elders' meetings went better. The ice giants continued to do the bustard and ruff dance before any meeting.

The living arrangements of the two groups worked well on the whole. They kept a communal fire to the south of the main shelter area and some of our group would join them there. That never became a habit with us because the ice giants were more inclined to wander than we were. Sometimes they would just be gone and their fire would be out. I wasn't the only one who found it a bit lonely without them. They would be away sometimes for a short time and sometimes for a long time, but they always came back and we were always glad when they did. Sinotsu and his girl would never be parted, so when the ice giants went he went too. I would never have guessed that he would become such an enthralled father. His girl proved to be very fertile. Neither of them could resist going on the hunts though, so I was used as child minder on many occasions. They could be naughty sometimes, like all children, but usually I enjoyed myself with them. Atutxa would pretend to be cross, that soon quietened them.



Once Groohk and I could understand each other, I asked him how he thought the ice giants felt about not getting to vote on everything.

"Most people seem to be relieved. Our meetings used to get boring you know. They seem only too glad for somebody else to do it. The few who think it's important, or want a say in everything, just go to all the Elders' meetings. Good luck to them. I think there are better ways to spend my time."

"Yes, I know what you mean. Some people can talk forever and not always about things that matter at all. I have to go as Enchanter, and I've got used to it, so it's alright. But I think about other things sometimes I admit."

"Having special people to be enchanters still seems strange to me. But we just ignore that and contact the spirits ourselves as we've always done."

"Do you all have spirit-guides?"

"Yes, of course."

"So really you are all enchanters."

"Looking at it your way, yes. But from our viewpoint there is no such thing as an enchanter, it's just the way everybody is."

"That's right, yes. Do you tell each other about your spirit-guides or is it a personal secret?"

"No, we don't really have secrets. We would speak about our spirit-guides if the subject came up."

"Would you tell me who your spirit-guide is?"

"Yes, of course, but I thought you would have guessed."

"No...I...no."

"It's Mammoth." I had to think for a moment.

"Yes. Oh, that's perfect. How could I have been so stupid as not to see that?" He laughed.

"Well I don't like to agree with you but I have to."

"Mammoth. I've always loved him."

"So have I."

I told him all about Hare then. Hare said

"If I could blush I would."

Then I asked Groohk how the ice giants thought the world began. He told me their creation story in a sing-song voice.

"The Great White Bear who lives beyond the sky made the world, then he made all the mountains and tundra, and last he scratched the rivers into place with his great black claws. He made it all bind together by encircling it with honeysuckle. But he couldn't see it well so he created the sun. That made the world warm too, so he created Mammoth to enjoy the warmth. Mammoth danced the first dance and sang the first song. Then he saw the trees and trumpeted their beauty. But there was nobody to hear him, so he thought about how Great White Bear had made him and he thought that in honour of that making he would make a wonderful flying being, because he could not fly himself. It was white as a sign of respect to the Bear and that was Snowy Owl. But there was nothing for Owl to eat. So Mammoth made a white Hare. He loved Hare when he had made him, so he made him a very fast runner in order that Owl would not be able to catch many. He made all the different animals and last of all he made Man so that he could love all the animals. But Hare found that it was too dark at night, so he made the moon.

That is how it all came about."

I said "I'm not sure that I love Mosquito." He laughed loudly, as he so often did.

"Mosquito dances in Great White Bear's dance like the others."

"I think I begin to understand now about a battle I was once in." I explained at length about the spirit world fighting with Ice Giant. I thought I understood to some extent the effect the black claw I raised at them must have had.

"That would have been an easy victory once Ice Giant saw that." he said.

"You may have the claw if you would like it. It is more significant to you."

"No. No, I don't even want to look at it. There is too much power in such an object. I trust you to guard it well."

"I will."

"You should not think so harshly of Ice Giant Spirit. He acts before thinking and can be aggressive but it

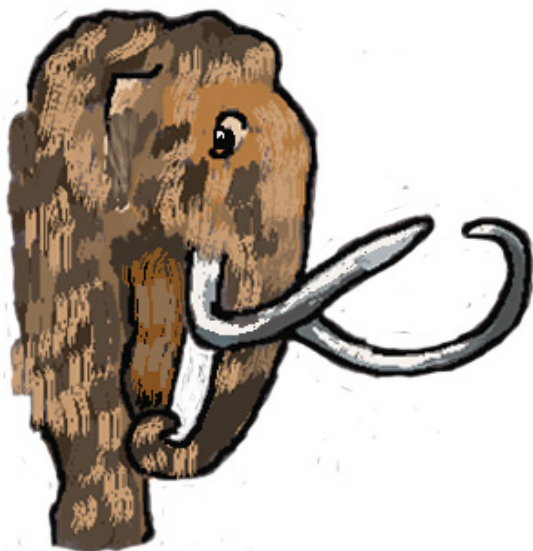
is from fear. He sees you as a threat."

"That is strange. You are so much stronger than we are. And our men are in awe of your bravery in hunting."

"We think your hunters are good too. We have been learning to use your spear-throwers. I don't know why he is afraid for us. There is plenty of food for us all now."

Epilogue

I awoke to see the Enchanter's mask and the obsidian mammoth. For that instant I was a child again and turned to look for Ikaseraz. But, of course, it was Atutxa sitting by the fire mending his winter boots. I wouldn't need mine. If I was still alive by winter I couldn't get out of the shelter. The worst part of living this way was that I couldn't get to the cave and go through to be with Hare. He spoke in my mind, mostly about the past, but I longed to be with him. Soon I would be with him always. But that brought the thought of having to leave Atutxa which was unbearable. I wouldn't have had a weak thought like that in the past, I would have to bear it. Tlez is getting old too. She moves slowly now, not that she was ever speedy. I can only hope that Atutxa doesn't lose us both at once.



When I go to the ancestors I shall be with Mother and Father. And Groohk has gone before me, he is with Mammoth now. I'm sure Owl and Eagle will be there to welcome me.

But I must think about this world while I am here. I tried to sit up, unsuccessfully. Atutxa turned towards me and said

"You're awake. Would you like a hot drink? I was just going to make one."

I don't suppose he was, but I said I would anyway. He came across with it when it was made and helped me to sit up.

"Ah! Fennel, my favourite." I pretended surprise though I had smelled it as it brewed. My pleasure was unfeigned. He sat beside me with his drink so I said

"Tell me again your story of going to find the ice giants."

"It is your story, Mother."

THE END