

Glade and Ivory

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Chapter One

Ivory tugged aside the curtain of mammoth hide that was all there was to secure the relative warmth inside the tepee from the chill wind. She crawled outside and stood upright in the bulky furs that muffled her body from hooded top to swaddled toe. She needed reprieve from the dark distress that was overwhelming her during her bedside vigil. Inside the tepee lay prone the fur-covered body of her mother who was exhaling her last few painful dying breaths.

There had been no warning, of course. No one had noticed the cave lion before it pounced. Despite the villagers' courageous onslaught on the predator, the only remaining consolation was that Ivory's mother had now lived long enough to die in her own bed. Ivory was fully aware that her mother could never survive such a mauling. Even the shaman's considerable medical skills were no match for the savagery of a lion's teeth and claws. The sudden loss would be especially distressing now that Ivory was her mother's only surviving child. There had been other brothers and sisters, but they were now all dead and most not even surviving childbirth. Ivory's father was also dead. He'd been gored to death by an aurochs during a disastrous hunting expedition two winters ago.

Ivory surveyed the chill steppes. It was Spring: the season most celebrated by her tribe. Game was plentiful on the grasslands. There was a rich harvest to gather from the woods. Ivory's face burnt in the glow of the sun which, however bright, was never warm enough to counter the chill wind that blew from the mountainous glacial cliffs not that far to the North. She bent her neck to follow the transit of a flock of storks flying west. In every direction were the wide steppes that were her Summer home. It

teemed with game of every species: woolly rhinoceros, antelope, deer, horse, bison, aurochs, and, the mainstay of her tribe, mammoth.

It was for this reason, of course, that her tribe was universally known as the Mammoth Hunters.

Ivory made a silent prayer to the spirits of the wind whose sharp chill was what she now felt most keenly. She soon knew that the spirits hadn't answered her prayers when a cacophony of wailing and ululation erupted inside the tepee from the neighbours gathered by her mother's bedside.

Ivory now realised how unprepared she was for the shock of her mother's death. It was no longer hypothetical. It was real and actual. Ivory was now an orphan. No father. No mother. And, in addition, no husband. She was wholly and utterly at the mercy of the village's generosity. And in these straitened times, with mammoth migration increasingly unreliable and the winters worsening each year, such charity could not be taken for granted.

“The Shaman needs an apprentice,” remarked Aunt Partridge several days later when it was deemed that Ivory had grieved for long enough to be approached. “She's says she wants a young girl. I'll put in a word with the chief.”

Overwhelmed by grief as she was, Ivory understood the need for shelter and security for an orphan in an unkind world. She grasped at this straw of comfort with all the enthusiasm she could muster.

“I'm sure I could help the shaman in her duties, Auntie. I've always wanted to

be tutored in the mystic arts.”

This last was a lie, but Ivory had faith that the spirits would give her dispensation in her hour of need. And anyhow, as her sorrow gradually subsided over the following days, this promise of relief awoke in her a desire she'd never noticed before. She'd be more than happy to take instruction in the arts of divination. She'd be honoured to partake of the wisdom dispensed by the only person in the village from whom even the chief sought advice. It also frightened her. The spirits were fickle and cruel. Surely it was only after great sacrifice and labour she could hope to acquire the skills possessed by a shaman.

The shaman was a mysterious figure. She'd not been born in the village. She hadn't even been born to the Mammoth Hunters' tribe. She came from a distant Southern land. These were lands where not only the language was different, which was to be expected, but where a person's skin and hair was of a different colour. Because the shaman's skin was brown, like clay or river mud, she was known as the Dark Shaman. There was no one else in Ivory's experience who had such dark skin. It was a pigment utterly alien to a tribe of pale-skinned, fair-haired people. The shaman's hair was as black as the night. Her lips were thick, her nose was small and her dark eyes were spaced wide apart. She seemed so strange that Ivory sometimes wondered whether she was a spirit or an animal rather than a person. But Ivory knew she was a person because she spoke the language of the Mammoth Hunters and was reputed to enjoy sex as much as a normal person might.

Ivory knew little else about the shaman. She was best known from her public appearances which were usually on such auspicious occasions as the Chief's Birthday, the Anniversary of the last Chief's death, the Equinoxes, the Summer Solstice, and,

most important of all, the Winter Solstice. The Dark Shaman didn't often appear in public. She was even excused the foraging duties that was such a necessary duty for all other women in the tribe.

Who knew what evils might befall the village were the shaman not there on those auspicious days to utter the right incantations, dance the right steps or bestow the right intoxicants? Perhaps the spirit of the last Chief would bring evil on the tribe if he was not revered with due dignity? Maybe the Sun would sink deeper still after the Winter Solstice and never be seen again? The village was envied by all others in the tribe for the privilege of having a shaman whose mysterious provenance was from beyond the Southern Mountains and further south than even the Great Sea. She was a woman who'd travelled from beyond barriers once supposed impassable through which no Mammoth Hunter had ever ventured.

However, it was not just the spirits that Ivory would have to contend with as another aunt explained to her while Ivory and she scabbled in the woodland dirt and soil for truffles and tubers. Aunt Sycamore rested her hand on Ivory's equally filthy wrist and smiled at her niece with sad sympathetic eyes.

"Although the shaman is a woman, to be her apprentice is like being wed," she said.

"I know," replied Ivory carelessly, whose mind was too fogged by bereavement to contemplate her future clearly. "I vow to pursue the shaman crafts with the same dedication and selfless devotion that I shall give my husband when I wed."

"You misunderstand me, my dear," continued Aunt Sycamore. She brushed the back of her hand, which was less thickly pasted by soil, on her niece's cheek: almost the only part of her face not shielded by musk ox fur. "It will be exactly like being wed

in the ways that best characterise matrimony. You'll need to be faithful not only to the shaman's craft, but also to the shaman herself."

"What do you mean, Auntie?" wondered Ivory as she gazed into her aunt's light blue eyes.

"The shaman is a woman reputed to prefer the flesh of young girls to those of men," Aunt Sycamore said with as much objectivity as she could muster. "To be the shaman's apprentice, you will also have to share the shaman's bed."

"How do you know? The shaman has never needed an apprentice before. She is a woman of advanced years. How do you know she desires female flesh? How do you know she's even interested in sex at all?"

"It's true she is old," conceded the Aunt. "She could be a grandmother now. She is more than old enough to be your mother. But a woman's needs last a long time. She may not be as young as you or as fit for a night of uninterrupted passion, but she has the desire for it. There are women in the village who have whispered to me, and I shan't mention their names, that the shaman has made love with them and that she is uncommonly passionate."

Ivory paused in her scrabbling in the soil and sat upright. The furs that bagged about her knees were pulled taut. She balanced her weight on her heels and let her aunt's news sink in, while all around was a cheerful cacophony of woodland birdsong.

"So, I am to be a spouse without being wed," she said with hesitancy. "And worse: a spouse to a woman many seasons my senior and not to a man my equal in age. It is not right. It is a husband I seek: not a lover bereft of cock and balls. I want a man to fuck me, not a woman to stroke my hair."

Aunt Sycamore took Ivory in her arms and showered her face with kisses and

tears. "I understand your desires. What woman wouldn't want a man's cock inside her cunt? What woman wouldn't relish a man's sperm? What woman doesn't need a man to comfort, guard and care for her? But the shaman is such a woman. She has entertained many a fair woman in this village and beyond. If it is of comfort to you, the reports I have heard is that she is a fair and compassionate lover and exceeds most men in her ability to bring pleasure to her companions."

"She wants an apprentice for sex and I am to be her sex doll?" asked Ivory.

"No. It may seem strange to you, being of tender years, but she has had little trouble in satisfying her need for female flesh. She is discreet. The husbands need never discover the infidelity. There is no risk of pregnancy. Many a woman prefers sex with another woman than no sex at all."

"No sex at all? What about the husbands?"

"A man doesn't always stay faithful or kind or even alive."

"But it is a man I want to wed. Not a woman."

"I wish it were not so," said Ivory's aunt, removing her arms from her niece's neck to suggest that they return to foraging in the forest mulch, "but at this moment there is no man in the village looking to wed. You must eat and sleep, but you have no immediate family and there is no man to offer you shelter. Your aunts and uncles have discussed your future with Chief Cave Lion and he has decided that the best solution for you is to be the shaman's apprentice."

"Why does the shaman need an apprentice?" Ivory asked as she crouched down to better forage through the tough soil. "She's managed without one for many years. Why does she need one now?"

"It's best to ask her yourself," her aunt replied.

It was agreed by the villagers that Ivory should observe a proper time of mourning which the Chief decided with the advice of the shaman would be as many days as fingers on two hands. This was a leisurely time of sorrow, but despite the grumblings of Ivory's aunts and uncles that they would have the burden of feeding another mouth for these ten days, the Chief's word was law. He was blessed with the wisdom of the spirits that had guided the village through many years of seasonal migration. To disobey was to risk the wrath of the spirits of the forest and the steppe.

It was almost with relief that Ivory awoke on the morning of the day on which she would become the shaman's apprentice. The kindness of her aunts and uncles had been appreciably stretched. The children were moaning to their parents how much they resented having to share food with their orphaned cousin. Everyone is generous when a hunt on the wide-open steppe results in success, but not every such expedition is rewarded with a feast of mammoth or woolly rhinoceros. On lean days, everyone had to make do with the herbs, seeds, tubers, nuts and berries that the women of the village gathered in the woods, supplemented with the meat of hare, lemming and forest fowl. The hunters who earned the tribe their fame as Mammoth Hunters were the ones who provided the meat for the feast. Every last part of the animals they butchered was used. The fur clothed the villagers. The bones were fashioned into tools to supplement those made from quarried flint. The sinews made thread and bow-string. However, despite their incontestable bravery and dedication to the chase, the hunters were never certain to bring home enough to feed the entire village every day.

Ivory was mournful as she prepared to leave the tepee. It was the last time she would sleep in the Summer home she'd always shared with her mother and her immediate family. Her married cousins, Woolly Rhinoceros and Bluebell, would take occupancy now that Bluebell had a child on the way. From now on, Ivory would have to share her bed with the shaman.

Ivory knew the shaman's abode well. After all, she passed it every day. It was positioned just beside that of Chief Cave Lion and his family. Ivory had always thought it rather large for just one woman. It was assembled from wood and aurochs-hide and was very nearly half the size of the Chief's home.

The Chief escorted Ivory to the shaman, as common people weren't normally privileged to enter the confines of a Holy person's abode. Chief Cave Lion was almost the oldest person in the village but by no means was he frail. The hunting scars on his face were testimony to his bravery. It might be years yet until he would need surrender his chieftaincy to his chosen successor. As they walked to the shaman's tent, the Chief impressed on the young girl the importance of her new role and how the whole village expected her to take good heed of the shaman's instruction. This would not, however, excuse her, as it did the shaman, from the duties expected of a tribeswoman such as the daily forage in the woods.

He pushed aside the brightly coloured leopard skin that acted as door to the shaman's tent and spoke familiarly to the figure inside. This was the first time Ivory had ever entered such a large tent and she was suitably impressed by its size. A rhinoceros, even a young mammoth, could sit inside. The tapered roof towered above with the aperture at the tip releasing a trail of smoke from the fire in the tepee's centre. Animal skins covered the whole expanse of the ground. The furniture was made of

stone and wood. And pride of place was the most spacious bed that Ivory had seen. It was space enough for more than two people to sleep together without having to curl their legs.

“This is Ivory,” announced the Chief. “She is the daughter of Antler and Chestnut, and the granddaughter of Snow Wolf. Care for her well.”

“Thank you, my lord,” said the shaman. “It is with more gratitude than I can ever express in a lifetime that I accept her services. May long years and happiness bless you for eternity.”

Ivory appraised her new mistress during the exchange of formalities. The shaman had dark skin very much like clay on the banks of a stream. She wrapped a large loose fur around her that must have once belonged to a cave bear. Beneath this, Ivory caught a glimpse of her bare skin. The shaman relied on only one layer of fur to stay warm. Her hair was black but flecked with grey and the ends had splintered into wild wisps. As was the style of all women in the tribe, bones were threaded into her hair and she tied it back behind her neck. Her round face had a nose that was flatter, lips that were thicker and eyes that were wider than was normal for people of the Mammoth Hunters’ tribe.

Her voice was cracked with age, but she spoke most strangely in other ways as well. It was different even from the speech of other villages belonging to the tribe. The fact that words were pronounced differently from village to village was a source of endless humour for youngsters. Her voice was curiously flat. It had a curious gutturalness as if she had a cold. She pronounced some syllables with unusual emphasis. The shaman was the first person that Ivory had ever met whose first language was not her own.

It was only after the Chief had departed, taking with him a gift of woven braid, that the shaman directly addressed Ivory.

“Sit down on the floor, dear girl,” she said kindly. “Do you have any questions to ask me?”

Ivory paused for a moment and then asked the question that had troubled her most since she had been told of her chosen destiny. “What should I call you, Your Holiness?”

The shaman laughed. “Well not that, that’s for sure. My name is one unpronounceable to you, as it’s in the language of my people who, as you know, come from the South where it never snows. Translated it means ‘glade’, which is something scarce in the forests where I was born but so common here that the woods are just islands in an ocean of grass. So, call me Glade, but not in public where I must be addressed with reverence.”

“*Glade*,” Ivory rehearsed. “It’s a strange name. I’ve never heard of a name like that before.”

“That is the nature of the world,” said the shaman. “Names reflect the world you live in. My people lived in the forest, so I have a forest name. You live in the frozen steppe, so you are named accordingly. What other questions do you have?”

“What are my duties? How will I learn to commune with spirits and learn the mysteries of their world?”

The shaman laughed indulgently. She stood up from the cross-legged position she’d assumed ever since Ivory and the chief had entered the tent. As she did so, her bear skin parted in the middle. It was secured by only a cord at the neck and other than that she wore no other clothes at all.

“Do you think I have the answers to that question, my dear?”

Ivory hesitated. She was reminded by the sight of the shaman’s naked brown flesh of what her duties might also entail, but she was also impressed by the beauty of the older woman’s body. She was slim, as were all the tribe, but her skin was healthy and she undoubtedly ate reasonably well. Her breasts were still full, indeed quite large, with nipples at least twice the size of any other woman’s that Ivory had seen. Her pubic hair was plaited and threaded with small bones. She seemed wholly oblivious of her nakedness.

“Surely it is because you are in communion with the spirits that you are the shaman,” Ivory said.

“That’s what I’d like people to believe and my first instruction to you is to ensure that no one thinks otherwise,” the shaman said with a conspiratorial smile, “but how can I commune with the spirits when they don’t exist?”

Ivory gasped. This was blasphemy indeed. It was worse than blasphemy: it made no sense. What meaning was there to the universe, if it wasn’t guided by the spirit world?

“How can you say that?”

“Because it’s true. Every tribe, every race, has its own beliefs of what makes the world function. Here in the mammoth steppes, as in the southern forests where I was born, everyone believes in spirits. Not all tribes share that belief, but almost everyone believes in something. There is a legend of how the world began, a history that explains how the tribe is set apart from the rest, and, of course, some mystical unseen presence. And you know what? They are all different from each other.”

“They are?” said Ivory to whom this thought had never occurred before.

“It is so. As not every belief can all be true at the same time, my opinion is that they are all as false as each other.”

“How does the sun rise? Why does the moon change shape? Where does the rain come from? There must be spirits guiding nature...”

“And who governs the spirits, my dear? What I shall teach you is not how to commune with spirits, but rather how to commune with the villagers so that when they are in distress, when the rains don’t fall, when the mammoths fail to migrate, when the sun is at its lowest ebb in the winter months, they still have hope and faith in the world. If they wish to believe in spirits, then I shan’t tell them otherwise, but my wisdom, such as it is, and what qualifies me to be shaman for this village, is my insight that there are no spirits guiding the world.”

Ivory shook her head from side to side. She wasn’t hearing this. It was wrong, wrong, wrong. She knew there were spirits. She prayed to them every day. She couldn’t abandon her belief in the spirit world merely on the word of a shameless woman from the Southern lands.

“What *do* you believe in?” Ivory challenged the shaman.

“That, my dear, is a lesson for another day,” she said with a smile. “But first, shall we eat and drink? It must be hard for you. I’ve heard that you have just lost the last person in your family.”

“My mother.”

“The hardest loss of all to bear,” Glade said sympathetically. She sat next to Ivory and placed a bare arm around her shoulder. A bare nipple brushed against the thick fur of Ivory’s coat. “Relax, my dear. Have no fear. I shall treat you well.”

Glade prepared a simple stew, served in a clay pot, accompanied by mead in

carved wooden beakers. Ivory savoured the mead and filtered the floating detritus through her teeth. The alcohol made her relax for the first time since her mother died.

“You know why you’re here, don’t you?” Glade asked.

“Because you need an apprentice?”

“No. I have needs as you shall discover, but an apprentice I don’t need. It is the Chief who wants me to have an apprentice. It was he who asked that you should serve me in some capacity, so I invented the role for his benefit. It was a favour from him to your departed mother. She was one of the Chief’s mistresses, I believe.”

“She was?” said Ivory, who had nonetheless guessed that there was some reason why some nights she slept in the tepee without the sound of her mother’s low breathing.

“Chief Cave Lion is an honourable man. He must want to honour your mother’s memory after the mauling. But an apprentice is not a need I truly have. He reasons that the village will need a successor for me should I also fall prey to a wild beast. My fame has spread throughout your tribe. Many chiefs and elders come to the village from other villages, bearing gifts and favours, and seek my potions, my wisdom and my parables. If I should die, Chief Cave Lion’s status will be much diminished.”

“So, I am to replace you?”

“I don’t really care whether you do or not. I only hope that you’ll at least wait till I’m dead before you become shaman in my stead. However, you are a pretty girl and I am a lonely, childless woman. I have needs, as you know.”

“You do?”

“Take off your clothes so I can see you better.”

“Sorry?”

“You heard,” said the shaman with a broad smile.

“It’s cold.”

“It’s warm by the fire and we are protected from the wind. Do as I say, dear.”

Ivory gulped, but she’d been expecting something like this. She was sure the mead had helped to lower her inhibitions. The heart of the shaman’s tent was warm enough for her to wear fewer furs than she needed in the chill wind outside. In fact, it was warm enough that she needn’t wear any clothes at all.

She unhurriedly unstrapped and unpeeled the hides and furs from her body and soon stood naked by the fire—more naked under Glade’s gaze than she’d ever felt before.

Ivory’s body was as white as her face, but not as weather-beaten. The freckles that spotted her shoulders were pale in comparison to the darker ones around her nose. Her breasts were small and pert, her arms slim and her legs long. The thick triangle of pubic hair that hid her maidenhood was darker than the hair on her head. It was not yet decorated by threaded bones or plaits.

Glade unclasped her bear skin and let it slip to the floor, so that there were now two naked women where before there was only one. She stepped over to Ivory and took the trembling girl by the shoulders and pressed her, bosom against bosom, to her breast. They were of almost exactly the same height.

“Are you a virgin, my dear?”

“Almost.”

“Almost?”

“The boys like to feel what a girl has to offer and I’ve been tempted, but I only once let a boy enter me and that was for the briefest time. I didn’t wish the spirit of motherhood to enter me.”

“Indeed not,” said Glade approvingly. “But have no fear. No such spirit can be passed from me to you. Shall we lie down together?”

Ivory’s first experience of making love with a woman was less terrible or awful than she feared, though she wasn’t sure she enjoyed it with nearly the same delight as Glade so obviously did. Never before had anyone licked her so vigorously about her vagina nor had her clitoris ever been so moist with spittle. Despite the older woman’s evident animal urgency, she was also very tender. She resisted the temptation to probe with her fingers inside the lips that hid the recesses of Ivory’s vagina, although the fingers of at least three, maybe four, boys had already prepared the younger girl for the day when it could be used more thoroughly. On Glade’s instruction, Ivory explored the older woman’s vagina with her tongue and lips, from which arose odours that were more pungent than she’d ever imagined a woman’s should have. It was totally unlike Ivory’s brief exploration of Lion Paw’s erect penis on the day she allowed herself a moment of unresolved penetration. The smell of his genitals, though memorable, was less potent than Glade’s.

Later that evening, the two women’s bodies entwined under the pile of woolly rhinoceros hide and bear fur on Glade’s enormous bed. Ivory relished the warmth of her older companion’s skin against hers. She savoured the smell of her flesh. She wondered at its strange brown complexion.

“Why do you love women rather than men?” Ivory asked as Glade nibbled her ear.

“I haven’t always done so. When I was young and lived with my people in the Southern Forests, I always believed, as I think you do, that a man would be my lasting sleeping companion. My tribe was much freer than yours with regards to pleasures of

the flesh. Love between women and, indeed, between men was neither proscribed nor frowned upon. Despite this, it never occurred to me that I should ever exchange the lithe, muscular delight of a man's body for the fleshy roundness of a woman's. Some girls thought differently but I didn't share their preference."

"So, why did you change your mind?"

"My mind was changed for me. It changed when my life as I knew it then came to an end."

"It came to an end?"

"The day my mother died. The day my village died. The day when the whole world I had ever known died. And a horrible, violent and bloody death it was, too."

"Worse than being mauled by a lion?"

"I would have preferred to have been mauled by any beast—lion, hyena or bear—than suffer again the fate that befell that day."

Chapter Two

“The forest where I was born is far, far to the South,” Glade told Ivory the following day after her apprentice had returned from foraging duties in the woods and removed her clothes on the shaman’s request. “It’s a very different land. The sun shines high in the sky. At midday it’s almost directly overhead. It is always warm. My people never wore clothes. I never knew what it meant to cover my flesh. The need to do so just did not exist.”

“It sounds like paradise,” said Ivory.

“Paradise? The mystical place where the spirits take you when you die?” Glade mocked, reminding Ivory of the gulf between their beliefs that could never be bridged. “The *paradise* you imagine and which I invoke to comfort the dying is no paradise at all compared to the land I come from. Your *paradise* is a cold dry treeless plain, whereas the forest where I lived was warm, moist and full of trees. In comparison to the Southern forests, your small woodlands are nothing more than pitiful. The trees were alive with beautiful birds whose gorgeous feathers were more splendid than those of any ptarmigan or crane. Most animals that live there never venture to the cold forests of the North.”

“What type of beast are they?”

“You have no words for them. There were monkeys and apes. There were frogs whose skin was more brightly coloured than flowers in the Spring. It was never cold. There were no seasons. We had no word for ‘year’ or ‘season’. The course of our lives was measured only by the Moon we could but dimly glimpse through the forest canopy. We knew no other world than the forest. If given the choice we would never exchange

the warmth and bounty of our *paradise* for the cruel cold of the frozen North.”

The young Glade had no notion that one day in her future she would live in a land dominated by seasons and populated by large animals such as woolly rhinoceros, aurochs or mammoth. There were a few dangerous animals under the forest canopy, but the leopards and wolves generally left people alone. The chimpanzees and gorillas were wary of humans. Most of the animals that lived in the dense forest were small. The Forest People didn't live in villages. They slept on the forest floor at night on whatever spot their roving had taken them during the day and they relied on campfires to ward off predators. Occasionally, a lion or hyena might stumble into the forest by accident, but there were not many rich pickings to whet their appetite.

The Forest People had ways of life and traditions appropriate to a life of foraging and hunting in the woods. The custom of permanent settlement was not one of them. If an area of the forest was full of fruits and small game, a settled community of more than thirty people would soon denude it of everything edible. It was best for the tribe to be constantly wandering.

The forest was home to many itinerant clans of Forest People and there was great celebration when their paths crossed. There was no suspicion or hostility in such encounters. Everyone knew the encounter would be brief and that the two clans would soon part, but these gatherings were a time when all inhibition were wholly abandoned.

Many of Glade's happiest childhood memories were of such encounters. There was the exchange of gifts and food. There was feasting under the shadow of the trees. And when enough palm wine had been drunk, there was the inevitable fucking. It was on such an occasion that Glade first lost her virginity and did so more than once that night. Although she enjoyed sex with the men in her clan, what Glade most enjoyed

was sex with new friends she might never see again. It was commented on, but never understood, that nine moons after such an encounter was a fruitful time for new brothers and sisters. This was always a cause for celebration. Nobody understood that sex and pregnancy were related. It was enjoyed too frequently and with too many different partners for anyone to establish the link between the two.

It was an innocent world. It was innocence so absolute that when it came crashing to an end the awakening into a harsher, less forgiving world was that much more terrible.

“Did you believe in the spirits when you were young?” Ivory wondered. She was sure that Glade couldn’t always have been an apostate.

“Yes,” the shaman admitted. “But these weren’t the spirits you revere. Our spirits were the spirits of the trees, which we believed were people like ourselves. We would never harm a tree. We gave praise to the trees whenever we made a kill. We believed that the deer or antelope whose life we’d taken was a gift from the trees that had given them life. The Forest People had many myths and legends which we embellished and enriched around the campfire at night. It wasn’t only sex we relished when we met other clans in the forest. It was also the exchange of new stories. This is where I learnt my skill at story-telling which I employ to such good advantage here. I discovered early on that the essence of a good story is not to simply give an account of what actually happened or what might have happened: it is in the telling of that story. People want to hear stories that have a satisfying and happy conclusion. The story must be resolved in a way that reinforces what people want to believe. This is another lesson you must never forget. When you tell a story, you must find out what your listener wants to hear and ensure that this is how the story ends. Any other ending and the

listener is not satisfied and is less likely to trust you.”

“Did you also believe that man and woman were born from ice and snow, and that the world began in a snowstorm?”

“Of course not. No one in the forest knew what snow or ice is. We believed that the world was like a tree but one that had lived forever. There were new branches in the history of the world and the appearance of the first man and woman was one such new branch. Our tales were of a happy first birth. Not like your myths. There was no tradition of punishment and guilt. We believed that nature is always bountiful. Our prayers were to express gratitude for nature’s beneficence. They weren’t an appeal for forgiveness and mercy.”

The Forest People had no concept of sin. People could be greedy. They could be naughty. They could even be angry. But they could never be sinful. There was no malice or avarice because everyone shared everything: their food, their fire and their bodies. How could sin ever come to pass?

Glade discovered that not only was she a gifted story-teller, but that she was also a skilled and passionate lover. She was proud to be known as an easy lay and a good fuck. She did whatever she could to further the opinion that made her so popular with her clan. After she made love to one man or boy, she would roll over, semen still trickling down her thighs, and take another man’s penis in her mouth in anticipation of another bout of sex. She often made love to two, three or four men: sometimes serially and sometimes together. When men were in need of sex, it was Glade who was the most willing to provide it.

“I loved cock. I couldn’t get enough of it. There was not a day, except when I was ill, that I didn’t make love at least a couple of times.”

“How many children did you have?” wondered Ivory. She understood that sex was a gift from the spirits to compensate for the burden of motherhood.

“None,” said Glade.

“Have you ever had children?”

“Yes. Two. But this was many years later, after I’d left the forest. It is a strange thing, but nature decided that I should be less fecund than most women in the world. Nevertheless, there were girls in my clan who were always pregnant. They gave birth and then within the space of a moon or two they were pregnant again. Others like me never gave birth at all. We thought that children were another gift from the trees. In your tribe, with its taboos and your practice of *marriage*, it becomes fairly obvious to understand how a mother can come to give birth to children.”

Ivory’s life as the shaman’s apprentice was mostly no different from how it had been before. She had the same duties at the hearth to prepare food, tend the fire and stitch the thick furs that was as much a necessity as food in the cold weather. As Ivory pulled a thread through the hide with a bone needle, she more than ever envied Glade’s childhood where clothes were unknown. There was never a day in Ivory’s life even in the height of Summer when it was warm enough to greet the Sun’s rays without the protection of thick furs.

Ivory’s routine had changed in one significant way. Whenever she joined the village women to forage for fuel or food in the woods, she was now aware that they had a very clear idea of what the shaman and she did beneath the bedsheets. Ivory wasn’t

as revered as the shaman, so she couldn't expect her sexual activity to be regarded quite as indulgently. Ivory was viewed rather warily, especially by those women who feared that the affection she expressed with one woman could now be applied to them.

It was for this reason that Ivory was surprised when Acorn approached her furtively on the open grassland while they foraged for animal dung to feed the fire. She'd been a widow ever since her husband suffered an unfortunate fall during a mammoth hunt near an unexpectedly fragile cliff-edge. Ivory had never spoken to Acorn before. She wasn't a relative and their families had once quarrelled over the inheritance rights of a tent and its possessions.

"How I envy you," whispered Acorn as the two piled dried cakes of aurochs dung on their heads. "I've also shared the shaman's bed and no man can compare to her for her love-making."

Ivory blushed. "My duties as an apprentice are wholly honourable," she protested.

Acorn smiled and brushed her fingers over the small patch of cheek Ivory exposed to the Sun. "I'm sure they are, sweetness, but the shaman is a woman whose bed I would gladly share again. I take it you've had the privilege of knowing her naked flesh?"

Ivory shook her head, but Acorn could see she was lying. "I've only been in her company for a few days. I don't know what to think," the young apprentice admitted.

"You're young yet," Acorn said sympathetically. "If you had more experience of sex with a man then you'd know how lucky you are. Not one night with my husband compares well with the all too few intimate nights I've shared with the shaman."

Acorn was right. Ivory's modest experience with boys wasn't remotely

comparable to the steadily more passionate lovemaking she enjoyed with Glade. There was no word in her vocabulary to describe a relationship between two women that was like that between a woman and a man, but even without such a word she was sure that a relationship where there was no hope of producing children was fundamentally wrong. In any case, Ivory still had amorous thoughts for men however wary they now were towards her. This wasn't because they disapproved of her, but because Ivory was a gift to the shaman and they had no wish to quarrel with the chief.

Ivory expressed her reservations about the nature of their lovemaking while she and the shaman nestled naked together under the thick furs of her bed.

“It’s a cock I need,” Ivory said. “Your kisses, however tender, are no substitute for the excitement of a man’s thrusts.”

Glade smiled. “You only miss what you think you’re missing. But if you want your lovemaking to be more like that between a man and a woman, I can satisfy you in that way too.”

She slipped out from the under the furs into the chill night air that was only feebly warmed by the smouldering embers of the fire that Ivory would rekindle in morning. She retrieved a pouch that was hidden behind the stone slabs from which her cabinet was assembled. She pulled out a curious reddish figurine that Ivory could see in the glimmering light was almost the exact size and shape of a man’s erect penis. Glade brought it to the bed and with a shiver nestled back under the fur beside Ivory. She handed the strange object to her apprentice.

Carved objects had great value amongst the Mammoth Hunters. They were prized for their mystical values because it was known that the spirit world had guided their construction. It was a miracle that stone, wood or clay could be carved into a shape that was recognisably human or animal. The more realistic the image, the closer its provenance to the spirits. But never had Ivory seen and certainly not touched an object of this shape nor one made from such peculiar material.

“It’s made from resin,” said Glade. “It comes from a tree, but resin as malleable as this can’t be found in the Mammoth Steppe. This comes from far to the South East. What do you think of it?”

Ivory giggled despite herself. “I can think of only one thing,” she admitted as she admired the knobbed head and its exact proportion.

“It’s a toy,” explained Glade, “but not a toy such as a child might use. Tomorrow night, I shall show you how the toy is used. And perhaps then you won’t miss quite so much what a man has to offer.”

When Glade was young she no more knew of such toys than had Ivory. She had no notion at all of any kind of decorative craft. The artefacts used by the Forest People were completely utilitarian and mostly employed for hunting or foraging. The tribe had no stone tools. All tools were made from wood that had been sharpened against hardwood trees.

Similarly, Glade had no conception that there was a world that existed beyond the woodland. The clan never wandered to the forest edge. The only open spaces they

encountered were alongside the rivers that flowed through the forest. These were dangerous places where large animals such as hippopotami and crocodiles lay in wait for the unwary. It was generally with relief that the clan would retreat to the comforting shelter of the trees and away from the harsh glare of the unshaded Sun.

In any case, this was a time when Glade had no need for a toy like the resin dildo. If she wanted a cock between her thighs there was always at least one such willing member on hand. Glade's few explorations of other girls' bodies didn't tempt her at all away from the pleasure of heterosexual coupling. The love Glade enjoyed most was predominantly serial and generally with men or boys.

"I love you," said Okapi, a boy named after the largest forest animal anyone had ever seen. "Of all the girls I've fucked, it's you I love the most."

"I love you too," said Glade as she rolled off his chest onto the mossy forest floor. She regarded his penis as it shrivelled to the size of a fig. "You're almost as good a lover as Baboon or Flying Squirrel."

"I'll be just as good when I'm as old as them," Okapi promised. "I'll fuck you like no one has ever fucked you."

"I look forward to it," said Glade.

She tenderly pinched Okapi's foreskin between her fingers. The boy leaned forward and eased a finger into her anus. It entered easily. It was well lubricated by the seepage of semen and vaginal juices.

"Do you want me to fuck your arse?"

"No," said Glade firmly as she gently removed his finger. "Flying Squirrel fucked me there two days ago and I've still not recovered. But if you like, I'll finger fuck you."

“I’d like that,” said Okapi who enjoyed such sport. He was a boy keener than most for sex with men.

As Glade’s fingers probed inside Okapi’s anus, she had no reason to doubt that this was a life that would last forever. The bounty of the forest was such that there was no reason to imagine that she wouldn’t always be able to make love in the dappled sunlight of the forest. It was impossible to imagine a time before her tribe had lived in the forest. It was equally as inconceivable that there would be a time after. Glade had no reason to expect that she would ever know a time when her tribe no longer had the forest to themselves.

Ivory was also innocent. Her arse had never been penetrated not had it ever occurred to her that a man or woman might choose to venture into such a tight and malodorous zone. Nonetheless, she was now less innocent of how Glade’s sex toy could be used.

As it always was with Glade, the introduction was gentle. She sat cross-legged and naked in front of Ivory. She parted first her thighs and then, with her fingers, the lips of her vagina. She slid the toy in steadily. She stimulated her clitoris with her free hand and bit by bit eased the dildo inside until it was as firmly within her as a man’s penis might be. She moved it up and down with slow rhythmic motions. She progressively increased the rhythm to one of frenzy as she thrust it in and out.

It was the first time Ivory had seen anyone masturbate, although she’d caught glimpses of boys stroking their penises when they thought no one could see. She was astonished by the degree of Glade’s arousal from her own ministrations. It was more

than she'd ever managed with her own fingers. Perhaps it was possible, she thought, for a woman to satisfy herself without the need for company. Certainly, Glade's exhaustion after her masturbatory session was as real as when they'd made love together, although she still had sufficient passion to make love to Ivory under the bear-skin blankets while the short night advanced towards the clear cold light of the morning.

Ivory was nowhere near as practised as Glade when it was her turn to use the toy. Her pleasure came more from her lover's tender caresses. Glade helpfully prepared the toy for her. She moistened it with spittle so that it didn't rub her vulva raw or tear the skin of her labia. Ivory could only achieve orgasm when the toy was used by the two women together. It was her first fulfilling penetration and it was shared by two engorged vaginas. Although Glade had taught Ivory something of sexual passion, the orgasm that shook her soul out from her body was one she'd never before imagined possible. She knew that sex could be pleasurable, but this was of another order altogether. When she collapsed onto Glade's bosom, Ivory was spent in a way she wanted to experience again and again. The perspiration dripped from her pert breasts onto her lover's rather larger bosom. Her body slid against Glade's with the slipperiness of bare flesh on a damp river bank. While making love she cried out with unrestrained ecstasy and afterwards she wept uncontrollably.

Not all Glade's instruction was of a sexual kind, although rather more of it was than Ivory originally expected. She was instructed in the shamanic arts that Glade had learnt in far distant lands and from other shamans. She was taught the use of herbs and mushrooms to make medicines and potions. She learnt about the ills that beset people, especially women, and how to give them comfort. Many were best treated by no more than rest and plenty of water.

Glade confided that there was almost no spiritual content in the babbling in foreign tongues that accompanied her ministrations.

“I doubt very much that your spirits have had much communion with the tribes I’ve known who make these medicines and speak these languages,” she confessed. “But people expect there to be chanting with their medicine and I am happy to give them that.”

She then recited what sounded like a prayer to the spirits. It was a guttural sound punctuated by clicks and whoops.

“That’s in the language of the Cave Painters in the High Mountains. It’s a poem I learnt on the glories of the Mother Goddess whom they worship. It asks the Mother Goddess to bless a woman with many children and that the children should all live long enough to be parents themselves.”

Glade then babbled in another tongue. This was a sibilant sound punctuated by heavy aspiration and a throaty glottal stop.

“That’s a dirty limerick about two men fucking a sow and one of them getting pig-shit on his feet. That chant is equally as effective.”

“That’s wrong!” exclaimed a scandalised Ivory. “When people are in distress, they should be treated with reverence.”

“Rubbish!” Glade retorted. “People just want to hear unusual sounds. The meaning is irrelevant. It only helps them insofar as it’s what they expect to hear. That’s why I always ask them to give me a lock of hair. I’ve got no use for it but it makes the ceremony seem more important.”

“Do you *really* cure people when they’re ill?”

“Usually yes. Not always. I know I’m doing no good when a person wants a

prayer for fecundity or to ward off wolves. But it makes people feel better and it keeps me well fed.”

Glade told Ivory many stories. Some were fascinating insights into foreign lands populated by strange animals such as giraffes, ibexes, hairless elephants, hippopotami and zebra. Often these were stories of hunting and quests. There were stories about people who lived by the sea and hunted dolphins. There were stories about villages made from mud in grasslands where animals roamed under a hot sun in large numbers as in the Mammoth Steppes. Some stories featured strange beings that Glade had never seen. These included one of a giant man with a single eye in the centre of the forehead, of small people with tiny butterfly-like wings, huge flying reptiles and beings that were half human and half some other animal.

“Do such beings exist?” Ivory wondered.

“I don’t know. But there are so many strange things in the world that maybe they do.”

Ivory was told more about Glade’s childhood home. This was a subject Glade returned to often, sometimes with a glimmer of a tear in her dark brown eyes. It was as utterly alien to Ivory as the tales of flying horses or ostriches or gorillas. She had always been frightened of the forest. They were terrifying places of tall trees and howling wolves. She couldn’t believe that the dense rain forests of the South were at all as paradisial as Glade made them seem.

“Does it rain *every* day?” asked Ivory for whom rain was not always welcome.

“Every day,” Glade assented. “But it’s a warm rain and the forest soon dries. It’s nothing like the gales and blizzards of the North.”

“So, why if the tropical forest is so wonderful, don’t you live there still?” asked Ivory.

“Because the world I once knew no longer exists. The forest is still there. Perhaps it will last forever. How can people destroy a forest armed only with stones, bones and spears? It’s just not possible. Not even a single tree can be felled without the aid of fire. But the tribe that lived there, my tribe, no longer exists.”

“Why is that?”

“First there was the sickness. A plague spread through the clan and killed one person in five. It killed my father and one of my sisters. It was horrific and alarming. A person would sweat and shit and vomit and then die. There was no cure. We knew of disease, of course. Who doesn’t? Mostly they were contracted when our travels took us to swamp land where insects are as thick in the air as they are on the ground. But this illness was new and terrible and came not long after we met another clan that had already suffered from its ravages.”

Somehow, all the clans of the Forest People were plagued by illness and there was no explanation for it. Perhaps it reflected the tree spirits’ wrath at the lack of respect shown them and so it was decided that the trees should be honoured with redoubled reverence. It soon became obvious though that however many gifts were offered to the trees and however much the men masturbated on them, the plague did not abate. The Forest People were fearful that the spirits had deserted them. Encounters with other tribes were no longer occasions of delight as they were now associated with the dread of a fresh bout of contagion. These fears were compounded by the increasing realisation

that such encounters had become much less frequent.

“What was the cause of the plague?” Ivory wondered.

“I don’t know,” admitted Glade. “I also became ill, but fortunately I recovered. Those days of suffering had been the worst days of my life so far. But much worse was yet to come.”

It was a day that started as every day began. As always the clan—now less than twenty in number—awoke with the first rays of the sun and began their day of making love, foraging for food and tending the fire. Then they began to roam, as wholly randomly as always, but one that followed landmarks familiar from earlier excursions.

A cackle of excited monkeys and the squawk of startled birds might have warned them that they were not alone in the forest, but this wasn’t usually much concern to a tribe who knew well how to guard themselves against leopards or wolves.

It was Tarsier, a girl in the first bloom of sexual maturity, who first saw the strange men in the forest and alerted everyone. The clan approached the shadowy figures that were marching in the gloom of the forest with some apprehension but not really fear. And strange these men most certainly were.

As they approached Glade could see that the men had much darker skin than the Forest People. Indeed their skin was almost entirely black. It was as black as the sky at night. They were well camouflaged against the dark shadows of the forest. Their strangeness wasn’t confined only to their skin colour, which made Glade wonder whether these were people at all but spirits made corporeal. Their heads were totally

bare of hair as so too were their groins. Their pubes were somehow the more naked for there being no hair. That the men wore no clothes didn't trouble Glade's clan. In fact, no one suspected that such a thing as clothing even existed. What was far more peculiar was the total absence of hair.

There were a few moments of uneasy silence while the Forest People attempted to make sense of the unusual sight of a disciplined line of black men standing ahead of them. Tarsier shivered as she studied their unfamiliar unsmiling faces, while Glade took the young girl's hand in hers. The line of tall men curved threateningly around the clan. Their skin glistened from the sheen of sweat that was testament of a rapid march through the forest. They carried spears that unlike those of the forest-people were tipped with well-knapped stones secured at the tip by cord.

As one of the older men, it was Flying Squirrel who took the initiative to address these strangers. He walked up to the man in the centre of the line who seemed to be the one most in authority. The notion of status was a novel concept to Glade's tribe. They had no notion that any man could ever be in any sense less than equal to his fellows.

"We welcome you and hope that we may share the bounty of the forests with our new friends," Flying Squirrel said.

There was no response from the man he addressed. He didn't move his head but his eyes followed Flying Squirrel warily. His eyes shone very brightly on a black face and that combined with his shaved eyebrows made it seem that he was constantly startled.

Flying Squirrel repeated his welcome and proffered his wide-open arms as an additional gesture of welcome. He expected, as everyone did, that the stranger and his companions would break into a grin and respond to Flying Squirrel's welcome by

embracing him. Then the two bands could exchange tales and food. When the women appeared, as they surely must, hidden perhaps in the darkness of the forest canopy, there would be the orgy of sexual abandon that Glade normally associated with chance encounters in the forest. Glade already had her eyes on the black men's penises which she was sure would fit comfortably inside her. At least one man had a fully erect penis. No doubt, Glade thought, this was in the anticipation of a friendly fuck.

The man Flying Squirrel addressed began to speak. This was also very peculiar. Glade had no concept that there were people in the world who didn't speak the same language as her. Although there were Forest People who spoke with a distinct dialect, it was another thing for a language to be as wholly incomprehensible as the words this man spoke. Or were they words at all? To Glade's ears they sounded like the bark of a deer or the grunt of a boar or the snarl of a leopard. Whatever he was saying, the words he used seemed harsh and unfriendly.

Flying Squirrel didn't understand the reply any more than anyone else. He repeated his welcome word for word. He then walked right up to the man to whom he'd spoken and made to grasp his penis. This was the traditional friendly greeting amongst the Forest People.

And it was then that Glade and her clan knew for certain that this was not a friendly encounter.

For many years later, Glade rehearsed in her mind the exact sequence of events. She remembered them in slow motion, but at the time when they happened they were sudden, unannounced and unexpected. Flying Squirrel was angrily pulled off by one of the black man's companions before his hand could grasp the penis in greeting and a stone-tipped spear was plunged into his stomach. There then followed a frenzy of

violent activity, much like when a deer is slaughtered, but not this time accompanied by reverential prayers to the tree spirits. Spear after spear was thrust into Flying Squirrel's bleeding body as his limbs twitched their last. And the frenzy continued well after it was obvious to the horrified Forest People that he was dead.

This was not only the first time that Glade had seen anyone being killed but the first time she had ever experienced naked hostility of any kind.

Chapter Three

If Glade expected her apprentice to be more shocked than she was by her account of the violence that had decimated her tribe she was disappointed. Ivory was more indignant at the rudeness of rebuffing a welcome than distressed by the account of the bloodshed. In any case, Glade was reluctant to give a full account of the horrors that followed. It was painful enough for her to remember the evil and worse still to describe it. Did she really want to elaborate on how so many of the people she'd known all her life were massacred in a growing orgy of violence; the sexual frenzy of the invaders; the rapes that followed in rapid succession; and the murder of her mother? Simply alluding to the subsequent horrors served only to refresh the shaman's traumatic memories.

Compared to the younger Glade, Ivory was already fairly familiar with the sight of violent death. The spirits would curse the village for eternity when a crime was committed against the tribe unless swift and appropriate justice was dispensed on the perpetrators. Sometimes the spirits demanded nothing less than capital punishment. Such an execution was never a cause for celebration, although it needed to be staged in front of the entire village. This would openly declare that this extreme action was taken only to placate the spirits' vengeful inclinations. Thankfully it was rarely necessary, but such punishment acted as a salutary lesson to anyone who might be tempted to anger the spirits. If a villager took another person's life or property, if a villager showed disrespect to a sacred site, or if a villager plotted treason, then it was just and fitting that such a criminal be punished. The penalty was the expression of the will of the whole village. Every villager would actively participate in the debate as to how best to appease

the spirits' wrath.

The last time the village applied the ultimate penalty was during the Winter exodus. The offender was a hot-headed youth who had planned to kill the Chief and take on his mantle. He was sentenced to death by stoning. This was a horrible and ugly death that took far too long to execute.

As a result of such occasions, compared to the younger Glade, Ivory was relatively inured to the horror of violent death. Indeed, she was one of those most convinced that the most just retribution for the heinous crime of treason was one which was severe and unforgiving. Glade had a different opinion. She believed that there were alternatives to the barbarism of sanctioned murder. She also knew that had the young reprobate succeeded in his attempted coup d'état and become Chief, a very different legend would now be recounted by the village.

"How did your mother die?" Ivory asked. Her own recent loss made the question especially pertinent.

"As horribly as Flying Squirrel's. As senselessly and brutally as Tarsier's. As cruel as any other death that day. I had no idea what to do during the chaos of the slaughter. Nor did I know what the other villagers were doing. Some fled. Some tried to help Flying Squirrel as he lay in the blood-soaked undergrowth. Others, like me, stood petrified in fear. I simply couldn't comprehend what had happened. I knew I was doomed when more strangers appeared from the shadows in all directions. These figures were quite unlike the black-skinned men, although they were similarly shaven and naked. Their faces were different. Their skin was not as black, though none had skin nearly as pale as that of your tribe. They didn't carry weapons, but they swiftly overwhelmed us and bound our hands and legs together."

“Who were these people?”

“I didn’t know at the time. In a sense, I didn’t need to know. But they were what we later came to know as ‘slaves’. It was a word that at the time had no meaning to me. Even in your tribe, the word is very rarely used. You only permit slavery as a punishment and it’s only ever for a limited term. We thought the slaves were just more strangers and they appeared equally as fearsome as the spear-carrying black warriors, even though only the black warriors carried out the slaughter. It was they who systematically raped everyone: whether male or female. And it was one of them who clubbed my mother to death with a flint encrusted cudgel when she tried to pull another black warrior off me while he was raping me.”

“He raped you?” gasped Ivory, who believed that such violation was worse than murder.

“Yes, raped,” said Glade softly, as she pulled a bear skin over her breasts. The word in itself didn’t really describe the actual horror. She’d tried to banish from her mind the vivid memory of the grinning black face above her. She tried to suppress her recollection of the pain of brutal anal penetration and how her fruitless struggles incited more passion than sympathy from the man ravaging her. Most of all she wanted never again to recall the sight of her mother being dragged away and speared by a black warrior who was in the same frenzied excitement that accompanied her sexual violation.

The deer hide that served as the door to Glade’s tent parted. Startled, Ivory looked up. Although she wasn’t totally naked, a breast and much of her torso were uncovered. As

she hastened to protect her modesty, Ivory was further embarrassed when she recognised the intruder as Chief Cave Lion. He was dressed in his customary finery. Bones were threaded through his hair. A splendid snow leopard skin covered his shoulders. Sacred relics were carried in a pouch that hung down over his chest.

Glade bowed down on her knees in deference to the Chief's status. She smiled as Ivory made similar obeisance.

"To what do we owe the honour of your presence, my lord?" the shaman asked respectfully.

The Chief smiled in return. In fact, his weather-scarred face was cracked by a broad grin. He crouched down and sat cross-legged on the furs that covered the tent floor. Following his lead, Ivory and Glade also knelt. Neither woman wished to be at a height greater than that of the most pre-eminent villager.

"It's been several days now that young Ivory has been in your service," said the Chief. "In that time the moon has passed through two quarters. I wish only to see how well her instruction has progressed."

"You are right to enquire," said Glade who knew how much her status and welfare was in the Chief's gift. "She is learning well the ways of the spirits. She is adept in many sacred incantations. Soon she may also be able to summon the spirits to the village's service."

"Then we shall be blessed by not one but two shamans," laughed the Chief contentedly. "Our village will truly be the envy of the tribe."

Ivory sat quietly as Glade and the chief continued their discourse. Eventually, he came to the point of his visit.

"There is an auspicious day to come in the next full moon," Chief Cave Lion

announced. “Word has come that the Reindeer Herders are to travel here on their annual trek with the great reindeer herds. It seems that the strange beasts have chosen a more southerly route this year. We shall, of course, honour the Reindeer Herders with a feast and the exchange of wares. They have need of ivory and mammoth skin; we of reindeer antler, bone and butter. You and your new apprentice must also prepare for that joyful day. The Reindeer Herders have need of fortune-telling, medicine and sacred rites just as much as we do. We also need you to prepare intoxicants from honey, mushrooms and herbs. The honour of the village and our reputation as good hosts need to be upheld.”

“I understand well,” said Glade. “My apprentice and I shall do all we can to prepare what the village needs to make the day propitious.”

The conversation continued for several beakers of mead and the ceremonial chewing of hemp. Ivory was surprised to see the shaman and the Chief exchange intimate caresses, but she reasoned that this was the privilege of rank. Anyhow, the shaman and the Chief were both much older than her and much the same age as each other, although the Chief’s face was the more deeply lined. Glade’s brown skin retained more of the smoothness of youth, although the heaviness of her bosom and the fullness of her thighs and waist bore testament to her increasing years.

The Chief made clear that Ivory’s priority was now to assist the shaman in gathering herbs, roots and mushrooms in the woods for the coming day. She was excused her normal duties of foraging for food, tending the village hearth and stitching furs. Ivory

was wholly at the shaman's service for the coming days. Although this work was no less tiring than her customary obligations, Ivory took to them with enthusiasm. She enjoyed roaming about with Glade to previously unfamiliar places within a day's walking distance of the village.

As the shaman and her apprentice strode off over the barren plain armed with wooden spears and stones to deter predators, Glade recounted more about the terrible days that followed the massacre of her clan.

“At first I thought we would all share the fate of Flying Squirrel, Tarsier and my mother. I almost looked forward to death in the hope that it would eliminate the pain of physical assault and the memories that were already tormenting me. But this was not to be. All the survivors were taken captive. Our hands were bound in cord. Other cords shackled us together from ankle to ankle and neck to neck. We became like a train of ants that march over the forest floor. And we soon came to know who were the slaves and who the masters amongst our captors, although we had no vocabulary to express their status. The black men—there were no women amongst them—marched fearlessly and free. The slaves might have been freer than we were, but they cowered in constant fear of the warriors who treated the slaves almost as brutally as they did us.”

The first day of Glade's capture was etched more indelibly on her memory than the subsequent days that were, after their capture, much the same as each other. The day had begun in freedom and joy and ended in misery and shackles. Glade marched along between Leaf Mulch and Anteater, her ankle pulled by Leaf Mulch's stumbling foot and pulled back, as was her neck, by the much younger and smaller Anteater. Glade's physical torment matched her mental one. The pain of rape stabbed her stomach from within. Blood stained her inner thighs as it trickled from her ravished anus. One

eye was so swollen that she could barely see through it.

The physical pain Glade felt was as nothing to the despair that gripped her. Her head felt as if it had been torn open and its contents scooped out. She was sure the horror that tormented her was as visible as any scar. Her eyes gazed outwards but her vision was clouded by inner turmoil. She frequently stumbled against what she could very clearly see. Her skin flushed as if stung by the whip of her all too vivid memories. Her stomach constantly heaved. Sometimes she tasted the thin gruel of regurgitated food at the back of her mouth, but she never managed to release her vomit as did the other prisoners. She'd pissed and shit all she could in the terror of the onslaught, but her belly was insisting that there was yet more to let loose.

Worse humiliation was to come when the procession of captives was ordered to stand still after they'd endured nearly half a day of their stumbling, agonising march. The familiar and normally so friendly forest now had a sinister aspect. Although respite from walking was welcome, the black warriors decided that their prisoners shouldn't rest. Instead the brutal captors sated their lust on each other and the weary traumatised Forest People in a brutal orgy that renewed the trickle of blood down Glade's inner thighs. Although any rape is horrific, it seemed doubly cruel that the warriors never visited their captives' vaginas, but violated each and every one of them, not discriminating at all on age or gender, by the tighter more vulnerable anus.

It seemed that this was the warriors' definite preference even amongst themselves. Glade witnessed them take pleasure in each other's arses while they frenziedly jerked their penises.

The Forest People soon discovered that rape was not to be the final humiliation. When the warriors had finally spent their seed and still watchful of their slaves, they

crouched together, their black flesh still sticky and luminous. The man who was in a position of seniority to the others sat apart from his fellows, although he had been as one with his minions when they had sex together.

The slaves, who had watched the sexual activity in silence and with no apparent enjoyment, then descended on the Forest People armed with sharp stone implements and huge slabs of beeswax.

Glade was convinced that this would now mark the time when she and her clan would depart the living world and become one with the forest soil. Their attackers had sated their bestial lust and would now discard the objects of their ravishment with the same contempt they had shown in so many other ways. However, instead of bringing blessed death to the Forest People, the slaves began to methodically shave off every blade of hair from their body.

“Just as I’d never witnessed murder before, never been raped before, nor ever known the loss of freedom, I’d never known what it was to be shaved. And certainly not in such a brutal and peremptory fashion,” said Glade as she strode with Ivory over the open steppes.

Ivory had never visited this region of the plain before, but this didn’t trouble her. She was sure that Glade knew exactly where they were heading. Mammoths were grazing in the middle distance. Further ahead was a solitary woolly rhinoceros that they would do well to avoid. Herds of horse, deer, antelope and bison were scattered across the grassy plain. This was a comforting sight because they would provide plenty of warning should a wolf or hyena be prowling across the steppes.

“If I’d thought about it, which I was too distraught to do,” Glade remarked contemplatively, “I would have attributed the hairlessness of the black warriors and

their slaves to the will of nature. Our tribe had no more concept of depilation than we had of clothing.”

This was a strange concept to Ivory as well who occasionally trimmed the scraggly ends of her bushy hair with a sharp flint edge but she'd never heard of anyone actually removing the hair: certainly not to the extent that it would expose the bare skin underneath. The spirits had blessed people with hair on the heads, under the armpits and on the crotch for good reason. They also blessed men with hair on their chests and so much on the face that only the eyes and nose were visible. Ivory believed that this was so that no one could mistake an adult man from a boy who had no facility to bestow the bounty of motherhood on a woman. Indeed, the notion of disregarding the wishes of the spirits in such a way seemed as hugely perverse as everything else she'd heard about these barbarous black warriors.

She studied with sympathy and sadness what she could see of Glade inside her voluminous furs. The older woman's eyes were clouded and her lips pursed. Ivory held Glade's gloved hand in hers and kissed her tenderly on the nose, neither expecting nor receiving a kiss in return. This was a different kind of affection to that which the women expressed in the privacy and warmth of their bed-sheets.

“The rite of shaving removed a head of hair that had previously cascaded down to my buttocks. It even cleared the bush of hair that masked my vagina. It exposed an expanse of my skin that I'd never seen before. I'd never known that this hidden flesh was as relatively pale as the palms of my hands or the soles of my feet. I had no notion that exposure to the sun might make the skin darker.”

“Is that why your skin is so much darker than ours?” asked Ivory who'd never uncovered enough skin to experience the sun's darkening affect.

“You’re born with pale, almost white, skin and it never gets as brown as mine,” said Glade. “All the people of the North where the Sun shines so weakly have skin that’s paler than those of the South, so I suppose the Sun must have some affect. I still find your white skin peculiar. The tribes of the South have much darker skin than your tribe. Perhaps it is no more than the other ways in which one tribe differs from another. Some tribes are small, never taller than children. Others have blonde or reddish hair. Yet others have flat noses.”

“The spirits do indeed move in mysterious ways,” Ivory asserted.

The act of depilation added bloody scratches to the wounds of rape and the smart of the hand-warmed beeswax that the Forest People suffered. Glade looked at the unnatural baldness of her sister’s head and crotch and knew that this was exactly how she looked. She was more bare and vulnerable than she’d been since she was less than a year old. Their hair was collected together and bundled into antelope-hide sacks for what purpose Glade was never to discover.

There was little time to rest under the arching tree canopy after this fresh ordeal. The Forest People were dragged to their feet, still tethered to each other, and forced onwards on their march.

“The forest where I was born is very different from the small woods that scatter the steppes,” Glade explained when she and Ivory at last reached a patch of woodland by the side of some hills.

Ivory had mixed feelings about forests. They were intimidating enough during

the day and when she was accompanied by other villagers. Tall conifers towered above with only the occasional clearing in which flowers might grow. She might see the occasional pine marten or squirrel in the trees, but what she feared were the predators, especially wolves, bears or scimitar cats. They might be lying in wait behind a bush or thicket, as did the lion that killed her mother, though they generally kept their distance. At night, however, only the most foolhardy would venture under the dark canopy where light from the moon and stars barely reached. Night was the province of the predators and well they knew it.

“We were less frightened of the night than you,” Glade elaborated, as they clambered out of the plain into shadowy undergrowth and startled a previously hidden deer or fox. “We were always together in a group, night and day. No beast attacks a group of people even though our weapons were much less sophisticated than yours.”

Glade showed Ivory what herbs, berries and mushrooms she should gather for the coming feast. It was a strange assortment: quite unlike anything she’d normally pick. Some mushrooms were distinctly unappetising and there were flowers and leaves scattered in the motley collection. Glade was a patient teacher. She took the time to explain just how the fruits of the forest could be prepared to make intoxicants.

“Did you learn these things when you were young?” asked Ivory.

“You mean *young* as when I was a child?” said Glade with a smile, reminding Ivory of the extent of their age difference. “No not really. The trees in our forest are totally different to those in the Northern lands. It was much more lush and a deeper kind of green. We knew of the intoxicating effects of some of the forest fruits, but we shared those we found equally amongst ourselves. They weren’t things we would find every day. No. It was much later that I learnt about such things when I lived amongst the Cave

Painters. Intoxicants are a necessary part of their culture. I'm sure that's why their paintings are so weird."

"Paintings?" wondered Ivory, who'd never heard of such things.

"You still have a lot to learn, my sweetness, but never fear, I shall tell you all before I die," said Glade with an indulgent smile.

Glade and her fellow captives were still deep within the forest on the first day of her capture. When night fell and even the black warriors were reluctant to continue their march, the procession arrived at a settlement where there were many more alien black men and a rather greater number of slaves.

It was here that Glade saw many others of her tribe who were also shackled under the tall trees. They were sullen and weeping and huddled together. Around them was the first artificial construction Glade had ever seen. At first she thought it was a natural if peculiar feature of the forest. A row of sticks were panned around the miserable prisoners and between each stick was a lattice of cord and branches, stripped, Glade noticed with dismay, from the nearby trees. The spirits of the forest must be appalled and she was sure that they would visit their vengeance on these disrespectful intruders.

Alas, there was no incidence of divine intervention during the next few days while she was cooped in shared misery amongst the many other prisoners from her tribe. They were kept in silence that was enforced by their captors who rained brutal blows on anyone whose wails or moans was deemed too annoying.

It was during these days that Glade got a more complete view of the motives behind her capture. Every morning, just before the sun rose, the black warriors went together in a contingent led, she was shocked to realise, by one or two slaves from her own tribe who were now as shaved and bald as their captors. Like all the other slaves they had been beaten into servitude by brutality and fear. Glade recognized that their choices were stark—obedience or savage death—but she still regarded them as traitors for having collaborated with these black monsters.

At the end of the day, not long after the sun had descended, the warriors and their slaves returned with another group of brutalised, traumatised and thoroughly unhappy captives who were then pushed into the pen that was never made more spacious to accommodate the greater crush of bodies.

Only a few black warriors remained with the camp during these excursions. Their task was as much to guard the many slaves—who were despondently engaged in mundane chores—as it was to oversee their captives who, trussed as they were, could make little attempt to escape. The slaves' duties included those of shaving and feeding the prisoners which were attended to at the same time. A few slaves would enter the pen and select those captives whose hair was deemed to have grown sufficiently and who would then be unshackled from his or her fellows and taken away. After not very long, the captive would return: the body totally denuded of hair but the belly fuller.

Glade was initially so blinded by her grief for her mother and lost comrades that she didn't notice how much she was consumed by hunger. She moaned and wept with her fellows, who huddled together to ask "Why? Why? Why?" Why had they been treated so brutally? Why had the forest spirits so deserted them? What had they done to deserve such punishment? After a while, her hunger was such that she hoped and hoped

that she would be one of those dragged away from the pen. She dragged her fingers over her pate, willing the blue stubble to grow long enough to now attract the slaves' attention as they periodically wandered though the cowering bodies in the pen.

When her time came Glade was dragged away by two slaves. One had skin almost as dark as the black warriors, but had thicker lips and a longer nose. The other's skin was as light brown as hers, but with a squashed nose and small ears. She wondered whether she would be ravished, but although the slaves weren't especially gentle to her they weren't nearly as gratuitously cruel as the black warriors.

The shaving was less painful than the first time. The slaves scraped sharp flints over her pate, her crotch and under her armpits. If a longer hair remained from the first depilation this was plucked out by the darker man's tapering fingers. The whole process took very little time and then she was allowed to eat a mush of cooked tubers, fruit and grasses. It was far less than she would normally eat during a day in the forest, but it was enough to hold at bay the hunger that gnawed inside her.

She also learnt from the other captives how much their story was much the same as for her clan.

"We offered the black monsters hospitality and welcome, and in return they murdered my father and one of my sisters," moaned a boy much the same age as Glade, who sat beside her and whose penis she stroked in a friendly manner although she had no intention of having sex with him. The hunger and the pain she still felt between her legs made her disinclined. In any case, she couldn't imagine that the guards who beat up anyone whose moans were too loud would tolerate any exchange of affection between the prisoners, however much custom might demand it.

The boy spoke in a dialect that suggested he came from a part of the forest far

from where her people normally wandered, but at least he could be understood. This was not so for the slaves and black warriors who Glade learnt from her whispered conversations didn't understand a word she and her people spoke. This notion was yet another revelation to her. She'd never suspected that there was ever more than one language in the world and now she was surrounded by people who spoke many other languages. And each language was as incomprehensible to a speaker of another language as it was to any one of her tribe.

“There is a story I heard from one of the slaves who comes from our tribe,” said a woman who was amongst the first to be captured nearly a moon ago. “Once there was one language and one tribe, but the people climbed the trees to commune with the spirits of the sky and they were punished for their presumption by becoming many different tribes speaking many different languages.”

“Do you believe that?” Ivory asked, as Glade helped her to her feet after they had crouched down so long to dig for truffles in the soil.

“Of course not,” laughed Glade. “Why would the spirits of the sky, who have so much of it to themselves, be in the slightest bit perturbed? People speak different languages because they live apart from each other. Each tribe has its distinct language and sometimes more than one. It's like how they dress differently from each other and worship different spirits. It's just the way it is and how it has always been.”

“Since the beginning?” asked Ivory.

“If there was a beginning, yes, I'm sure they did.”

It was eventually time for Ivory and Glade to return to the village although there was much more that could be foraged from the forest. It was essential to be back before nightfall when two women in the middle of the open steppe could fall easy prey to a lion or bear.

Glade's earlier rest in the forest in the pen similarly came to an end after little more than half a moon. The black warriors had gathered enough captives and there was now little space left in the pen to accommodate them. Their huddled bodies pressed against each other: the conjoined sweat yet further worsening their distress.

It was the time in the morning when the black warriors normally gathered together to set off, whooping and laughing, on their excursions into the dark forest to inflict more misery on Glade's tribe. Today there was no such gathering. The prisoners were dragged out of the pen, shackled together by cord, and then led on a procession which was at first a blessed relief from their confinement and soon became an ordeal of many days' march through the forest.

"I believed the world was one enormous forest," Glade told Ivory as they trudged across the mammoth steppes and carried what they had foraged in their deerskin bags. "I didn't know that further to the North there are massive cliffs of ice and plains of mammoth. I didn't know that there was a world that held oceans, deserts, mountains or caves. All I knew was forest. And not one person from my tribe knew otherwise. So it came as a complete shock to us when several days later we walked out the forest."

"Is the forest so very big?"

"As big as the mammoth steppes," said Glade. "It was so big that our roving never took us to the forest edge. A new fear gripped us when we realised that the approaching break in the forest didn't herald a river or a clearing, but was in fact the

very end of our world. And when we emerged, blinking and trembling, into a world where there was no tree above our heads and ahead of us was open tree-spotted savannah, we believed that we had entered another world altogether. I was not alone in wishing every day for the rest of our journey that we should return to the comfort of the forest that sheltered us from the cruel sun. But alas that was not to be.”

The sunlight that shone on them was more intense than Glade thought light could ever be. She blinked and stumbled in the blinding glare that was reflected off the yellow and orange grassland. The sky above was a huge expanse of blue, not broken at all by a canopy of leaves. Ahead was nothing but a vast intimidating expanse of space. Glade was not alone in her tears and sorrow at being plunged into this terrifying ocean of openness.

“Did you ever return to the forest?” asked Ivory.

Glade sighed long and deep.

“I didn’t know it then, nor could I really comprehend it, but I was never ever to return home again.”

Chapter Four

Ivory threaded the pubic hair through her front teeth where it had lodged and then buried her face back into the rich aroma of Glade's vulva. Above their naked bodies the Sun shone high in the sky, but not as high, Ivory knew now, as the Sun climbed in Glade's homelands far to the South. She huddled up against her lover's warm body, hoping that this would compensate for the biting chill of the wind.

Every day these days, Glade and Ivory would leave the village just before dawn and tramp across the steppes to another patch of woodland that the shaman knew was good for foraging. They wouldn't return to the village until the Sun had dropped, which at this time of the year wasn't long before the sun rose again.

There was a similar rhythm, Ivory learnt, to Glade's procession when she and her tribe were marched out of the forest by their captors, although in the southern lands the night was always almost exactly as long as the day. Their daily trek, however, was always accompanied by distress and pain. None of those being herded along had any notion when it might end and those slaves who spoke the language of the Forest People were never allowed near enough to tell them. The black warriors striding ahead were in high spirits. They laughed and sang gaily, followed behind by a column of despondent captives watched over by slaves whose duty was to prevent them from escaping. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that an attempt at escape would be dealt with swiftly and bloodily.

Although Glade much preferred the shelter and familiarity of the forest, particularly as the Sun rose higher and higher into the sky, there was much to admire in the savannah. There were many unfamiliar beasts and some of these were much larger

than she'd believed an animal could ever be. There were giraffes, elephants and rhinoceroses. There were vast herds of gnu, zebra, antelope and oxen. Scattered amongst the savannah were predators such as lions and leopards of which Glade was already familiar, but there were also ones new to her and the more terrifying for that, such as cheetahs, running dogs and hyenas. Huge vultures flew above their heads. The predators rested from the Sun in the shade of the few trees but, as much as the grazing animals, they avoided the sullen procession of captured slaves that was winding through the plain.

Ivory was astonished to discover that there were beasts taller than even a mammoth and wanted to hear more about the giraffes. Glade was happy to tell her about them and the other strange animals she'd seen. "There are elephants on the shores of the salt plains bigger and taller than mammoths. Their tusks are straight rather than curved. But the giraffe is the tallest animal I've ever seen. It's taller than four men in height!"

As her pate and crotch blistered in the direct sun, Glade wondered why the black warriors chose to be closely shaven. She would welcome back her hair as much as defence against the harshness of the Sun as to restore the beauty she associated with it. It must be worse, she thought, for the men whose beards had been shaved and whose faces were now blistering under the Sun's unforgiving glare.

The pattern of each day's trek was established from the first day of captivity. The procession would pause at a waterhole or stream when the Sun was at its zenith almost exactly above their heads and their shadows were most short. These breaks were not really a time for rest, although the captives were able to sip the dark brown water under the trees' shade, wary of the unwelcome presence of crocodiles and hippopotami.

They were also thrown scraps of the least choice cuts of meat from the animals the black warriors had slaughtered on the trail. Glade had eaten antelope and deer before, but never gnu or zebra. If there was anything to admire about the black warriors, it was the efficiency with which they brought down their prey.

“Did they also hunt elephant and rhinoceros?” asked Ivory.

“No,” said Glade. “Although these people were much better at hunting than the Forest People, their hunting skills weren’t as expert as yours. They never hunted animals any larger than an ox. But why would they want to kill such large animals? They had no need of the fur or hide. It was only the meat they wanted.”

The black warriors also took advantage of these respites to ravish a selection of the prisoners. With such a large number they had as wide a choice as they liked but Glade was guiltily relieved to note that it was the men, particularly the younger ones, that they preferred. The women were mostly left alone, although some of the younger girls did not escape. Perhaps they’d been mistaken for boys.

If anything, the trauma of rape was worse for the men than it was for the women. Although the Forest People’s main sexual preference was not for anal sex, it was common enough that all women, except the very young, would have had some experience of it. In an earlier life, Glade had been proud of her adventurousness in that capacity as it added to her kudos as the sluttiest and most sexually promiscuous girl of her clan. However, only a few of the men had previously had sex with one another and fewer still had experienced anal penetration. Now they were being violated with exactly the same relish as the black warriors took in buggering each other.

“They seem to have been a peculiar lot!” said Ivory with a shudder as she clambered through a thicket of trees.

“It may seem strange to you as your tribe associates manhood with virility and fatherhood, but as I was later to discover the black warriors associated manhood with close intimacy. For them, the physical companionship of other men, in whatever activity, was preferable to any with women.”

“Was that true of all the black warriors?” wondered Ivory who thought the intimacy she shared with Glade was peculiar enough and still believed that the same between men was a perversion.

“Not really, but the pressure of custom was such that it was a brave man who would express any other preference. Amongst my tribe we just followed our desires and for most of us this led to intimacy with the other sex.”

“Are there other such perverted tribes in the world?”

“I’m sure there are. The world goes on for ever and ever, bound only by the snowy wastes, and there must be others just the same. But I’ve never seen it so prevalent elsewhere. Perhaps if homosexuality was practised more widely, there would be no children and all humanity would soon become extinct.”

At the time, Glade knew nothing more of her captors than what she’d witnessed and endured. The wounds from her violation gradually eased and she could walk more easily. The soles of her feet were toughening from the abrasive savannah soil she walked on, but her ankles, wrists and neck smarted from the cords that bound her to her companions.

“Why have we been taken?” Glade whispered to the man ahead of her to whom she was bound and from whose anus still trickled the evidence of recent violation.

“Perhaps they’ll eat us,” he said bitterly. “They’ve violated us in every other way. They have dealt worse with us than anyone in our tribe would treat an animal.

Perhaps they'll sate their vicious appetite on our flesh."

Glade shivered as did Ivory on being told this tale.

"Do people really eat each other?" asked Ivory.

"They do," said Glade firmly.

"And did the black warriors mean to eat you?"

"No, thankfully," said Glade. "Cannibalism happens and I have witnessed it. But it is usually ritualised and, it may seem strange to you, is most often practised to venerate the very people whose flesh they eat. And sometimes a tribe does it for reasons of extreme hunger. But if there was one thing the black warriors had never known it was hunger. There is so much game in the open savannah that anyone who knows how to hunt need never go without."

Glade and Ivory returned home smiling and laughing from their foraging. They carried the joyful memory of their intimate moments together on a sunny rock in the middle of the wood. The air was so mild and they were sufficiently sheltered from the wind that for the first time in her life Ivory experienced the warmth of the Sun on her bare flesh. It had to be brief though. Too long naked and the two women would catch a fever from the relentless chill that pervaded the air, but the heat of their bodies in full sexual fervour kept the risk at bay.

As the two women parted the deer-hide door to Glade's tent, they were astonished to see Chief Cave Lion sitting patiently alone on the bed.

"The time has come," the chief said simply after Glade and he had exchanged

the customary pleasantries and obeisance.

Glade blanched and looked distinctly uncomfortable. Ivory recognised the expression of guilt on Glade's face.

"The time has come for what?" she asked in alarm.

A moment of arrival had come for Glade, as well, on her trek through the savannah. The black warriors, their slaves and their long train of captives arrived at last at the village that had been their destination. It had been a whole moon since Glade last saw the forest and she no longer believed that her wandering would ever end. She'd almost resigned herself to the notion that her destiny would be to trail forever across the broad savannah in the gaze of giraffes and elephants. Perhaps this was how the black warriors always lived.

It was a half day earlier that Glade observed a wave of excitement break out amongst the black warriors, though it wasn't one shared by the slaves. They broke into a song that sounded to her not unlike the howling of wolves or the barking of dogs. It even had some of the disconcerting hilarity of a hyena's laugh. She strained her eyes, as did all the other prisoners, for whatever it might be that had caused so much excitement, but it wasn't anything she could see.

It was after much more marching across the arid plain, unbroken by the usual midday rest, when Glade saw the object of the black warrior's joy. Spread ahead of them, like a frozen herd of gnu and antelope, were the first permanent manmade structures Glade had ever seen. And there were so many of them. From the distance

they resembled ant-hills arranged in an unusually regular design. As their procession approached, they could be identified as circular structures of mud, rock and wood topped by straw roofs and through the roof of every single one of them wafted a thin trail of smoke.

The buildings were not all the same size. Most were relatively small, perhaps the size of a tepee, although at the time Glade had no more notion of such things than she had of any other kind of building. Some were quite large in comparison and clustered close together. Around these larger ones were fences of branch and cord that resembled the pen that had imprisoned Glade and her fellow captives in the forest.

Chief Cave Lion sat cross-legged and expectantly on the bed the shaman shared with her apprentice. From the way he gazed at Ivory, it was clear that whatever he was expecting was to come from her.

“As shaman, I have to observe the needs of our village,” Glade said to Ivory carefully, paying attention to both the demands of etiquette and her role as guardian. “As you know, the needs of the village and the needs of the chief are one and the same thing.”

Chief Cave Lion further clarified Glade’s words. “The shaman must minister not only to the needs of women who have lost their men or whose men have lost the desire or ability to satisfy them. The shaman must also administer to the needs of her Chief.”

Ivory began to guess what was being asked of her, but it still shocked her. Was

this the bargain that Glade had struck with the Chief when he assigned her as the shaman's apprentice? Was she to follow her mother into the Chief's arms? He was, after all, much older than her. His mottled hands, crinkly skin and hunting scars more frightened and repelled than attracted her.

Ivory shivered as she was disrobed. Glade was already naked, but with much less ceremony and rather more haste. So too was the Chief. Although the tent was as warm as ever from the flames of the fire and the thickness of the furs, Ivory felt a prickling chill on her skin and it excited her nipples to an erection that was a lesser likeness of the Chief's somewhat prouder appendage. She reflected, as her thoughts struggled to focus on anything other than her all too soon fate, that nakedness was as much an attitude as a physical fact. Glade, for all the bare skin she exhibited, was somehow not as naked as Ivory felt she was.

She might also have reflected as she lay next to the Chief who put an arm around her, with Glade holding one hand for comfort, that her anxiety for what was to come was little compared to the fears experienced by Glade's tribe as they were at last dragged into their captors' village.

There was so much that was strange and new in the black warriors' settlement. Most obviously so was the presence of buildings. It soon became apparent that these housed the villagers who streamed out to welcome the black warriors. Those most eager and most delighted were shaven and black-skinned like the warriors, and most of them were women and children. Accompanying them and in greater numbers were others, also

shaven and mostly women, who had a miscellany of skin colour, complexion and physical features. But it was not the slaves who were most vocal in the cacophony of welcomes that were a higher-pitched echo of the barks and cackles of the black warriors' tongue.

The captives were admired and prodded by the villagers as if they were the spoils of a hunt, which Glade later understood was exactly what they were. They weren't released from their cords nor, as yet, separated from each other. They were roughly pushed and pulled by the black women as much as by the men towards another pen much like the one that confined them in the forest just a moon ago. And here they rested, this time under the harsh glare of the unyielding afternoon Sun, watched over by female as well as male slaves, while their captors went elsewhere to a place from which Glade could hear much laughter and celebration.

"Now we'll know our fate," said Truffle, an older woman who had somehow survived her ordeal despite a deep cut on her arm and the loss of an eye.

"Will they eat us?" asked Glade anxiously.

"They most certainly will rape us," said one of the younger men, who looked younger and had never yet been troubled by hair on his face. He had been a favourite of the black warriors in their all too frequent orgies.

"We'll become just like the others," corrected Tapir, an older man who might well have been the senior man in his clan until he'd been captured. "We'll become 'slaves' and be forced to do the black warriors' bidding."

"I'd rather die," said a young woman with small breasts. A fresh gap in her teeth and a broken nose bore witness to the extent to which she'd resisted the ravages of their captors.

It wasn't until after dusk that Glade's people were to know for sure whether Tapir was right. In the meantime, each one of them, without regard to how little stubble had grown on their pate, was dragged off, shaved and given food. Although Glade was treated no more kindly than before, the gentler ministrations of women and the rather richer food she was given to eat was welcome and she found herself thanking them for it.

Not that they understood a word of what she said.

Ivory was anxious as she lay between the Chief and the shaman on the huge bed. It was now obvious why it was so large. Glade stimulated Ivory's nipples with teeth and tongue and her bush with her fingers, while the Chief's thick ragged beard brushed close to her face as he nibbled at her ears and licked her cheeks.

Glade had prepared Ivory for this. Nearly a moon of daily sex and the application of the dildo made Ivory rather more ready than she would otherwise have been. But she'd never supposed that the man who would shed her of what was left of her maidenhead would be older than her father. He was perhaps even as old as her grandfather would now be had an aurochs not gored him when she was still a child.

The penetration when it came was from a member much larger and owned by someone much surer of what he was doing than young Lion Paw when he fumbled about with her. It was eased in by Glade's tongue and fingers, who maintained a constant presence even in this normally very private intimacy where Ivory had never expected any further tutelage. Chief Cave Lion straddled over Ivory. His legs stayed

within the scissor grip of Ivory's bare legs and the coarse white hairs of his chest rubbed on her still embarrassingly erect nipples, while his cock thrust deeper and deeper inside her.

Although the Chief was such an old man and his beard rubbed on Ivory's chin and cheeks, this lovemaking became steadily more tolerable and even—though Ivory was initially as reluctant to admit this as she had been when Glade had introduced her to its Sapphic variant—almost pleasurable. Her vagina moistened and the thrusts lubricated her from within. She was glad she had Glade to assist in the ceremony, as she pushed a finger up Ivory's anus and squeezed her clitoris.

Back and forth went the Chief's pelvis. He raised his head and upper torso so that his hair and beard no longer brushed over Ivory's face and breasts. His thrusts became progressively more vigorous. Ivory gazed up at his upturned chin. His eyes were squeezed shut and a patina of sweat shone over his fore-arms and chest. Each thrust pushed Ivory upward, but she was steadied by Glade who kissed and licked Ivory's face as the fucking continued.

Although this was not quite the sex with a man that Ivory had long hoped for or had any good reason to expect, it could have been much worse.

Glade was thankful when she realised that there were no more cords to bound her and that she wouldn't be raped again: at least not on this day. It was the first time she'd ever witnessed a market and even stranger for her to be the object of it. Just as wares are exchanged between tribes during the great seasonal migrations, Glade was herself an

object that was bargained over by the black women when they returned from their celebrations, still excited from food, intoxication and, Glade guessed, sex with their men.

However, Glade was not to witness very much of this market as it was one determined not by mutual exchange, but by precedence of rank.

It was the black warrior who was accorded so much respect and had rejected Flying Squirrel's greeting so violently on that first fateful day who had the privilege of making the first selection. He placed his hand on some five or six of the best looking young men, each of whom already knew only too well the predation of their captors. They were the first to be unbound and dragged away to follow the black warrior's leisurely step.

Glade knew she was attractive. It was her beauty as much as her promiscuity that had made her such a popular fuck in her tribe. She'd never suspected that this blessing would also endow her with a marketable status and that she would be the first chosen of all the women. It was a privilege, although not one she'd ever sought, from which she was to benefit this day.

There was precedence in the order in which the black villagers could select the captives and it was the person of second-most rank who now entered the pen. Her rank was earned by virtue of being the first warrior's wife, but this was something Glade knew nothing of nor would she have understood. Neither the concept of 'rank' nor of being a 'wife' meant anything to her at the time.

Her unhurried step was more stately and languid than even her husband's. She strode around and about the pen regarding only the female captors and not at all the men. She hesitated by Palm Wine, a pretty girl from another tribe to Glade's, but then

strode on. The captives had plenty of opportunity to appraise the woman. She was tall and thin, with full round breasts that tipped upwards with pronounced nipples and areolae slightly paler than her very dark skin. Her face was long with a straight nose and even higher cheekbones than the other black villagers. Her limbs were long and slender, but her thighs were full and supported the pronounced buttocks common to the women of her tribe. She had a stern face, although the lack of eyebrows made her expression seem almost comical to the Forest People.

She stood beside Glade and gazed down at her dispassionately. Glade resented being stared at so rudely and glared back up at the black woman. Anger and hatred flashed from her eyes. The black woman smiled. This was the first flicker of emotion she'd expressed and Glade wasn't at all sure how to interpret it. She then barked out a series of hyena-like calls and wandered just as unhurriedly out of the pen.

It was Glade who the black woman had chosen. Of course, she had no idea what a privilege this was, even for a slave. Most of the others from her tribe were to be chosen by villagers of much lower rank and, as a consequence, would endure rather more arduous terms of employment than Glade. And, as she was to discover, were to sleep in rather less comfort and luxury.

Ivory lay back on the bed in perhaps the most comfort and luxury she'd ever known, but she was concerned about more immediate matters. The pain of the final breach of her hymen and the trickle of blood down her inner thigh had made it necessary for her to break off from the Chief whose desire to fuck her continued unabated and may even

have been excited by the young girl's obvious distress. Why had it taken so long for her maidenhead to be breached? Would the blood ever stop flowing?

Glade ensured that the Chief wouldn't return as soon as he wanted to his sport by taking his penis between her lips and bobbing her head up and down on it so that the glans was deep inside her throat. Ivory could now see that Glade was as expert in arousing men as she was women. The young apprentice was soon forgotten and the Chief's desire became entirely focused on fucking the shaman.

Ivory knew Glade well enough by now to recognise unfeigned passion and she was bitter that the enthusiasm the older woman expressed in response to the Chief's urgent fucking was as real as any that she'd shown her young lover. How could this be? Surely, a woman can only truly love one other person? How could Glade enjoy sex with someone else, even someone of such inestimable status as Chief Cave Lion? Jealousy was added to the anxiety of having lost what was left of her virginity.

Low spirits continued to weigh down the traumatised Glade as they had from the moment of her first encounter with the black warriors. She later discovered that they called themselves the Knights of the Savannah, which was as grandiose an appellation as all the others adopted by the tribe. Nonetheless, Glade's trauma was beginning to metamorphose into a resigned acceptance of her fate and destiny. When she was led away from the pen by two female slaves, one dark and short and the other brown and tall, she didn't struggle or attempt to escape. This was as much from a loss of will as from the wariness she'd acquired from seeing how brutally the Knights dispatched any

who challenged their authority. At least two men and one woman had been killed on the long walk from the forest to the village when they'd seen what they thought was a chance to run away. Their slaughter was, in all cases, unnecessarily prolonged and violent and, worst of all, somewhat confused with the perverse sexual acts the warriors indulged in.

Glade was treated by the two slaves with something very much like kindness though she didn't understand a word they said to her in their own differently but heavily accented version of their captors' barking, hyena-like tongue. She walked between the two slaves at the same measured pace as their mistress, who preceded them and still didn't speak a word. She was escorted to one of the larger buildings within the chief warrior's compound past other slaves who bowed down very low as Glade's mistress passed.

It was frightening at first to enter a building. She had never seen inside one before and had no idea what to expect. It was spacious and in the centre was a hearth in which smouldered a fire from which smoke trailed upwards and out through the straw roof. The floor of the hut was covered with the hides of zebra, quagga and rhinoceros. A framed bed was raised above the floor by flat stones and bound by a lattice of threaded straws and cord. There was a chair constructed out of wood and leather and this was where the mistress sat.

The two slaves laid Glade down on the tough rhinoceros hide and brought a clay bowl of cold water towards her. She was then shaved with a thoroughness that exceeded any earlier shave: first by sharp flint and then by a painful waxing. This was not the rough kind of shaving she'd experienced before, but an almost tender ceremony, where the slaves' fingers lingered longer than they needed over Glade's vulva and bosom.

After this, she was washed by water that was squeezed out of palm leaves that were first soaked in cold water in the clay bowl. This was the most scrupulous washing of Glade's life. Before this, the cleanest she'd ever been was after bathing in the ponds, rivers and streams that ran through the forest and in which there was sometimes the risk of attack by crocodile.

Then, although Glade was still sure that the kindness would be capped by brutal rape or some other monstrous act of cruelty, she was allowed to rest on a bed of straw by the fire. All at once, the weariness that had accumulated over the last moon and a half overwhelmed her and she fell into the soundest sleep she could ever remember.

Ivory, however, was not enjoying a similar welcoming oblivion. The shaman and the Chief continued their noisy lovemaking with abandon on the bed she normally shared with her older lover. Ivory watched the Chief's penis thrust into Glade's well-loved vagina. A stream of fluids that was an admixture of vaginal cream, semen and saliva dripped down the penis shaft and onto the Chief's tangled bush of pubic hair.

Ivory's resentment at Glade's apparent ecstasy was tinged with fear of the Chief's renewed desire for younger flesh, but she was rewarded by her two older bed-partners collapsing into sleep long before this could happen.

Was this her future then? Would she have to share her body with older people? This was most certainly not the prospect that had lubricated her many pubescent masturbatory fantasies.

Chapter Five

“What was your mistress’ name?” Ivory asked the following day, while she and Glade prepared elixirs and drugs from what they’d foraged in the woods.

“Demure,” said Glade. “Or Lady Demure, as she was known then. At first, I didn’t know that was what the name meant. It sounded like nothing more than a short yelp. It took me quite a while to learn the language of the Knights of the Savannah. The names they gave themselves expressed the qualities that they believed were desirable. The men were given names like Boldness, Honour and Bravery. Lady Demure’s husband, the village chief, was known as Lord Valour.”

“What do the words ‘Lady’ and ‘Lord’ mean?”

“This was another thing about the Knights of the Savannah. They had a rigidly hierarchical society. Everyone, except slaves, was given a title. Because Valour was chief of the village his title was ‘Lord’. As Demure was his wife, she was called ‘Lady’. The highest title of all was ‘King’. This was reserved for the leader of the whole tribe who governed the villages of all the Knights. They had other titles like ‘Sir’, ‘Baron’, ‘Queen’, ‘Prince’, and so on. Initially, they meant as little to me as they do to you. Even the lowest person had a title like ‘Huntsman’, ‘Knapper’ and ‘Weaver’. This was a society where your title determined your share of the spoils whether it was freshly slaughtered meat or freshly captured slaves.”

“So you were now a slave?” asked Ivory. “And your mistress was this Lady Demure?”

“That’s right,” said Glade. The furs that covered her were parted at the front to display her bosom and crotch. Her skin was still flushed from her sexual exertion with

the chief the night before. “It was how the Knights’ society was organised. All the real work was done by slaves. Like me, they’d all been captured by the Knights on slave-hunting expeditions. These expeditions were not only vital to the Knights’ economy, but they provided a way for the men to gain status.”

“And were you to have sex with this Lord Valour just as I had to with the Chief?” asked Ivory with a faint tone of bitterness.

“Yes, I did,” said Glade. “It was the price I had to pay to stay alive. It’s somewhat similar to what I do now with Chief Cave Lion to earn my right to stay in your village and share in its bounty.”

“But why me? Why was I expected to fuck the chief?” Ivory wondered.

Glade smiled with a slight air of sadness. She laid down the stone tools she’d been working with and strode the two paces across the hut to Ivory. She then let the furs fall apart on either side of her thighs so that her whole body was displayed. She wrapped her arms around Ivory who now, since she’d succumbed to the shaman’s influence, wore only a single fur and one which also parted with little effort.

Glade kissed Ivory tenderly on the lips and tweaked a nipple between her forefinger and thumb. “You are a gift to me from the chief and he can do whatever he wishes with his gifts.”

“I thought I was your lover and yours only,” sniffed Ivory sadly. “I thought we were like husband and wife, only without the blessing of the spirits. I didn’t think I was just a property of the Chief.”

Glade kissed Ivory tenderly on each nipple and placed a comforting hand on her bare thigh. “You are still young and innocent,” she said slowly and evenly. “I had as little choice of accepting you as my apprentice as you had of refusing the role. I’ve

always wanted to make love to you as I've often observed you in the village and much admired your beauty. Whether you would ever love me in return was another matter, though I have enough faith in my skills of seduction never to doubt it much. But however much you love me is immaterial. The Chief commands and he must be obeyed."

"It's you I love," sniffed Ivory. "Not Chief Cave Lion. I want to make love to you, not to him. And I want only you to make love to me."

Glade smiled. "You confuse love and sex, jealousy and desire, theory and practise. I love you, but I also enjoy having sex with the Chief. I share my bed, body and hut with you, but we also have to share our bodies and my bed with the Chief. There is no choice. It is the way of the world. To those that have, more is given. To those that have not, more is taken away. You have only my kindness and the Chief's generosity. Without either you would be nothing."

Ivory didn't appreciate having her life and her choices described in such stark terms. "Am I to make love to the Chief again?" she asked. "Will he fuck me again like he did last night?"

"Yes, he will. And next time he will expect more from you."

"And will you also be there?"

"I hope so," said Glade with a smile. "Chief Cave Lion is almost the only man I ever fuck these days and he isn't at all bad."

Glade was also young and innocent on the first day of her life of servitude. She had

only the vaguest idea of what was expected of her. She understood that she was now a slave, like everyone else in the village not from the ruling tribe, but the only duties she'd observed the slaves perform was during the long march to the village. She had no concept of what other obligations there might be. Moreover, the loss of liberty was still an abstract idea to her. She still believed that when the time came, she could walk away from these brutal black warriors and return again to the comforting shade of the forests.

She awoke after her deep slumbers to see the other two slaves engaged in tasks whose purpose was still obscure to her. One was mashing up grasses and herbs into a powder with a round stone, while the other was weaving the stems of long grasses into the shape of a bowl.

"Hello," she said, perhaps thinking that all her misery was now over and that these slaves secretly understood her language. "Can I leave now?"

The tall brown slave put down the weaving and walked over to Glade and spoke to her in the harsh language of the Knights. The words meant nothing, but the tone was gentle and soothing. Glade later learnt that the woman was named Quagga in her own tongue, but like all slaves she had no name or title in the captors' language. She was known simply as one of Lady Demure's slaves. She pointed at the fire and indicated that it needed tending. This was a duty that Glade, like people everywhere in the world, was familiar with, but she'd never done so before in an enclosed space.

The three women knelt together around the fire. The other two women occasionally passed comments to one another in the Knights' language, which was the only tongue they shared. Glade's breasts and knees were burning in the heat of the fire. She desperately wanted to escape the confines of the hut and return to the fresh air outside, but she sensed that she this wouldn't be allowed.

Glade recognised that the other two slaves were both very beautiful. This was clearly an important element in the mistress' choice of slave. The brown woman was the more amiable and spoke more than her companion. Her rendition of the Knights' language had a curiously rhythmic sibilant quality. The black woman, although shorter than everyone else, especially the mistress, was no less beautiful. Her limbs and thighs possessed a thickness which suggested that her tribe tended towards a healthy plumpness. She spoke more haltingly and occasionally interspersed her speech with strange clicking noises and a kind of nasal growl. Like Quagga, she had no name amongst the black warriors, but she was known as Mimosa in her own language.

Glade remained silent for most of the day. She was given the task of cracking nuts. She was naturally expert at this duty, having spent all her life practising this in the forest, but she never before had access to such well-chosen round stones with which to do the job. She was again washed and shaved. This was something of a daily ritual. The two women performed the same on each other while Glade watched with fascination. There was so little stubble to begin with, but soon everyone was as smooth on the pate and crotch as they were anywhere else. Even the hair on the legs and arms were removed. In Glade's case this was with the painful application of heated beeswax as well as the sharp edge of flint blades.

It was nearly dark when their mistress returned to the hut. The two slaves bowed down to her, nearly pressing their noses on the ground, and Glade did the same, recognising that this was what was expected of her. She remained prostrate for a long time, sniffing the rhinoceros hide under her nose. Finally, she was pulled upright by one of the other slaves who must have realised that Glade had no idea of the required length of time for such obeisance.

“Did you have to make love to your mistress?” wondered Ivory who was now of the opinion that this was the expected behaviour of anyone in a submissive role.

“Indeed I did,” said Glade. “This was after our mistress was first fed, washed and shaved however. This was a ritual that took rather longer to perform on her than it took on any of the rest of us. She said nothing at all while she was there and the two slaves said nothing to her. It was only when she indicated that she was ready for bed that I discovered that my body was as much her possession as my domestic services.”

“Did you enjoy it?”

“I’ve always enjoyed making love,” said Glade. “It’s rare for it not to be a pleasurable experience. Only when it’s forced on me has there been anything about it that I didn’t enjoy. I deserve well my reputation for promiscuity and lasciviousness. It never crossed my mind that there wouldn’t be sex, as it was such an expected part of my own tribe’s customs and, in retrospect, I think it may well have surprised both Lady Demure and her two slaves that I took to the duty with such enthusiasm and diligence. Although I was ignorant of the expected etiquette associated with slaves making love to their mistresses, this ignorance didn’t trouble Lady Demure at all. I even then noticed that the other two slaves were rather less passionate in their love-making than I was.”

Ivory considered what Glade had said. “Are you implying that the three of you and this black mistress all made love at the same time?”

“Well, yes,” said Glade. “Amongst the forest people this wasn’t the usual custom, of course. So many elbows and knees to get in the way, you know. But our mistress simply lay down on the bed and the three of us licked and nibbled over her whole body, though from the sharp way I was pulled off by Quagga, it was clear that this intimacy didn’t extend to kissing our mistress on the mouth, however much we

could lick and kiss her lower lips. It was a peculiar lovemaking, although in the many moons to come it seemed as normal to me then as any other.”

“Peculiar? You mean: four women making love with each other at the same time?”

“Well, that might seem strange enough for you people who have such little understanding of the love that women often feel towards each other. And I suppose four is a larger than normal number of partners to be making love with each other at one time. I’ve enjoyed sexual intimacy together with as many women since, but never so one-sided. It wasn’t that I was making love to Quagga and Mimosa at the same time as that there was only one person who was having love made to and three people who were giving her that love. And although I orgasmed, as I usually do, it was Lady Demure’s orgasms that mattered. I later discovered that I was the first slave she’d ever seen who’d actually had an orgasm and this was one of the reasons why I became her favourite lover. I later found out that Quagga and Mimosa were quite horrified to see my undignified spasms of ecstasy and uncomfortable that I tried to make love as much with them as with our mistress.”

“Didn’t these two slaves enjoy making love to women?” wondered Ivory, who was beginning to think that the most natural thing in the world was for one woman to have sex with another.

“In a sense, yes,” said Glade. “Or they’d got to enjoy it. But their tribes, just like yours, didn’t really believe that same sex relations could be not only acceptable but even the expected norm. And this was the case amongst the Knights of the Savannah. Although I’d enjoyed making love to women before, like you do now, I still considered it to be a second choice. As no other kind was on offer, it was the sex I was happy to

take pleasure in. The other two slaves took to their Sapphic duties only reluctantly. I don't think Lady Demure expected or cared whether it was something they genuinely enjoyed."

"Did you ever make love to the other two slaves when your mistress wasn't there?"

"Yes I did, but not for many moons. When Lady Demure was elsewhere, I was told, quite forcibly as I didn't understand the words, not to express my affection towards either of them in an intimate way. It was only acceptable when we were making love to our mistress."

"What was she like, your mistress?"

"Her skin was dark, of course. Her nipples were beautiful when erect and I loved to take them in my mouth and pass my lips over the mottled areola. Her vagina had a musky odour and was easily lubricated. She could easily engulf a whole fist inside her. Her orgasms were frequent and passionate. Her thighs bent back and up and she loved to grind her cunt against mine."

Ivory was slightly perturbed by the shaman's description. It certainly wasn't the reluctant and resentful sex she'd expected Glade to describe. Indeed, the shaman clearly relished her memories of making love with this black mistress. This was quite unlike the bitterness that tainted Ivory's memories of her lovemaking with Chief Cave Lion.

"No, not as a lover," said Ivory hurriedly. "What was your mistress like as a person?"

"As a person? I'm not sure it's easy to separate a person from her body and her sexuality. I got to know her a great deal better, of course. Better than I ever expected. I'm not sure I liked her very much as a person at the time. You can make love to, even

be in love with, someone without liking them, you know. For instance, I don't think you like the Chief much however obvious it was to me that you enjoyed him fucking you. Similarly, you might like me rather less when you know more about me, though I suspect you'll still love me. In many ways there was very little to like about Lady Demure."

As Glade was to discover, her mistress was not especially kind or caring. She made no allowance whether her slaves might not want to make love to her. She expected their labours to be hard. She often hit Glade and the other two slaves whenever something displeased her. Sometimes it was because the food they'd prepared was not to her liking. Sometimes it was when she considered the fire to be burning too low; the hut disordered; or their weaving or pottery-making substandard. On occasion, she hit the slaves violently, often to the point of drawing blood, just because she felt like it. There was no way that Glade, any more than the more experienced Quagga or Mimosa, could anticipate before their mistress made her unannounced entries into the hut, which was never at a predictable time, whether she would be in a violent mood.

"Did she slap you?" wondered Glade, who had sometimes been spanked by her mother.

"Yes. And she punched me too. Often full on the face. Sometimes, she beat me or the others with a cord or whatever else she could find. She would continue doing so for as long as she liked and made no allowances that whoever she'd been beating might then feel disinclined to make love to her. This was something she expected every night. We always slept with our mistress. We were her bedclothes: her sheets and mattress. We kept her warm in the chilliest nights when a cool wind blew from the north. She would pull one of us over her body during her nocturnal twitching. The Knights of the

Savannah had no more notion or use for furs as bedclothes any more than they did as clothing.”

Glade was soon to find that her liberties as a slave were circumscribed in more ways than she originally imagined. She had as good as no freedom of movement at all. She very rarely went beyond the confines of the fence that enclosed her mistress’ hut that also confined a small number of jungle fowl with clipped wings that laid the eggs that Lady Demure enjoyed eating. Glade dallied as long as she could outside the darkness of the hut. She much preferred the open air to the smoky and sometimes fetid air of the hut’s interior, but she was often defeated by the fierceness of the Sun in a sky where there were few clouds. When it rained, which was rare enough, it did so with a ferocity that made it impossible to enjoy its refreshment for more than a very short time.

Because she was a slave of the most senior woman in the village, Glade had very little opportunity to socialise with other slaves: even those of her own tribe. She occasionally passed words with Wood Ant, a slave from her tribe who laboured in a neighbouring compound, all the while looking out warily for a guard or a black warrior. The Knights took a very dim view of slaves fraternising with one another. Her duties only rarely took her beyond these narrow confines and that was only ever in the company of her mistress. Other slaves had more opportunity for fraternisation, but as they were in the service of less privileged masters they were treated with a brutality Glade was happy not to suffer. Indeed, as any harm to her would be an insult to her mistress, she was actually accorded with exaggerated respect by the guards, who were slaves like her, and even other Knights.

She enjoyed her few trips outside the compound. She would follow her mistress at the same unhurried pace as she paced her way to attend religious festivals or special

feast days that required her slaves to be in attendance. Normally, she preferred to leave her slaves behind. As such a senior woman in the tribe, she could expect the services of all other slaves wherever she went.

Glade's principal duty was to perform the daily ablutions her mistress demanded. It was only when she was well-practised at washing and shaving her fellow slaves—an apprenticeship which inevitably resulted in several mistakes with the sharp flints—that she was permitted to wash and shave Lady Demure. It was a duty she actually came to enjoy. It was a non-sexual intimacy that allowed her close access to the private parts of her mistress she'd enjoyed while in bed. She took pride in the concentration and care she dedicated to the task. She soon almost forgot how strange all this hairlessness was and took as much care to remove every one of her own hairs as she did that of her mistress and the other two slaves. She no longer thought it peculiar that there were no eyebrows, no pubic hair nor even hair on the arms or legs. No one had hair and she was no different.

“What did your mistress' husband do, while you and the others were making love to his wife? Didn't he ever get jealous?” wondered Ivory, for whom these arrangements seemed worryingly perverse.

“This was what was most strange about the Knights of the Savannah. They placed great store on being married and having children. Most of their religious ceremonies had something to do with fertility. But, in practise, the men preferred the company of other men and didn't care what women did with other women, which was all they were left with as wives were not permitted male slaves. The men were always fucking each other. And when they weren't fucking on another, they'd fuck a slave. A few of them fucked the women slaves, often with the full approval of their peers, but it

was considered less manly than to bugger a man, whether he was willing, as in the case of those of the same rank as themselves, or, as it was for everyone else including slaves, rather less inclined.”

“And your mistress’ husband?”

“Lord Valour was no different, though as highest ranking man he never knew any sex that wasn’t of his choosing. He much preferred to fuck men and his bed was fuller of them than of any woman. It was also his duty to fuck his wife and this he did on a somewhat less regular basis. I don’t know whether he fucked her when she wasn’t in her hut, but I guess it wasn’t very often. It was an obligation he observed and he treated it very much like a duty.”

“Are you saying that he didn’t really want to fuck her?”

“I don’t think he did. I don’t think he was unusual in that way. But the Knights of the Savannah had to have children, otherwise there would never be another generation and, as chief of his village, Lord Valour needed them more than anyone else. As you may have already guessed, Lady Demure for all her haughtiness and stature wasn’t delivering.”

“She couldn’t have children?”

“A lot of men and women can’t have children. I don’t know why but it is so. Of course, it wasn’t obvious that it was Lady Demure who wasn’t capable and this uncertainty was something she had no compunction about voicing, as it became evident to me as I came to understand her tribe’s language. She often said she was prepared to let one of his lieutenants fuck her to provide the children he needed, probably knowing that his pride wouldn’t allow her to strike such a deal. Her argument was that it was he who was lacking was proven by her facility for orgasm, which was thought to be related

to fecundity. This was a rather persuasive argument. It was only much later that I discovered that whether or not her husband was lacking, Lady Demure was definitely not a woman destined for motherhood. I don't think she'd have made a very good mother anyway."

Ivory sighed as she considered her own plight. Would she ever be a mother? Would Chief Cave Lion be the father of her child? It wasn't a thought that had crossed her mind before, although she knew it should have done.

She also wondered about the spiritual life of the Knights of the Savannah. "Their religious festivals? The ones you said were concerned with fertility? Which spirits did this vicious tribe worship?"

"It may seem strange to you, but these people didn't worship what you call spirits. Theirs was a very hierarchical religion, exactly like their society. There were a number of minor gods governed by a greater god who was more powerful and wise than the rest of them put together. The Knights of the Savannah didn't have the creativity or imagination to come up with such a religion themselves. They borrowed or stole it from the tribes they'd conquered. The tribe that Quagga came from had a remarkably similar religion. There was one god for the Sun, one for the Moon, another for the rain, and so on. Naturally enough the Knights believed the gods looked exactly like themselves and nothing at all like people from Quagga's tribe. The god who governed fertility was the one of the highest status and his wife. Not, as you might have thought, the god or goddess of love or sex. Such a notion was beyond their comprehension. Perhaps if the men had spent more time fucking women rather than each other they'd have had more children, but, no, it was always some kind of divine providence that determined who had children and who didn't."

“What’s a ‘god’?” wondered Ivory who’d never heard of such a thing.

“Well, your tribe worships a lot of spirits. There’s a whole load for the weather. Another lot for the wild life. Another bunch for good health. And in addition there are the spirits of your ancestors. These people had one god for one thing. Another god for another thing. So, they had fewer entities to worship, but they were quarrelsome and had conflicting demands. I can’t help thinking that someone should come up with the idea of one god or maybe none at all. Then, perhaps there’d be less time wasted in ceremonies and rites and more time allocated to more important tasks.”

Ivory didn’t like Glade’s blasphemous musing. It was disrespectful of the spirits that governed her life. She didn’t like to think of a universe without purpose or meaning. She was comforted by the thought of her mother’s spirit watching over her and Ivory hoped she might understand and even approve of her relationship with Glade.

The following day the two women set off out of the village to another wood that Glade knew. This was on the other side of a nearby mountain and entailed an arduous climb up one side where roamed ibexes, bear and snow leopards. Fortunately, they didn’t need to go to the top where the spirits of rain congregated before a storm. The two women shivered in the piercing cold wind and throughout the whole day. Ivory looked forward to returning to the warmth of the tent she shared with Glade.

They couldn’t talk much together as the wind carried their words off into the billowing black clouds above. When they eventually reached the shadow of the wood, the air was cool and there was a steady drizzle around them. Ivory wished that there

was more of this dampness on the steppes below where it would have been much more welcome.

It was dark when the two women finally returned to the village through the gloom of the shadowy savannah. They warded off wild animals with flames burning on sticks they had dipped in animal fat. All Ivory wanted to do was rest in the shared bed, wrapped in Glade's arms and with that dildo once more burrowed inside the moist lips of her labia. But when they finally parted the hides to the tepee they found a boy of less than twelve summers awaiting them. It was the Chief's oldest son.

"At last!" he said. "I thought you'd never return. My father wants the shaman's apprentice to visit him in his tent."

"He wants to see me?" asked a startled Ivory. "When?"

"Now," said the boy. "And not with the shaman. Alone."

Chapter Six

Chief Cave Lion's dwelling was by far the largest in the village. It was a huge lattice of fallen tree trunks, tied together by cord and covered by sewn-together aurochs and rhinoceros hide. It was as large as five or six tepees meshed together. Although the harshness of the winter snow was usually enough to wreck most habitations in the village, the chief's weathered the conditions best and was reassembled on the same spot each spring with, if anything, more splendour than in the previous summer.

Like most villagers, Ivory had never passed through the ornamental mammoth skins that served as door to the yurt. She was naturally apprehensive of what she would discover in the shadows inside as she followed the Chief's son. It took Ivory's eyes a while to adjust to the glowing embers of the fire.

The Chief was waiting for her. Ivory immediately noticed that he wasn't dressed in his usual formal splendour. He wore a casual elk-hide singlet and his arms and legs were bare. His wife stood beside him. She was a woman much closer in years to Ivory than to Chief Cave Lion and was the mother of two of the Chief's seven surviving sons and daughters. She was dressed equally casually in an antelope-skin that covered only one of her angular shoulders and revealed much of the bare skin of her thigh. The warmth from the well-tended fire was enough for the Chief and his wife to cast off the heavy furs that most people had to wear even inside their homes.

Ivory bent down and made obeisance to the Chief, aware of how awkwardly she was articulating the required formulations.

"Quite, my dear," said Chief Cave Lion who was clearly bored with such rituals. "Come here and sit with my wife and me. We wish to speak to you."

As was the way, the conversation was fairly inconsequential to begin with. The Chief asked general questions about Ivory's apprenticeship and didn't seem much interested in her replies. His wife nodded occasionally, but expressed more apparent interest than her husband although she asked nothing herself. She smiled encouragingly at Ivory, who was nervous and remembered only too well the real nature of her earlier intercourse with the woman's husband. Her name was Ptarmigan and it was several years ago when she'd been presented to Chief Cave Lion as a gift. She was the daughter of the chief of a village far to the west whose path sometimes coincided with Ivory's village in the annual southwards trek. As the Chief's wife she was only ever seen in his company and no one spoke to her except on the Chief's behest. She spoke a strong dialect distinguished by dental fricatives and a slight throaty rumble.

"And how well have you learnt the languages of the southern tribes that the shaman knows and uses in her discourse with the spirits?" the Chief asked.

"I know some words and incantations, but only a little of their meaning," Ivory answered.

"The shaman is a valuable member of our village," the Chief said. "She has often helped in the annual trek south when we needed to trade with and call on the hospitality of the southern tribes of the mountains, rivers and plains. We would like you to learn as much from her as you can. Should she die or, as I sometimes fear rather more, choose to leave of her own accord, our village will need a shaman in her stead. It is a task to which you should apply yourself with diligence."

"I shall, my liege," said Ivory who sensed that the initial stage of this exchange had drawn to a close.

"My wife and I have no secrets between us," said Chief Cave Lion as he

squeezed her hand in his. “She knows that a Chief has needs that no single woman can hope to fully satisfy, especially when she is so often with child. I told her that you are a good, if inexperienced, fuck and she wished to meet you.”

Ptarmigan nodded her head decorously.

“My husband has told me that you’ve been instructed by the shaman as much in the arts of love as in the ways of the spirits,” she said.

Ivory blushed. She hadn’t expected such open frankness from the wife of a man who’d been so unfaithful to her.

“It’s true that I’ve been taught well,” Ivory spoke cautiously, “but not in the ways of men. It is his lordship, the Chief, who has taught me all I know of such matters.”

Chief Cave Lion laughed and squeezed the hand of his wife, who didn’t seem quite so delighted by Ivory’s testament.

“The ways of love between women and men and between women and women are not so remarkably different,” he said. “It is the art of how to give pleasure and that is what my wife wishes to know more about.”

Ptarmigan seemed uncomfortable at this account of her wishes but she made no remark.

Her husband continued.

“I remember your mother well, Ivory. She too was a most commendable fuck. She was blessed with child when she was mauled by the lion. There were two who’d died on that fateful day and one of them was of my flesh. I feel duty-bound to ensure that what remains of your sweet mother—and you are all there is—should be treated well. It is my hope that you too may one day be the mother of one of my lesser children.”

This was another role that Ivory had never anticipated, although she knew that

those women of the village who'd borne the Chief's unofficial progeny were accorded privileges that were the envy of other women. She didn't relish the prospect of becoming pregnant to a man so much older than her nor of seeing her child delegated to a lesser role in the Chief's household.

However, her answer had to be diplomatic. "It would be an honour indeed to be so blessed, my lord."

"That is said well, my dear," said the Chief kindly as he placing a gnarled hand on Ivory's bone-threaded hair. "However, you may still wonder why my wife also wishes to see one of my lovers."

"Is it that she wants to be certain that your lord is well-satisfied?" Ivory asked. She wasn't sure whether this was quite the right formula for her response.

"I'm sure that is so," said the Chief who squeezed his wife's hand a little tighter. Ptarmigan didn't smile quite as warmly or appreciatively as her husband. "The life of a chief's wife is one of denial. She must not, of course, enjoy the body of any other man. That would be a capital offence for both parties. However, she may pleasure herself with another woman but only with my permission. It is not appropriate that she do so with the shaman. However, with you it is another matter."

"It is?" wondered an aghast Ivory.

"Since your mother died, I have taken responsibility for you," the Chief continued. "You are in my care and, by default, my wife's as well. She much desires a woman's tongue between her legs and it is to you I entrust that honour."

"Me?" Ivory gasped. She wasn't sure she heard his words right.

But Ivory was to know that the chief spoke as he meant. He instructed his wife and her to remove their furs and they disrobed in utter silence while the Chief's children

watched by the flickering light of the fire. Ivory was embarrassed by her nudity as much as Ptarmigan was. She was even more embarrassed when she followed the Chief's subsequent instructions. She took position between his wife's legs with her arms resting on Ptarmigan's thin thighs and her tongue buried in her thick pubic hair. Her nose brushed against the threaded flowers.

This was only the second vagina that Ivory had tasted and this one had a notably less pungent odour. There was very little moisture on the lips other than that dripping from Ivory's saliva. Ptarmigan gasped as Ivory's tongue probed her clitoris and labia, but there was little evidence of the gush of vaginal fluid that made Ivory certain that Glade was enjoying her ministrations.

It was principally Chief Cave Lion who was taking pleasure from this Sapphic encounter and this was confirmed when Ivory felt a probing behind from fingers that could only belong to him. Her vagina was frigged with rather more enthusiasm than his wife was relishing her tongue. In fact, Ivory was shamed that her vagina was lubricated with more readiness by the chief's application than she'd done for his wife. Ivory was more than ready when the chief redoubled his effort and added more fingers and his tongue to her vulva while she laboured on Ptarmigan with mostly indifferent results.

The extent of Ptarmigan's passion wasn't the greatest concern of the Chief who separated the two women and laid Ivory down on the bed beside him. He thrust into her ever more urgently while Ivory gazed up at his beard and scarred face by the dim light of the flickering fire. Her vulva was engorged by desire and her body shimmered with perspiration. All the while, the Chief's wife sat to one side. She seemed embarrassed by her nudity and participated in the action only occasionally and hesitantly. She stroked her husband's testicles desultorily and laid supporting hands on his upraised

shoulders.

Ivory was naturally curious to compare her sexual experiences with those of the shaman. “What was it like when you made love to Lord Valour?” she asked Glade the following day.

“For a start, to call it ‘making love’ is a gross exaggeration,” said Glade. “It was fucking, pure and simple. And to be frank, it was buggery, not even normal vaginal intercourse, and nothing but painful.”

“Did he fuck you often?” Ivory asked. In her present uncharitable mood, she was secretly hoping that Glade had suffered more than Ivory.

“Very rarely and, from his point of view, rather reluctantly. He felt duty-bound to fuck his wife on a regular basis: perhaps two or three times a moon. It was clear to me that Lady Demure enjoyed it more than he did and even then not conspicuously more than when she made love to her slaves. Lord Valour would appear in the tent with a retinue of two or three male slaves. Before fucking his wife and to excite his enthusiasm, he would be fellated not only by his slaves but also by me and my fellow slaves. Sometimes, he readied himself by fucking a slave and he usually preferred to take one of his male slaves. Less often, he fucked one of us but these were brutal and peremptory fucks where he plainly got rather less pleasure than he did with his male slaves. And then, when he was good and ready, he would fuck Lady Demure. Hers was the only vagina that by custom he was permitted to penetrate. It wouldn’t be long at all until he released his semen and that was well before his wife was satisfied. Then

husband and wife would then talk together while the slaves, including me, stood in attendance should he feel like fucking one of us again. That didn't happen very often. It was obvious that Lord Valour got very little pleasure from fucking women."

"Why did he fuck you only in the arse?" wondered Ivory not unnaturally. Thankfully, the Chief hadn't penetrated her there and she rather hoped he never would.

"It was taboo for the Knights of the Savannah to have vaginal sex with anyone other than their wives. It was something to do with their rites of fertility. It was forbidden to fuck a slave anywhere but in the arse, although no distinction was made between men and women. Slaves were not to bear children and especially not the children of the Knights. Miscegenation was a capital offence. Slaves were not permitted to have children even by men from their own tribe. This made good sense from the Knights' point of view. They believed that they were the master race and destined to rule the whole world and all its people. It also meant that unless new slaves were captured on a regular basis, the Knights' slave economy was doomed to collapse."

"You must have hated the ordeal," said Ivory.

"The slavery: yes. The sex: not really," said Glade. "It was, after all, the only sex I ever had with a man all the years I was in captivity. In fact, I developed rather a taste for anal sex though I'm not sure I'd have enjoyed it quite so much if I'd been buggered as often as Lord Valour's slaves. I enjoy sex and it was frustrating to enjoy only the bodies of Lady Demure and her two slaves. Don't misunderstand me. I enjoyed sex with my mistress. She was a beautiful woman and an enthusiastic lover. Her vulva was often engorged with desire. I loved the glimpse of the pinker flesh that was laid open when I parted her lips with my fingers. I also relished the flesh of my fellow slaves."

“Didn’t you feel any jealousy when your mistress and her husband fucked while you watched?”

“Only that it was she and not me whose legs were open to receive the chief’s thrusts. It was also the only opportunity I had to talk, in hushed tones of course, with the Lord’s slaves, one of whom was from my tribe. I would hold his penis in my palm and stroke it while we whispered together. In that way, I discovered a little about how the men were treated and that was similar in principle to how Lady Demure treated her slaves.”

Glade gained rather more from these encounters when she’d learnt the Knights’ language. This wasn’t, of course, to communicate with them because even with her mistress, and absolutely not at all with the men, she was expected to utter not a single word. The only words Lady Demure addressed to her were commands regarding which there was no expectation of any discussion. She learnt the Knights’ language as it was the only common tongue she shared with anyone other than her own people who, in any case, she saw very rarely and spoke to even less often. This was the time when Glade discovered that she had a talent for learning languages.

“The Knights’ tongue was the first language I learnt other than my own. At first I thought it would just be the ability of learning different words for the same things, but I soon discovered that learning a language is much more challenging than that. The Knights’ language resembled a series of barks and yowls. The way you pronounced a word fundamentally changed its meaning. It was difficult to learn at first, especially because the most common words had no equivalent in my tribe’s language and many not in yours either. Many words were related to concepts of status, honour and the Knights’ strange religion. Different words were used according to the rank of the

speaker. The lowest of the low such as a slave had to phrase sentences in such a way that the people they spoke to were reminded that they were of a higher status.”

“It sounds very complex,” said Ivory with a frown.

“It’s not too different from the way you speak to the Chief or the Elders. It was just that much more decorous. It was also accompanied by genuflections, bows and curtsies that denoted how relatively worthless you were.”

“Did you speak to the other slaves in the same way?”

“They were the only ones I spoke with for any length of time, but there was no other way to speak to them. Anyhow, Quagga and Mimosa came from tribes that had more difficulty in understanding the culture of the Forest People—where there was no rank, status or whatever—than they did the Knights’. Quagga’s tribe accorded status by seniority of age rather than accomplishment or birth. They believed in the wisdom of the elders and, naturally, the foolishness of youth. She thought it extraordinary that the Forest People treated all men equally without regard to age. Mimosa’s society was more like yours. There was a single chief and a kind of inner court of people who were mostly related to her.”

“To her?” wondered Ivory, who wasn’t sure she’d heard right.

“Yes. In her tribe, a woman was always chief of a village. In fact, Mimosa expected to become such a chief herself when her mother died, but then her tribe was enslaved by the Knights before such a succession could take place.”

Glade’s language skills eventually improved to the extent that she could understand the conversation between Lord Valour and Lady Demure. In fact, she was soon rather better at understanding the Knights’ language than Mimosa and Quagga even though their captivity had been longer than hers by several years. As the Knights

treated the slaves as rather less than human, they made no precautions against them being able to understand what they said. Much of the couple's conversation was bound by the rigid conventions of the society, so a large proportion was phrased as an opportunity for Lady Demure to praise her husband's virility and he to praise her beauty. It took some time for Glade to decipher the true meaning of their words.

"It is many seasons since we first conjoined, my Beauty, and yet the gods are yet to bless you with the fruit of my seed," Lord Valour moaned.

"It is you the gods have failed, Man of my Heart," Lady Demure replied. "Perhaps the seed has been spread too thinly throughout the brave Knights of your court and too little remains of your virility."

When not complaining about Lady Demure's persistent refusal to get pregnant, not assisted, as Glade knew so well, by her insistence on a thorough wash after each such encounter, the two discussed matters of the village.

"When next is your courageous foray into the outside world to replenish the slaves who die more quickly than they are replaced, Lord of my Fertility?" Lady Demure asked.

"I know not, my Gazelle," her husband sadly admitted. "Gladly would I venture out to prove the honour and glory of our village, but I know not where or when. News has not come of another place as rich for conquest as the accursed forest of our last expedition. There are fewer pickings than before and those we find are meagre and weak. Our journeys take us many days and even moons distant, and there is less and less bounty."

"Are the other villages of the Knights similarly cursed, my Eternal Lover?"

"I have heard tell that the expedition of Lord Gallant and his brave Knights to

the open waters brought a very poor harvest indeed, my Sweetheart. They marched for more than two moons across savannah and then over the high cliffs to the sand and pebbles that stretch towards the infinite waters where monsters swim. Every village they found was on the shore and the homes made from shell and stone. In none of the villages did they find any but the frail and weak, who make poor fucks and even worse slaves. Lord Gallant believes that the people forewarned themselves of his approach by using fires they could see burning at the top of tall beacons high atop the hills and cliffs.”

“A devilish people indeed, my Virile One,” said Lady Demure with a hint of admiration in her voice. “We would do well to learn from the captured slaves what the meaning is of the signals they send from these beacons. We could then use this information to our advantage.”

Lord Valour frowned. “It is not for the Knights to lower themselves to learn the ways of lesser people, my Zebra Foal. It is in the gods’ behest whether we succeed in our brave expeditions. If we don’t pluck the fruit of our endeavours then it is because our valour and courage has been found wanting. Besides, not one captured slave survived more than a day or so after they were captured.”

Glade was fascinated by Lord Valour’s description of the places visited by his tribe, but unfortunately most conversation concentrated on more mundane matters such as religious festivals and the relative rankings of the Knights. This last was in his gift and caused him most anguish. It was Lady Demure whose advice he most intently listened to despite the fact that she was a mere woman.

“It is not for me to pronounce on Spear-Thrower Courage, my Husband, but if he is to be promoted to Fire-Bearer, you should think first of his loyalty and the

ambition of his family and then on his merits as a good fuck and a valiant warrior.”

“Who then should become Fire-Bearer, my Sweet Cunt?”

“You should guard yourself most against Liegeman Noble who has an ambitious wife and desires more respect from the village. He doesn’t enjoy the company of Spear-Thrower Honour, who is older than you and has been blessed only with daughters. If Spear-Thrower Honour were promoted then Liegeman Noble may well be inclined to waste his energies in plotting against those of equal rank and less likely to be a threat to you and your rightful status.”

Glade only rarely left the confines of her mistress’ compound during the years of her captivity. This was most often during the religious festivals where Lady Demure was expected to be accompanied by her retinue of slaves. These were Glade’s favourite days, although she had no understanding of what the festivals were about and wasn’t allowed to participate.

On such days, she and the other two slaves dedicated nearly half a day to preparing their mistress and themselves. Lady Demure was waxed and shaved. Then she would have sex with her slaves. This was a passionate lovemaking where Glade’s fist might be embedded deep inside her mistress’ lips while Mimosa and Quagga, the less enthusiastic lovers, would caress her nipples and tongue her anus. When Lady Demure reached her climax, which she did energetically and noisily, she was cleansed of the perspiration that glistened on her dark skin. Her own sweat mixed with water was used to wash her in the customary way. The three slaves then diligently applied the

scent glands of small animals on their mistress' skin so she was dressed in a strong aroma that made Glade feel weak with desire.

“You sound like you'd fallen in love with this Lady Demure,” remarked Ivory disdainfully.

“As I've said before: she was a beautiful woman. I was often in agony as I waited for her to decide to have sex as I could never initiate it myself. I wasn't in love with her—at least not then—but I did enjoy having sex with her. She was, after all, my only true lover during those years of captivity however much I tried to satisfy my cravings on the other two slaves.”

The festivals were most often at night and usually involved a public display of fucking. This was never, of course, with the slaves who, as lesser beings, were employed mainly for the Knights' private employment. As the festivals were principally related to fertility, there was always a stage in the rites when the men would participate in ceremonial fucking and, on special occasions, a husband and wife would fuck together in the centre of a ring of cheering villagers. Those who provided this show were always artisans, such as Knappers or Weavers, who as people of manual rather than military skills were accorded very low prestige.

The greater part of such festivals was never much fun. It generally entailed the ritual slaughter of an animal or, on occasion, a slave. There was also a great deal of chanting and prayer. As Glade's knowledge of the language improved, she discovered that much of this was to honour one god or other. She discovered that these gods required their vanity to be massaged and that their appetite for praise knew no limit. The most important gods were principally invoked in the hope of promoting good hunting and fertility.

The most unpleasant sacrifice occurred just before an expedition to hunt for new slaves. The victim was a slave in Lord Valour's service. He was slaughtered in a lengthy and painful ceremony that kept him alive for far longer than he'd have wanted. His crime was that he'd refused sex with his master. In any case, he was also getting too old to satisfy Lord Valour's taste in decidedly youthful men.

Glade kept her eyes squeezed shut for as long as she dared through the ceremony, although she could still hear his cries of agony. She was bathed in his spurting blood as much as anyone else unfortunate enough to be in the first row of spectators. What horrified her most wasn't so much his apparent agony, but the extent to which the Knights of the Savannah delighted in seeing him suffer. They particularly enjoyed watching the ritual mutilation of his genitals.

Lady Demure was as exhilarated by this ceremony as the other Knights. When she and her slaves returned to the hut, leaving the men to their inevitable public orgy, she directly addressed her slaves for the first time in the year and a half since Glade first came into her service. Everything she'd said till then had been a command or an order and could as easily have been addressed to any slave irrespective of how much she enjoyed making love to them.

"Regard well the blood on our bodies and recall the sufferings of the wretched slave," she said with an excited gleam in her eyes. "It could well be yours should one of you cause me sufficient displeasure."

All four women were still marked with caked patches of the victim's blood during the lovemaking that followed and the orgasms that racked Lady Demure's body were the most intense Glade had yet witnessed.

Chapter Seven

“I hate the bastards!” growled Mimosa the following day, employing the worst insult available in the Knights’ language. Illegitimacy was the ultimate stigma in a society that attached so much importance to child-bearing.

Glade paused from shaving her fellow slave’s crotch. She was aware of the vehemence of Mimosa’s remark. “I hate them too,” she said, although by now she’d got so accustomed to being a slave in their society that she’d almost forgotten what life had been like before.

“They killed my mother!” continued Mimosa bitterly.

“They killed my mother, too,” Glade reminded her.

“But hers was a lesser death. My mother was the chief of our village. If the bastards hadn’t attacked our village I might well be chief now. Indeed, now that my mother is dead I *am* the chief. But it’s a hollow claim. The village of which I am chief is now the haunt of hyenas and vultures and my people are enslaved. I detest the Knights. They steal everything. They stole their religion from Quagga’s tribe. They stole the art of flint-knapping and weaving from my tribe. They stole their skill in hunting from the Little People of the Savannah, who must all now be dead. And worst of all, they steal and enslave free people and treat them worse than animals. They are thieves, murderers and bastards: every single one of them!”

Mimosa told Glade that the savannah was once home to many tribes of which the Knights were but one. They originally came from a desert land a long way far to the East. Then one day the Knights grouped together under one King to conquer their neighbours’ lands and enslave the survivors. Over the passing generations, their

conquests spread ever wider until they'd overrun the whole savannah. Then their range spread beyond the savannah in the pursuit of fresh slaves as their existing ones died.

"They even conquered our tribe!" said Mimosa angrily. "We kept the bastards at bay for years. Under the leadership and wisdom of our matriarchs, including my mother, we outwitted the bastards. We forced them back every time so they had nothing but bruises to show for their debauched savagery. But then they conquered a tribe from the Long Grass Savannah to the South and stole from them the skill of archery and the use of shields. They descended on my tribe in huge numbers and one by one each of our villages succumbed to their ravages. My village was one of the last to surrender. We lived in a mountainous valley at the far edge of the savannah and thought ourselves safe. How could a tribe of bestial shaven-headed plains-people ever conquer a terrain as treacherous as the one we knew so well?"

Mimosa's tribe was wrong, of course. Although the Knights didn't benefit from the element of surprise that had made the conquest of Glade's people so very easy, they had the advantages of the new technology they'd purloined and of their overwhelming numbers, supplemented by the slaves that were used as the front line of their defence. The slaves and the shields protected the Knights from the barrage of stones and spears Mimosa's tribe threw at them. In response they rained down a shower of arrows on the unprepared mountain people that wounded more people than they killed and caused a panic that turned the battle into a rout.

This hard-fought conquest had cost the lives of many of the Knights' warriors including a chief, Lord Noble's predecessor, so their revenge was accordingly the more vicious when they took control of the village. Mimosa's mother was one of those most cruelly murdered, after having been raped and tortured. The Knights understood well

how the humiliating death of such a revered leader would extinguish the last vestige of spirit in the defeated villagers.

“They cut off my mother’s head and spiked it on a stake in the centre of the village. They urinated on her mutilated face and forced my villagers to follow suit. Those that did not were tortured and killed. They then took us into captivity and the booty was shared between the Knights’ villages who’d banded together to attack us.”

Quagga’s memories of her own capture were hazy. She’d been a child when the Knights conquered her village—too young to be raped even by them. Her mother survived, but Quagga had no idea whether she was still alive or even, if she was, where she might now be living. Her hatred of the Knights was no less fervent than Mimosa’s. The life of a child slave was no better than that of an adult and she came to know only too soon the rapacious sexual appetite of her captors.

As her mastery of the Knights’ language steadily improved, Glade became acutely aware that what most unified the slaves in the village and, no doubt in all the villages of the savannah, was a shared hate of the Knights. This hatred was reinforced every day by the indignities and cruelty the slaves endured at the hands of a tribe that denied them any consideration of humanity, let alone of equality.

“You must have despised the black Knights at least as much as Mimosa,” Ivory commented. Glade and she were walking across the village along the dusty ground between the scattered tepees and the detritus of settled life. They’d been summoned to the bedside of young Hyena whose parents hoped that the shaman had the medicine that

would save the boy's life from the fever with which he was stricken.

“I did hate them,” said Glade, “but as I later discovered Mimosa's spite was greater than mine. Quagga had very few memories of her previous life, so she was the most resigned to her fate. My hatred was ameliorated by the pleasures of regular sex with Lady Demure. Mimosa resented even that. She despised our mistress more than she did anyone else because of the sexual humiliation she visited on us.”

Glade pushed aside the horse-hide door flap of the tepee. A small fire threw shadows against the walls of the cramped quarters. In the dim light the shaman and her apprentice could see a small boy lying delirious on a bed of musk ox and mammoth furs. All around him were gathered a handful of women, one of whom was his mother, and alongside them Grey Wolf, the father. This usually cheerful man was reduced to gnawing anxiety. The women silently parted to let Glade and her apprentice walk by.

“I hope you don't mind me bringing my apprentice with me,” Glade said to the sorrowful company. “She needs to learn all she can of the ways of the spirit world.”

Grey Wolf stood up and addressed the shaman: “My son's been like this for two days now. I worry that he might die. He is my only son. Surely the spirits will be merciful.”

Glade nodded and placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “None can answer for the whims of the spirits. May I attend to young Hyena?”

Glade crouched down by the ailing child while Grey Wolf looked on fretfully. He wrung his hands together and seemed nearly as ill as his son. His wife, Elm Tree, stood by his side and put a comforting arm around his shoulders. Glade meanwhile asked the two worried parents some very precise questions about the fever's symptoms and the circumstances by which he'd caught it.

“It is very much like the fever of the swamp spirits,” she remarked. “Has he been near the poolside where the mosquitoes gather?”

“He often plays there,” said Elm Tree. “Is it an accursed place?”

“The swamp spirits are at their most malevolent in the summer when the days are long and the mosquitoes bite,” said Glade. “He must drink much water to make amends for the spirits’ spite and it must be clean water from the spring’s source. He must stay warm even though he sweats as if he is already too hot and,” Glade shuffled about in the leather pouch she brought with her, “he must chew on the leaves of this plant whose taste is bitter but which pacifies the spirits within him. His fever will very likely persist for a few days more.”

After giving more practical advice of this nature, Glade placed a deer skull on her head. Both eye-sockets were stuffed with herbs. She then incanted in a strange tongue what Ivory now recognised as a comic verse in one of the many languages she spoke about a hunter whose spear had got stuck in the ribs of a wild boar. Despite the absurdity of the incantation, Glade chanted solemnly and it had the desired effect of comforting Hyena’s family and friends. It had no similar effect on the young boy’s fever. Glade scattered some oak leaves and petals on his face and made some strange hand movements which Ivory could see were totally improvised.

“I have called on the spirits of the hyena after which your son has been named,” said Glade. “If the spirits heed my call, they shall rally to his side and take battle with the malevolent spirits of the foul waters. The boy may still be delirious but with luck he will soon be well. If he still sweats after a handful of days call me again.”

The parents showed their gratitude for the shaman’s visit by presenting her with a recently slain hare which Glade grabbed by its long ears. After she made another

shorter solemn incantation, the shaman and her apprentice left the tepee. Ivory hadn't heard this incantation before and asked Glade what it signified.

“It's a limerick about a slovenly cave bear.”

“How can you make such fun of those poor people?” Ivory asked as they walked back to Glade's tepee in the dim evening light. They pulled their furs close up over the chin to ward off the chill summer breeze.

“It really doesn't matter what incantations or gestures I employ,” said Glade with a smile that was just about visible through the fur. “What matters is the advice I give. I've seen this swamp illness many times before. Sometimes it is fatal, but rest, fresh water and the pain-killing effect of the herbs I've given usually fends it off. Some people say it is the fetid air of the waters, others that it is the malevolence of the water spirits who prefer not to be disturbed, but I think it is poison carried in the mosquitoes' bite.”

“Where did you learn your medicinal skills?” wondered Ivory who, despite her reservations about Glade's blasphemy, was nonetheless very impressed by the shaman's extensive medical knowledge. “Did you learn it in the forest? Was it imparted to you by the black warriors?”

“I gained practical knowledge in both places,” admitted Glade as the two women entered the warm interior of their shared tepee. She slipped off her furs as soon as they were inside. “Everywhere I've lived or travelled by, I've learnt new things. Some of it has practical use and some of it is superstition and foolishness. My tribe was no better. We often mistook illnesses as the symptoms of the tree spirits' temperament even when it was apparent that the symptoms spread from person to person. We treated it by isolating the ill and diseased like one would use a fire-break to keep the flames of

a burning forest at bay. However, I learnt most of my skills when I was a shaman's wife."

This revelation comforted Ivory as she also shed her clothes and slipped under the furs beside her naked lover. There was a history to Glade's shamanic skills which validated them and invested her with the aura of spiritual awareness. Despite her scepticism of the spirits and her mischievous incantations, she had been passed the wisdom of the spirits through her shaman husband's seed.

"It was when I lived with a tribe of Cave Dwellers to the south," Glade continued as she put an arm around her apprentice's bare shoulders. "Those may well have been the happiest days of my life. That was when my two children were born. My husband was a kind and generous man. He was a shaman and much venerated by his tribe. Men of a shamanic and mystical calling are accorded much respect in his tribe. And, yes, the Cave Dwellers do believe in the spirits, just as your people do, and my husband shared none of my irreverence. He made due obeisance to them and his incantations were not the nonsense I employ: although I don't think they were any more efficacious."

"How long did you live with the Cave Dwellers?"

"It must have been for about four or five years. This was a time I thought would last forever. I truly loved Flint, my husband, as I believe he loved me. Of course, I didn't speak his language at all at first. It was as different as any language is from another but the better I spoke it the more I came to respect and love my husband. He had true wisdom however much he attributed all his success at helping the diseased and injured to the blessed spirits of water and earth and all his failures to the malevolent spirits of fire and ice. Even in those days I paid more attention to what he did and how

he did it rather than to his explanations of why the medicines worked.”

“Was this many years after you left the black warriors who enslaved you?”

“Several years later, yes. I was an older and wiser woman then. Not a child. I’d become accustomed to fending for myself and it was a pleasure indeed to share my life with one man and to share his hearth. His tribe placed great store on fidelity and was harsh on those who strayed from the ways of virtue. As you can imagine, this was something of a strain for someone like me who’d been brought up in a much more liberal sexual climate, but I respected the stability it brought to the community.”

“Was it because of your sexual promiscuity that you no longer live with your husband?”

Glade cuddled Ivory close to her and peppered her face with kisses. “You’d think so, wouldn’t you? The girl who was the most promiscuous fuck in her tribe. The girl who spent several years as a sex slave. And the woman who now prefers the body of a woman to any man. But no. I was more than willing to sacrifice the dictates of my lust for the love I felt for Flint, although I occasionally and very discreetly erred. No, my nemesis was one with whom I was already well acquainted when I was a slave.”

“And was it through your husband you learnt your shamanic talents?”

“I have many things to be grateful to Flint, and not just my two children and the security and love he gave me. But he never trained me to be a shaman as I am training you. Only men were destined to be shamans in his tribe. I learnt what I did only by observing and asking questions. If I have advice to you that takes precedence over any other, it is that you should also look and learn. Don’t expect knowledge to come from instruction alone. Study everything and don’t accept too readily the explanations that you’re given. No question ever has a simple answer. The world is an infinitely large,

monstrous and mystical place. And it most certainly isn't a world governed by spirits or gods."

"Is this what your husband told you?"

"No! Not at all," Glade laughed. "He was the most devout man you could ever hope to meet. His whole life was dedicated in the service of the forces he believed to govern the universe. And you can't blame my scepticism on my forest tribe who were as spiritual and pious as any other, despite our very different notion of sexual morality. I believe that the origin of my disrespect and blasphemy comes from the time I served as a slave."

The lovemaking that followed was more intense and more heartfelt than any Ivory had enjoyed with the shaman before. Somehow, the knowledge that Glade had once been a faithful partner, and could perhaps be one again, excited Ivory more than even the smell of her moist vagina or the probing of toys within her moist lips. When the two lovers disengaged, Ivory's crotch throbbing from the breach of Glade's fist, she nuzzled her nose into her lover's voluminous bosom with a contentment that she'd not felt since before her mother died.

The following day, Glade was engaged in the preparation of potions and intoxicants for the forthcoming visit by the Reindeer Herders. Ivory, meanwhile, was in the company of the other village women in the woods where they foraged for a rather more mundane harvest than that required by the shaman. These were the truffles, nuts, roots and other fruits of the forest scattered unevenly about its mossy floor. Along with the odd

slaughtered fowl or hare these made up the greater part of the village's daily repast. Some women were gathering the field-grass seeds that could be ground down to add extra body to a stew. Ivory was assigned much more mundane tasks that bent her head low and muddied her fur-covered knees.

Ivory approached her duty with a light heart. Her thoughts returned again and again to Glade. Although she was still reluctant to admit it, she now treasured her lover as much more than just a sexual companion. Although she still believed that such love should be shared only with a man, her chief misgiving was how much her love for Glade was reciprocated. Surely, the passion of their lovemaking, the memory of shared orgasms and the closeness of their conjoined flesh excited as much love in the shaman as it did in Ivory.

"You seem very cheerful," said Sycamore who chose to forage near the young girl. "Does the life of a shaman's apprentice suit you well?"

"I think it does," said Ivory. "I'm learning so much. And not just about the spirits or of the medicines they've bestowed on us."

"You mean the ways of love, don't you?" said Sycamore in a soft voice. "I knew you would find pleasure and satisfaction in the shaman's arms. She is truly an exceptional woman."

"It's not just..." said Ivory bashfully. "She's not just a lover... I mean, we make love... but it's not like with a man... I don't know, I just..."

"I know. I know," said Sycamore, placing her hand on Ivory's. "I'm sure a man's love is a different, perhaps even a better, thing. For some women, the love of another of their sex is all they need, but for others the woman they love has to be more than just a woman. The shaman is skilled in the arts of love..."

“It’s not only her skill at lovemaking...” protested Ivory.

“Maybe. Maybe not,” said Sycamore. “Have you fallen in love with her?”

Ivory paused. She raised her head and gazed into Sycamore’s sympathetic eyes. “I suppose I have,” she admitted.

“Be careful, sweet one,” said Sycamore sadly. “The shaman isn’t of our tribe. She has different customs. She isn’t going to be exactly the lover you might want her to be. She’ll be the best lover you’ll ever know, but she isn’t going to offer you the love that I think you seek.”

Ivory dismissed Sycamore’s advice. After all, what could Sycamore know? Ivory was sure she’d made love to Glade more often than had any other woman or man in the village. And anyway, Ivory now knew that Glade was a woman who had known a more permanent love with a husband in the distant south where she’d worn clothes every day as did the Mammoth People. Perhaps it was the licentiousness of habitual nudity when she lived in the tropical forest that had led to her promiscuity. Now she lived amongst those who would never contemplate nakedness, mostly because the elements dictated otherwise, surely she would become a woman who could temper her lasciviousness. Especially when the person with whom she shared her bed was Ivory.

Clouds gathered ever more densely in the sky as the day passed and they began to be tinged with a threatening yellow. Very soon it was almost as dark as it would normally be at dusk. Before long it would rain and heavily enough that the women’s lives could be at risk from the impending tempest. Word went round that it was time to head

immediately back to the village before it was too late. The women then raced back, weighed down by the provisions they'd gathered, anxious not to be soaked by the raindrops that fell ever more heavily as they run.

Ivory's furs were soaked by the downpour. They protected her from the worst of the rain's chill but were now weighed down by damp and made progress ever more arduous. She pushed aside the leopard-skin door to her tepee, glad at last to be out of the rain and happy also in the expectation of being with Glade. She'd been occupied the whole day in anticipation of this moment.

What she didn't expect to see was not only her lover, who was already under the bed furs, but nestled beside her another woman whom Ivory recognised as Oak Leaf: a woman half way in years between Ivory and Glade. And what was even more of a shock was that both she and Glade were naked.

Ivory stood by the tepee entrance in stunned silence apart from the persistent wheezing that was the result of her dash across the steppe. As she struggled to recover her strength, she also struggled to make sense of what she could see. Her lover was in bed with another woman. Ivory could also tell that they were both flushed with the afterglow of sex.

"Glade!" she cried in distress. "What's this? Have you...? Were you...?"

The two women lay on the bed. Oak Leaf pulled the bed furs up to her bosom and looked appropriately guilty. Glade, however, was naked to the waist but didn't seem ashamed at all.

"Yes, I have," Glade said. "Would you like to join us? If, of course," she continued, glancing at her companion, "Oak Leaf is amenable."

"No, I wouldn't!" said Ivory firmly. "How *could* you? I thought..."

“You thought wrongly,” replied Glade. “Why should I abandon the love of my friends? After all, you share the company of the Chief with his wife. Why can’t I also enjoy the company of my other lovers?”

“Your other lovers...?”

Glade stood up. A pearl of sweat dripped down from the tip of a bare nipple onto her brown stomach. She put an arm round Ivory’s fur-covered shoulders and kissed her on the face, while her apprentice shivered as much from shock as from the rainwater that pasted her eyes and nose.

“Take off your clothes, at least,” she said comfortingly.

“My clothes? In front of another woman?”

“Of course. Why not?”

“It’s not right. It’s not right.”

Oak Leaf also stood up, but took care to cover her crotch with a hand while she gathered her furs.

“I’d better leave,” she said.

“Are you sure?” asked Glade. “I’m sure that Ivory won’t...”

“Let her leave!” said Ivory firmly. “I thought you were my lover. I didn’t believe that I’d have to share you...”

“...As I have to share you.”

“It’s not the same. It’s not the same at all.”

Oak Leaf made no comment, but ensured she was fully clothed before she left the tepee. She evaded Glade’s attempt to kiss her before she pushed aside the hide that kept the torrential rain at bay. She was no more enthusiastic than Ivory about sharing Glade with another woman.

When the two women were alone, Ivory burst into tears and resisted ineffectually as her lover disrobed her.

“You can’t keep on these damp clothes,” Glade said reassuringly as if she had no part in Ivory’s current distress. “You might catch cold and I don’t want to have to treat you as a patient.”

Ivory slumped naked on the bed with Glade’s arms around her bare back and shivered in the chill. “I thought we were lovers. I thought we were as man and wife.”

“I am not a man and I am not your wife,” said Glade. She stroked Ivory on the back and held up a cloth of elk-hide to Ivory’s damp face, where the salty taste of her tears intermingled with the chill cold of the rain.

“But...”

“You thought that because we share the same bed each night and because we make love that I would now forswear the temptations of other flesh?”

“Yes...”

“You have much yet to learn, my dear,” Glade said. “Lie down on your back and I’ll lay out your clothes to dry by the fire.”

Ivory obeyed, as much from her inability to think of a better course of action as from her acceptance of the wisdom of Glade’s advice.

“How *can* you...?”

“How can I continue to make love to another woman?” Glade hazarded. “Because I see no good reason why I shouldn’t. Oak Leaf was one of my lovers before you became my apprentice and it would seem no less wrong to abandon her just because you are in my care.”

“But she has a husband and four children.”

“Her husband is no more faithful to her than I am to you,” Glade said. “Hush. Don’t fret. I know it’s difficult for you, but as much as I love you, and, yes, my sweetheart, I *do* love you, I still love other women.”

“Couldn’t you now...?”

“Why should I deny myself the love of other women while you also enjoy sex with Chief Cave Lion?”

“I didn’t choose that. I would gladly never see the Chief again.”

“You have no choice, my love. And even if you were never again to make love to the Chief, do you truly believe that I would forego my own pleasures?”

“But... but...”

“Remember that I was once proud to be the most promiscuous girl in my tribe. And the girl I was is still the woman that I am. If you are to love me, you would do well to remember that.”

Chapter Eight

Glade kissed her young lover on the lips while Chief Cave Lion slumped on his back exhausted. A thin thread of semen trailed from his penis into the tangle of Ivory's pubic hair. Now that Ivory had discovered her lover's infidelity, Glade was actually rather more affectionate to her ward even when she was being fucked by the Chief.

"You have become a more accomplished lover," mused Chief Cave Lion. He tenderly kissed Ivory's pale thigh and cupped a buttock in a gnarled hand.

"You have taught me well, my lord," said Ivory loyally.

"...As has the shaman," said the Chief. "Although of the two of you, it is the shaman who is the more expert and the most confident lover, you are the one who benefits from the blessing of youth and are therefore to be preferred."

Ivory could see from her face that Glade didn't relish the Chief's remark and this provided the younger woman with a small amount of satisfaction. Ivory knew she had to accept the ways of the shaman. There was no other tepee in which she could sleep and it was unthinkable that she should abandon her apprenticeship. She hadn't forgiven Glade but there was no other shoulder on which she could rest her head.

"The Reindeer Herders are due to cross our path within two or three days," continued the chief. "We have mostly completed our preparations to welcome them in a style that honours them and brings us no shame. We have intoxicants. Our hunters are in pursuit of mammoth and other game to feed our guests. The musicians are practising on their instruments. But there is one gift we are as yet unable to provide."

"And what is that, my lord?" Glade asked as she caressed the Chief's now shrunken penis which when erect had thrust into her as many times as it had Ivory.

“The chief of the Reindeer Herders should be honoured by the pleasures of the flesh as he would so honour me. As I have no marriageable daughter to give away and there is no one else suitable in the village, it behoves me to ask you and your apprentice to provide the chief and his closest relatives with the carnal relief he expects. As the apprentice has the more succulent flesh, it is she who has the most pressing duty to fulfil.”

Ivory gasped in dismay. “Do I have to offer my body to the Reindeer Herders, my lord?” she asked in the hope that she’d misunderstood him.

“It is a duty as necessary as any other,” the Chief explained. “It would be unseemly for our village to disappoint our guests. But worry not. Should you become pregnant, I shall treat the child as if it were my own.”

This was scant consolation to Ivory, who burst into tears as soon when the Chief departed. “I’ve become nothing but a fuck toy!” she moaned to Glade who put a comforting arm about her bare shoulders.

“It is the way of the world,” said the shaman.

“Is this a service you’ve ever provided?”

“Not in this way,” Glade mused, “but in former years I regularly made love to strange men to provide for myself. A woman wandering alone in the world needs do what she must to stay alive. Indeed, it is a service offered by many travelling women amongst the people of the southern valleys.”

“It’s not what how I would wish it to be,” Ivory sniffed. “Is there nothing else I can do?”

“While you live in this village,” said Glade with a sad smile, “what the Chief wishes is what you must do.”

For the rest of the day, the shaman and her apprentice supervised the preparation of entertainments for the Reindeer Herders. Several villagers were rehearsing on musical instruments they'd made from wood and hide. Amongst these were a set of hollow reeds through which a player could blow air and generate a high-pitched tone that could be modulated by small holes carved into its stem, but most instruments were of a percussive nature that could be slapped on by the musicians' open palms or struck with sturdy sticks. Glade rehearsed songs whose lyrics were mostly improvised, but whose melodies she'd learnt from distant tribes in her travels.

“Did the Knights of the Savannah have songs such as these?” Ivory asked.

“Not really,” said Glade. “They relied on the slaves to sing songs, which they insisted should be sung in the Knights' tongue and which had to be adapted to what was relevant to their culture and religion.”

“Did you have to fuck many men as I will have to do?” wondered Ivory who addressed the matter uppermost in her mind.

“The only man who fucked me in the years I was a slave was Lord Valour,” Glade said. “But it was from his conversations with Lady Demure that I learnt the most. My anus was not then, any more than it is not now, the orifice whose violation affords me the most pleasure.”

Glade's interest in what the chief had to say was greatest when he was distressed and sought his wife's advice. This was especially so when slave rebellions broke out amongst the other villages of his tribe. At first, he expressed only indignation that the

slaves were so disloyal and satisfaction in the severity of the measures taken against them.

“Lord Courage decreed punishment on the rebels in his village so severe that only ten slaves were left alive and each of these had an eye or ear removed,” Lord Valour boasted. “The rebels’ blood flowed so freely that Lord Courage’s wife, Lady Trust, could bathe in them. Some rebels’ agonies were prolonged beyond the day by having the villains skewered on stakes. That will be a fine example to other slaves who might be tempted to overthrow the divine order.”

Lord Valour was rather less sanguine when a rebellion many leagues distant resulted not in its successful crushing but rather by the unprecedented slaughter of all the brave Knights of that village.

“It is said that the village chief, a cousin of the King himself, was slaughtered like a common warthog. His eyes were gouged out, his tongue was sliced off and his corpse lashed to an eland where it was found several days later on the weary animal’s back.”

“And his wife, Lady Loyal?” wondered Lady Demure who was no less disturbed by the news than her husband. “What happened to her?”

“No one knows. The reports we’ve received have come only from those Knights who escaped the carnage, but they tell of rape and retribution of a most savage kind. I doubt very much that she’d have survived. I doubt that any of the women and children of the village still live. But soon, when the King and his Barons descend on the rebel village, we shall extract confessions from the scum before their deserved execution and we shall know all that has befallen. The King’s revenge shall surely be as terrible as the enormity of their crimes deserve.”

Glade and her two fellow slaves strained their ears to hear the details of the Lord Valour's account. This news brought great hope to Glade who wished only evil on her captors. When their mistress at last left the hut, no doubt to discuss the news with her friends, the three slaves broke out in smiles and nervous cheers.

"If rebellion can succeed in one village," said Mimosa with the hugest grin Glade had ever seen on her face, "then surely it can succeed here."

"But what if it doesn't succeed?" asked a tremulous Quagga. "We know how cruel the Knights can be. They will torture and kill us most cruelly. You know what they do when there is the smallest provocation. Remember the fate of Impala."

Quagga was referring to the death of a female slave who'd become pregnant. Her punishment was to have her stomach sliced open. She was left to die after the foetus was pulled out and smashed against the rocks, even though it was rumoured that the father had been a Knight who'd raped her and, contrary to tradition, had abused her vagina rather than her anus.

"It is better by far to die an honourable death than to live a dishonourable life," said Mimosa with no sympathy at all for Quagga's fears.

A few days later, a body of Knights from the village were consigned to join the King's army to suppress the revolt in the rebel village. Lord Valour was initially eager to join his fellow warriors, but Lady Demure advised him otherwise.

"It is fine and noble to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the King," said Lady Demure, "but you should follow His Majesty's example. He has chosen to stay at home in his village rather than accompany his noble Knights. It could be that he has designs himself on the estate of those lords who perish in the conflict and will use the excuse of this incident to bolster his power at the expense of those who don't return."

“Not one Knight will die in the sack of the rebels’ village,” Lord Valour asserted. “It will be a glorious victory.”

“The slaves may be emboldened by the one success and there may be yet more rebellions,” said Lady Demure firmly. “With so many Knights engaged in struggle elsewhere might not the slaves of our own village take advantage of your absence and also be tempted to rebel? Your duty should surely be in the suppression of rebellion closer at home than in a far off village a moon and a half’s march away.”

“There is no other village where rebellion has succeeded,” said Lord Valour.

“That is no doubt because the Knights of those villages have chosen to stand firm rather than abandon their women and children,” said Lady Demure. “There have been other insurrections in the past, as well you know, amongst our tribe’s villages and it is only because they have been made secure from within by the efforts of our valiant Knights that there have not been more disasters.”

“My honour is at stake,” said Lord Valour miserably.

“Then send Barons Peerless and Resolute who besides being your most senior lieutenants are also those most covetous of your status,” said Lady Demure. “This will flatter the King who wishes to see the bravest warriors do battle in defence of his realm and may relieve you of those most likely to threaten your rule if the outcome of battle is that yet more valiant warriors should die. Remember that it is by death in battle rather than on the sickbed that the succession in our village has been most often decided.”

Lord Valour left the hut angrily and no less resolved to answer his King’s call to arms. However, the flaring up of a mostly forgotten battle-scar provided sufficient reason several days later for him to make his excuses and dispatch the Barons suggested by Lady Demure to do battle. This change of mind might well have been influenced by

reports of two other villages, scattered widely apart in the Knights' Kingdom, where the slaves' rebellion had been as successful as in the first and where the Knights were murdered just as viciously. As the lord confided to his wife, a messenger was able to confirm the slaughter in one of these villages by the sight of scalps scattered on nearby bushes and trees.

"Not one child or woman was spared," the lord confessed.

Lady Demure nodded, but did not remind him of her earlier day's advice. She preferred her husband's decision to remain in the village to appear to be one made by him alone.

The decision as to which slave was chosen as an auspicious sacrifice for the warriors' departure to what was now one of four rebel villages was made rather too easily. Baron Glory, a Knight who'd elected to stay with the village rather than join the expedition, was murdered by his slave. Rock Baboon originally came from Mimosa's tribe and had been infected by the excitement spreading through the village's slaves on news of the distant rebellions' success. When his master commanded the slave to submit to his nightly fuck, Rock Baboon not only refused the honour but strangled the Baron with his bare hands. The ritual torture and disembowelling of the treacherous slave during the feast that heralded the warriors' departure was the cruellest yet devised. It was particularly unpleasant in that the Baron's other male slaves who had been so slow in intervening were forced to eat his entrails while he was still alive.

Nevertheless, there was a strangely sober atmosphere amongst the Knights after this ritual. Such a bloodthirsty ceremony would normally leave them cheerful and celebratory. The Knights retired to their huts relatively early, as did Lady Demure with her three slaves. Glade dreaded that her mistress should deliver a homily on loyalty to

her slaves. She knew that Mimosa was unlikely to respond as meekly as she once would have done. Her fellow slave had been close to mutinous in the last few days and in private had speculated endlessly to Glade and Quagga on the implications of the outbreak of rebellion. Slave revolts were scarcely new but successful ones were rare and easily suppressed. Mimosa had never heard of a rebellion that had spread so fast to so many villages. Glade wondered whether Mimosa would respond to a lecture on the virtue of obedience with quite the tact and diplomacy she normally displayed. She'd already expressed pride that it was a man from her village who'd murdered the Baron.

As it was, Lady Demure was very subdued when she entered the hut with her slaves and seemed almost reluctant to have sex with them. She let them wash off the blood that had sprayed onto her feet and slumped onto the bed with Quagga and Glade, after ordering Mimosa to tend the fire which really needed no extra attention. In fact, she had recently been excusing Mimosa of all amatory duty. Perhaps she sensed how little her slave enjoyed it.

Glade was the one who got most pleasure from the lovemaking: perhaps more so than even her mistress. She licked and chewed at Lady Demure's smoothly shaved labia and nibbled at the proud dark clitoris which she now knew better than her own. The lovemaking finished rather sooner than usual and Lady Demure lay down between her slaves, one on either side, silenced rather more by her thoughts than sated by Sapphic pleasure.

She then addressed the three slaves with more respect than disdain for the first time in all the years they had been together.

"I am troubled about the rebellions," she said in a confidential tone. "Why do you think they are happening? What is your opinion?"

Neither Glade nor Quagga knew what to say, but in truth it was Mimosa who was being addressed. She knelt by the fire, a dark squat silhouette, with her proud bald pate and small ears outlined against the flickering flames.

“Are you asking me, my lady?” she asked with rather less humility than her station demanded.

Normally Lady Demure would respond to such impudence by striking Mimosa hard against the face and following this with punches and kicks that would bruise the slave for several days to come. Glade shivered. Would her mistress rise to the challenge?

Lady Demure made no reaction beyond nodding her head. “Yes. It’s your opinion I seek.”

“The Knights have treated their subjects most unkindly, my lady,” said Mimosa. “Many of the slaves come from proud and independent tribes whose spirit has been crushed by the Knight’s viciousness, but not to the extent that they do not resent their enslavement.”

“And I believe they also think they have little left to lose,” added Lady Demure in apparent agreement. “It’s true that my tribe has treated the people it has conquered with little respect. Indeed, as little more than animals. It is also true, alas, that I’ve acted no differently to the others of my tribe. It may be that we deserve the catastrophe that has descended upon us.”

“That is true, my lady,” said Mimosa, who Glade could see was on the verge of expressing her opinions much more forcefully. Would she have to intervene to prevent her fellow slave from overstepping the line? But where now was that line?

Lady Demure wisely refrained from demanding from her most independent

slave any more dangerous opinions. She kissed Quagga on the lips. “And you, my most loyal slave,” she said in rather more affectionate terms than she’d ever done before. “Do you think that I’ve been a cruel mistress?”

Quagga blushed and ran a nervous hand over her shaven skull. “I... er... I don’t know...” she said uncertainly, before shaping her response more diplomatically. “Yes, my lady. You have treated us fairly and with dignity.”

Lady Demure smiled and squeezed her slave’s hand in hers. “Alas, I don’t believe you. I have been a cruel mistress. I have been no less wicked than the rest of my tribe. But know this, I have done so because it is the custom of my tribe and I am as guilty as any of not questioning our practices. I hope you will recognise that I am not as cruel or vicious as I’ve seemed to be and I am willing to mend my ways. If there is any way that I can persuade my husband to treat slaves with more dignity and even to share more evenly the spoils of the chase, then be assured that I shall do so. It surely must be possible for the Knights to reform their practices and for slave and mistress to live in harmony.”

With such reassuring words, Lady Demure then gestured that she was ready to retire and with the added warmth of Mimosa’s fuller flesh settled down to sleep.

It was apparent to Glade that Mimosa wasn’t at all mollified by Lady Demure’s conciliatory tone, although she made no more comment in her presence. The following day she was as scathing as she had ever been about her mistress. When Lady Demure accompanied her husband to perform the duty of wishing well the contingent of warriors about to march off to join the King’s army, Mimosa spoke to Glade in the shelter of the hut while Quagga was outside tending the fowl that ran freely in the compound.

“If that cunt thinks she’s bought my loyalty and submission with her talk of reform, she clearly does not know of the spirit and courage of the Mountain People,” she said mutinously. “All she wants to do is to head off the risk of revolt in the village by promising better conditions for the slaves. What she does not want is for us to be free. She is a scheming and conniving shitbag. She has no greater ambition than her own comfort and glory. I would gladly strangle her as much as Rock Baboon did his master. Do you think she would hesitate to treat us with any more mercy than was shown to him?”

“Perhaps she means well,” said Glade, mindful that there was nothing predestined in the promise of rebellion and that she and Mimosa might very well continue to serve Lady Demure for the foreseeable future. “If either of us had been born in the Knights’ tribe would we have treated our slaves differently?”

Mimosa sniffed with disdain. “Such even-handed opinions are foolish,” she said. “The Knights are bastards, cunts and perverts. They destroyed my tribe as they did yours. As they did Quagga’s. They are evil incarnate. We should never extend to them the privilege of respect and honour any more than they have done towards any other tribe. The world will be a better place when every last one of the shaven-headed arse-fuckers is disembowelled, decapitated and dead.”

Ivory fiddled nervously with a small figurine of a plump woman carved in mammoth ivory that the shaman kept on the stone shelf in her tepee. Would she soon be as pregnant as this strange faceless woman? Would she carry within her the offspring of

one of the Reindeer Herders? Would she then be forced to herd reindeer rather than hunt mammoth and rhinoceros?

Glade sensed her apprentice's unease and moved over to Ivory's side. She grasped Ivory's hand in hers. She deliberately let a breast fall free from her furs as a promise of more familiar intimacy.

"Listen to the drums," she said with a smile.

Outside the tepee, the musicians were beating on hollow wooden trunks and stretched hide as they rehearsed for the coming celebration. It was an insistent rhythm that created a unified whole although individual rhythms strayed from the underlying pattern that held the improvisation in check. There was an excited chatter from the girls gathered around the musicians who occasionally sang along to a melody of their invention.

"It only reminds me of my fate," Ivory moaned.

"They will be here for only a few days," said Glade. "You may well enjoy it more than you think. I've seen how much pleasure the Chief gives you. Other men may satisfy you even more."

"But if the Reindeer Herder chief is as old and lined as Chief Cave Lion..." said Ivory.

"If he *is* too old," remarked Glade with a smile, "he may not have the energy or even the ability to fuck you. Don't fret, my sweet. That day will soon be past and we can make love together once more."

"I don't wish to carry a Reindeer Herder child within my womb."

"Don't worry about that either, my love," said Glade conspiratorially. "One of the many talents I have as a shaman is to relieve you of an unwanted child. I also have

artistry that may prevent such a thing happening at all.”

“You have?” said Ivory, with a sudden unexpected rush of hope.

Glade nodded. “It’s not foolproof, sweetest. But follow my advice and it may be that you will never need to bear a child. Unless, of course, you should change your mind...”

Glade was gripped by a breathless urgent anticipation as, despite the Knights’ endeavours, rumours of fresh rebellions spread amongst the slaves. All the snatches of Glade’s conversation with slaves from outside her compound were of the same subject. The slaves’ satisfaction was briefly compromised by the news more widely promulgated by the Knights that one of the rebel villages had been crushed by the King’s army. But this was a bloody engagement that cost the life of several of Lord Valour’s Knights, including that of Baron Peerless.

Lord Valour became a more frequent visitor to Lady Demure’s bed, but this didn’t appreciably result in his wife’s greater satisfaction. His sexual pleasure was compromised by his desperation and frustration that his wife hadn’t yet become pregnant. Even though his efforts at impregnating his wife had become more urgent, it was obvious he’d prefer to fuck his male slaves who were beginning to hide rather less well their resentment at his anal incursions. Glade, Quagga and, most particularly, Mimosa were also rather less than delighted by his more frequent insistence on anal sex with whichever arse was nearest at hand. Mimosa was bitter at the specks of blood that often accompanied his frantic buggering.

“If he fucked cunts as often as he fucked arses, who knows how many children the bastard would have now!” she complained to Glade after one especially frantic night of one-sided lovemaking.

Even Glade was now decidedly unenthusiastic about the chief’s favourite sport, though the more frequent visits meant she could pass more words with those slaves of his who belonged to her tribe. She even managed to get Tree Shrew, one of her tribesmen, to ejaculate when she discreetly masturbated him while his master was engaged in fucking Quagga’s arse and Lady Demure’s vagina in roughly equal measure.

However, the day came when Lord Valour entered the tent unannounced with no intention of fucking his unenthusiastic wife. He was far too agitated and anxious. Lady Demure was nestled on the bed between Glade and Quagga, saliva from Glade’s tongue slipping down her inner lips and onto her thighs. She could see her husband’s agitation and rather more politely than she would once have done she eased her slaves to one side.

“What is it, Delight of my Heart?” she asked.

“Blessed Cunt of Mine,” he said, still observing the niceties of civilised discourse. “I have heard news which if it is true is most terrible indeed.”

“And what is that, my Sweet Prick?”

“The King is dead.”

Lady Demure narrowed her eyes and laid a hand on Glade’s thigh to steady her weight. “The King is dead?”

“There has been a rebellion in his village, my Sweet Cunt. It was horrific. The carnage was terrible. Not only the slaves of his village but of the surrounding villages descended on the King’s court and murdered every last nobleman. The King’s wives

and all his children were ritually disembowelled. The rumour is that he was found with a spear that had been thrust up his anus, through his bowels and right out of his mouth. The King is no more. His Princes are also dead.”

Lady Demure ran her hands down the side of her cheeks and pulled them downwards. Then she smiled. “So, it may be that you have a claim to the throne, my Proud and Erect Prick. We may have the wealth and glory of all the tribe at our feet.”

“What?” said a puzzled Lord Valour. “You think...”

“Who else but you, Sweet Childgiver, is better suited for the highest office under the gods’ firmament?”

Lord Valour stood uncertainly in the flickering light of the fire, clearly rather flattered by the notion. Then he corrected himself. “It is not right, my Sweet Cunt, to celebrate the death of the King.”

“But it is your duty and your destiny...” said Lady Demure excitedly. “Think of all the power you would have, my Proud Prick.”

“What power, what glory and what majesty is there, my Chosen Childbearer,” asked Lord Valour, for once the more realistic of the two, “if there is no Kingdom for me to reign over?”

Chapter Nine

After her husband had at last swaggered back to his hut, Lady Demure reclined between her slaves lost in thought. She barely registered their presence, however much Quagga loyally cuddled up against her. It was an uneasy silence while the slaves also appraised the significance of Lord Valour's news. Although the death of the cruel and malevolent King was surely welcome, Glade was anxious of the consequences it might have for her. She had almost forgotten any other way of life than that of a slave. Mimosa was the only one whose face beamed unambiguously with triumph and delight.

Lady Demure stirred at last. She squeezed her eyes together and pinched her straight nose between her long fingers. She ran her tongue over her lips as if they had become dry.

"So, it is happening," she said at last.

None of the slaves dared reply.

"The King is dead and soon each and every village in the Kingdom of the Knights will fall to the rebellious hordes," Lady Demure continued, talking as much to herself as she was to her slaves.

She scanned the room around her and then gazed steadily into the face of each slave. It was Mimosa's face she studied the longest.

"It's foolish to believe that this village will be any different," she said. "Before long, the slaves will be emboldened or, if not the slaves of this village, the rebels from another. There will then be great slaughter." She paused for effect. "I'm sure you all believe this is for the good. You've been treated unkindly by our tribe and it will afford you no regret to see your masters and mistresses slain. However, I don't think you

should be as complacent of the likelihood of escaping with your lives as I suspect you are. Especially you,” she said to Mimosa, for whom she had no name. “You might believe that the demise of my tribe will automatically bring a brighter more prosperous future, but reflect on this. You are my slaves and I am the wife of the chief of the village. How can you be sure that when bloodlust overcomes the rebels that they will necessarily spare the property of the noblest woman of the village? You may very well be slaughtered along with the rest of us.”

“I think not, my lady,” said Mimosa slowly and carefully. “I am of noble blood and no one from my tribe would risk the spirits’ wrath by allowing harm to come to me.”

“Noble blood?” said Lady Demure, with a quizzical expression that hovered between derision and respect. “Do other tribes have such things?”

“They do indeed, my lady,” said Mimosa without further embellishment.

“That may be so,” continued Lady Demure after a measured pause, “but I have no wish to risk my life to the rebels’ mercy. Tomorrow night, when it is at its darkest, I shall hazard the hyenas and lions of the savannah in preference to the rebels’ retribution and flee to the hills. And I would be very grateful if you should all accompany me.”

“To continue to be your slaves?” snorted Mimosa indignantly.

“Not at all,” said Lady Demure with an unusually conciliatory smile. “When I abandon my village I also abandon my rights to property and status. This means that I shall then be equal to each of you, however much it galls me to admit it.”

“Shouldn’t you rather stay by your husband’s side, my lady?” Mimosa challenged.

“My husband is nothing but a fool,” said Lady Demure. “It is noble indeed to fight for a cause that may be won, but foolish to fight for one that is already lost.”

“And why should we choose to follow you, my lady, rather than take our chances here?” asked Mimosa.

“It is your choice, but together we are strong and divided we are weak,” said Lady Demure firmly. “I know the land about here whereas you don’t. I know where the hyenas, leopards and wolves roam. I know where to find food to eat and water to drink. You may not be so fortunate.”

Ivory mused on Glade’s mistress’s advice as recounted by the shaman. “Were you tempted by her offer?” she asked.

“After three or more years in which I knew nothing but captivity, I wasn’t at all as confident in my ability to fend for myself as I was when I lived in the forest,” Glade admitted. “I knew where to find food and shelter in the forest. I didn’t know where to find it on the savannah. And, furthermore, Demure was right. Could we trust our fate on the kindness of bloodthirsty rebels? The slaves came from different tribes and although I could trust my people, I wasn’t so sure of those from other tribes who spoke different languages, had different customs, worshipped different spirits and were often rather more warlike than my tribe. Perhaps my close association with Lady Demure, which after all included daily lovemaking, really would make me the object of a vengeful slave’s anger.”

Ivory’s feelings were increasingly clouded by her anxiety about the imminent arrival of

the Reindeer Herders and, above all, their chief. She gazed towards the horizon across the plain from the log on which she sat. Could she see the Reindeer Herders approach over the horizon or was it just another herd of horses?

It was later in the day that the long-awaited visitors arrived. The first sign was a small group of reindeer emerging from between the distant hills herded by almost as many people as there were animals. From the distance they seemed no different from the Mammoth Hunters. They were clad in fur and carried staffs and, over their shoulders, leather sacks filled with provisions. They were a miscellaneous group that included women and children and domesticated wolves yapping and barking beside their masters.

Ivory had encountered Reindeer Herders before during the long winter treks when all the tribes of the mammoth steppes followed the game to the snow-free pastures of the south. They were people of Ivory's tribe who spoke the same language, but so differently that it sometimes sounded as alien as the languages of the southern tribes. Unlike most people from her tribe, the Reindeer Herders would never settled in a village. Instead, they followed the reindeer herds that normally roamed the northern grasslands where there were fewer predators, but where it was also much colder. It was rumoured that their range took them to the ocean glaciers where there were large white bears and very few mammoths.

When the Reindeer Herders processed into the village they were greeted by ululations and whoops from the women and presented with small gifts of nuts and berries by the children, who then ran excitedly about with their new friends while their parents headed towards the Chief's tepee where Chief Cave Lion was standing in attendance. Leading them was a tall, heavily bearded man in the thickest furs that Ivory

had every seen and who carried a staff taller than himself on the crest of which was the skull of a cave bear adorned with eagle feathers.

This must be the chief of the Reindeer Herders, Ivory reflected. She was pleased to see that he was a young man compared to Chief Cave Lion, but still somewhat older than she was. From what little she could see through the fur he wore and the beard that covered his face, he was a handsome man. This gave her the hope that the ordeal she would soon endure might not be so terrible after all.

As the shaman's apprentice, Ivory was soon occupied in rather more pressing matters for the rest of the day. Intoxicants were prepared which included strong alcoholic drinks fermented from honey. There were leaves and mushrooms of potent mind-bending qualities to be chewed and swallowed. Some Reindeer Herders had ailments for which they hoped the shaman could provide relief. There were fortunes to be told, incantations to be chanted and pungent potions to be imbibed. Although Ivory's role was only as Glade's assistant, she took great pride in her duties. This was most especially so since they were received so gratefully.

The visitors were animated in excitement and enthusiasm. They had walked for many days and rested with their herd only at night. Only a few of the reindeer accompanied them to the village. The majority were still in the care of a handful of Reindeer Herders, including the chief's brother and uncle. It wouldn't have been practical for several hundred reindeer to descend on the village. Nor would it have been wise to leave them untended with so many predators about. Reindeer made welcome prey for the many lions, hyenas and wolves that roamed in the game-rich mammoth steppes.

As the shadows lengthened and evening approached, the villagers brought out

the meals they'd prepared during the last few days. The carcasses of elk, great antlered deer, aurochs and even a mammoth calf were roasted on spits over blazing fires. All the while, the village musicians played an incessant rhythm of music that encouraged the younger Reindeer Herders and villagers to dance. If Ivory didn't have so many duties to observe, she would gladly have joined the dancers in their light deer furs in sheer abandon to the insistent rhythm.

When the Reindeer Herders and villagers gathered around the blistering flames of the ceremonial fires and before the feasting began, both chiefs addressed the eager assembly. The two chiefs' speeches vied with one another for humour and wisdom. They were sprinkled with homilies to the great spirits, praise to both the hosts and guests, and a series of funny and sometimes obscene anecdotes that invited appreciative laughter. As was the tradition, only men were allowed to give speeches although Ivory knew that the shaman could very easily have given a much more entertaining speech. However, Glade's time to perform came after the most prominent people had spoken and the Reindeer Herder women had sung a few songs about reindeers and hunting. As Ivory knew she would be, the shaman was totally mesmerising.

Only Ivory was privy to the fact that the saga Glade sang over the accompaniment of a piped reed and a slow rhythmic drumbeat was wholly improvised apart from the chorus. Glade's tale was of a brave hunter who went forth in pursuit of a great mammoth and on the way encountered some heroic Reindeer Herders who accompanied him from thenceforth. On his quest, the hunters dispatched rhinoceros, feasted on a deer with antlers so large that from the distance it looked like a tree, fought off bears and cave lions, and eventually battled for nearly a day with a mammoth twice the size of even the largest bull mammoth that anyone had ever seen. The climax of the

saga was that the hunter returned triumphantly home with the mammoth's tusks slung over his shoulder.

The feasting began when Glade finished her tale. This was interspersed all the while with dance and song from the two clans' rich oral traditions. Ivory shared handfuls of venison with women more accustomed to the tough meat of reindeer.

For the first time in her life, Ivory believed that she was sincerely valued. The Reindeer Herders venerated her as the shaman's apprentice and believed her to be blessed with the spirits of the trees, the wolf and the moon. Whatever veneration they showed towards the apprentice was expressed many times more towards the shaman. The Reindeer Herders didn't recognise Glade as a foreign woman. They believed that her strange skin colour was a blessing from the spirits.

The various smoked herbs and mead Ivory imbibed had its desired effect and soon she was living in an eternal present where her concerns and fears were wholly forgotten. So, when Glade tapped her on the shoulder and led her off to the Chief's tepee Ivory felt no trepidation at all. She relished being stripped of her clothes and having Glade's hands massage the musk of small animals onto her skin. She dressed in scanty clothes that failed to completely cover her breasts and continued to jiggle to the rhythm of the drums that echoed throughout the village, muffled as they were by the thick hides cladding the chief's tent. And while she waited for the Reindeer Herder chief to arrive, Ivory felt excitement rather than foreboding at the prospect of a strange cock penetrating her.

The shaman and her apprentice didn't have to wait long until the Reindeer Herder chief appeared, dressed in only loose deer hide and with his penis already erect and ready. Chief Cave Lion stood to one side, happy for once not to be partaking of

Ivory's flesh. Perhaps the Reindeer Herders had made a similar offer of a woman or two of their tribe so he would have no need for more mundane carnal pleasure.

The Reindeer Herder chief was indeed a handsome man. He had two fingers missing from one hand and slash of scars across his chest that might have been inflicted by a leopard or lion. Otherwise he was a man in full possession of his manhood, most especially so between his legs. He had both Ivory and Glade at his disposal and fucked them with abandon for rather longer than Chief Cave Lion had ever managed. There was little that could be seen of the Reindeer Herder chief's face in the thick beard that rose well over his cheeks. Only his snow-scarred nose and bright eyes could be seen peeking through. His hair was long and knotted with bone and ivory. His chest was hairier than even Chief Cave Lion's. And his thrusts into her came with an urgency and passion that told of vigour and youth. It was far more expert than the lovemaking Ivory had enjoyed with her own chief, but it lacked the subtlety and technique of which Glade was a mistress.

And very soon it was into the Reindeer Herder chief's arms, with Glade beside her, that Ivory finally collapsed. She now knew what she'd missed in the sex she'd so far enjoyed and she also knew that she now had a hunger for more, much more, of the same.

Glade's last lovemaking in the Knights' village with the less selfish lover that her mistress had become was an oddly fretful affair. Although she knew well from listening to Lady Demure's words that her mistress was unlikely ever to do anything unless there

was a way in which she thought she could benefit from it, the lovemaking was of a kind that made her want more. And this was so even though she was sure that, like Mimosa, she would abandon her mistress as readily as Lady Demure proposed to abandon her village. She wondered whether Lady Demure's more reciprocal lovemaking might be her way of tempting Glade to join her. Her mistress knew full well exactly what the young girl's greatest weakness happened to be. And that, of course, was her desire for carnal pleasure.

When Glade spoke to Mimosa the following morning her fellow slave's disdain for her mistress was no less vehement than before.

"The cunt might think she can buy my loyalty with her pledge of equality and respect in the savannah beyond this village," she said, "but it is she who should bow down to me. My people will arise and slaughter each and every one of these arse-fucking cocksuckers. If she expects mercy after the shitty way she's treated me in the many years I've twiddled her clitoris and cleaned her arse with my tongue, well, she must be as much a fucking fool as her shithead of a husband."

Glade wasn't convinced that Lady Demure was quite so foolish. And she wasn't sure either that she wanted to entrust her fate to Mimosa any more than she did her mistress. However, there was a palpable air of excitement in the village now that news of the King's death had become common knowledge. Glade was convinced that it would only be a matter of days until the slave rebellion would spread to the village.

And as it happened, it was sooner than even that.

However solid and secure the way of life that held together the Knights' community seemed to be, there was a fracture already so deep that it would take the smallest provocation to rent the village apart.

When Lady Demure returned to the hut rather earlier than usual in the evening, she instructed Glade to work alongside Mimosa and Quagga to pack food and hunting tools into the zebra-hide sacks that their mistress provided. She made a point for the first time in the years they'd been together in helping the three slaves with their duties. She did so completely silently. It was clear that she didn't relish the prospect of leaving, but Glade still admired her stoical dignity in the face of danger.

"Will you be joining us?" Lady Demure asked Mimosa as kindly as she could. She was clearly uncomfortable in having to ask rather than demand something of her slaves.

"And what choices have I got?" asked Mimosa, pointedly not appending the honorific 'my lady'.

"You have every choice in the world," said Lady Demure diplomatically. "You can come with us and hope to survive in the savannah where there is plenty of game. Or you can stay here and risk being slaughtered by my husband when he discovers me gone and only you left behind. I don't believe he is likely to temper his anger by any consideration at all that the village may soon be a bloodbath of revolution in which he is the one least likely to survive. I would very much not want to be you when that happens. The dismal fate of Baron Glory's slave will be as nothing compared to what you would suffer."

Lady Demure made no more comment and continued to stuff fire-making tools into the zebra hide she clutched. She hesitated over putting her shaving flints and oils into the sack. She held them up to her face and turned them around with an almost loving gaze.

"Do other tribes shave themselves as my tribe does?" she asked at last.

“My people never knew of shaving before we were captured, my lady,” said Glade.

“My tribe also, my lady,” said Quagga, “except in ceremonies and religious rites.”

“It would be a fool indeed who would shear themselves as do the despised Knights when their last corpse is devoured by vultures,” said Mimosa with a sniff.

Lady Demure bit her lower lip. Her instinct was to lash out but she recognised that this was not the time for her to remind her slaves of their role in her life thus far. Lady Demure’s relationship with them had already changed irrevocably. She set down the shaving implements without a word and gathered together the furs from the bed.

“It may be necessary to carry these over our shoulders. We may have need of them if the nights be cool.”

“Why not wear them as clothes?” Mimosa challenged. “Or are you so tied to the perverse customs of your tribe that you wouldn’t contemplate even that?”

This was the first time that Glade had ever heard of the notion of ‘clothes’. Indeed, the word, which was rarely used by the Knights, had no real meaning for her. For the Knights it was a religious principle to be forever naked. For her it was nothing more than a matter of knowing nothing else. The very idea seemed somehow odd and unnecessary however much in later years it became as natural to her as total hairlessness in the Knights’ village had become.

“I just hope my idiot husband doesn’t choose this night to observe his conjugal duties,” said Lady Demure when all the sacks were full and the four women were sat together in a hut strangely denuded. “I told him that I was ill and didn’t wish to be disturbed, but he isn’t a man who necessarily respects my wishes.”

“And when he sees that you’ve prepared to leave, what will you tell him?” Mimosa asked with a sneer. “Will he be any more pleased to see you about to leave than he would be if you had already gone?”

Lady Demure picked up a small flint knife and held it in her hand. “I may be a mere woman but I am more practised in the art of combat and surprise than you may imagine,” she said with a sternness of purpose that astonished Mimosa and alarmed Quagga and Glade. “If he wishes to hinder me, he may discover the extent to which when I have determined on a course of action I shall not be deflected.”

There was an uneasy silence in the hut as the four women sat together. Quagga and Lady Demure on those furs on their mistress’s bed she’d decided to leave behind; Glade cross-legged by the fire; and Mimosa hidden in the shadows on the other side of the hut. Each woman was lost in her own thoughts and as wary of one another as she was of the dangers she faced. Glade was still uncertain whether she should side with Lady Demure in the plain beyond or risk the wrath of Lord Valour. Although Mimosa had made clear her intention to Glade that she wouldn’t accompany Lady Demure in the dark savannah, she was no doubt silently weighing up her limited options.

The subdued silence in Lady Demure’s hut was eerily echoed by the village outside where the only sounds that could be heard were the distant grunts of game, the occasional chirrup from the fowl secured in the compound and the small animals that shrieked in the wilderness. The whole village was engulfed in an atmosphere of uneasy expectancy.

And so it was when shouts and screams erupted in the village, it alarmed all the women in its suddenness not least by the fact that it was unprecedented. Just what were the sounds? Some sounded like shouts of triumph. Others like cries of agony. And

amongst them were the unmistakable screams of women and children. The few words that Glade could hear sounded like pleas for mercy and that from people not used to voicing such sentiments.

It was Mimosa who leapt up first and ran out of the hut. Her face expressed determination and exhilaration. She pointedly grabbed the sharp shaving flints that lay on the ground as the nearest approximation to a weapon on hand. Glade jumped up after her and pushed aside the rhinoceros hide that acted as a door. She was sure she could hear Lady Demure and Quagga exit behind her.

The village was poorly lit by the quarter-moon, but it was clear that rebellion had indeed broken out. Shadowy naked figures were wrestling with one another and spears and flint knives were in everyone's hands. It was difficult to be sure what the figures were doing as they rolled on the ground and hit each other with what weapons they could improvise. It was not even obvious that the Knights were the only ones being slaughtered, as several black figures were beating up the slaves. However, the sight of the slumped corpse of a dead child, that could only be a young Knight as the slaves were allowed no children, made it obvious that the rebellion wouldn't spare the innocent.

"My Sweetness! My Love!" yelled one black figure running awkwardly towards them in obvious pain, pursued by three or more others. It was Lord Valour and the figures behind him were his slaves, with the exception of Tree Shrew who, like Glade, observed their tribe's taboo on inflicting violence. "The bastards! The fucking bastards!"

Glade turned her head to see Lady Demure standing side by side with Quagga, both of them weighed down by her sacks. It was difficult in the light to read her

mistress's expression but it was surely not a happy one.

Glade turned to face the violence in front of her. The lord who had so cruelly killed Flying Squirrel on the first day she had met the Knights was jostled onto the ground and Glade could see clearly now the cause of the man's suffering. Not only were there gashes on his face and chest, but trailing behind him and securely impaled into his anus was a wooden spear. His slaves had obviously had rather more than enough of Lord Valour's priapic lust.

Glade turned her head again to measure Lady Demure's reaction, but this time she could see no one. Not even Quagga. One of the sacks they had packed and a leopard skin lay discarded on the ground in front of the hut.

She stood transfixed and suddenly alone. Where was Mimosa? And then she recognised her among the figures gathered around the chief as he lay on the ground. He was surrounded by people from many tribes with the notable exception of her own. They were stabbing him viciously with flint knives and throwing rocks on his head. His thrashing about was at first frantic and vigorous but steadily became rather less so, until with a final twitch of his legs he was protesting no more. Amongst those most active in the assault on what was now a corpse was Mimosa who'd exchanged her shaving implements for a rather more lethal flint knife tied to a wooden shaft.

Glade stood horrified. Much as she felt no regret that Lord Valour was dead, she was startled by the bloodlust. And when the lord's decapitated head was raised aloft to the sky, the hand that held it high and which was streaked by his blood belonged to Glade's former fellow slave, Mimosa.

Chapter Ten

“You did well, my dear,” Chief Cave Lion told Ivory the following morning as she and Glade lay together on the bed the Reindeer Herder chief had vacated.

“Thank you, my lord,” said Ivory who still savoured the memory of her lovemaking. She didn’t say so but she thought to herself that the pleasure in the duty was all hers. And she would gladly do the same again.

“The Reindeer Herder chief has complimented the shaman and you on your lovemaking,” continued the Chief, running his hand over Ivory’s bare shoulder. “He praised your beauty. He said that it is many years since he last fucked a woman as beautiful as you. But as you may have noticed, the Reindeer Herder women are poor, ragged wretches compared to the women of our village.” He sniffed with slight disdain, as if reflecting on the quality of his reciprocal gifts.

“You are too kind, my lord,” said Ivory.

“However, your duties are not at an end,” continued Chief Cave Lion. “Nor are they likely to be while we continue to entertain our guests.”

“Do you mean that I shall once again have to entertain the Reindeer Herder chief, my lord?” asked Ivory who didn’t conceal very well her delight at the prospect.

“It is likely,” said the Chief with a small smile. “But it is his responsibility to share his gifts with his court, just as it is mine with the gifts given to me. Your duties shall now extend to his brothers and uncles and the favoured men of his court.”

Ivory’s broad grin vanished. “Do you mean, my lord,” she said after an uneasy pause, “that the shaman and I are to be fucked by the other Reindeer Herders?”

“Not exactly, my dear,” said the Chief. “The shaman’s duties lie elsewhere. It

is you, and you alone, who shall honour the Reindeer Herders with the pleasure of your flesh.”

This was not welcome news. It was one thing indeed to make love with one man, especially when that duty was shared with her lover. It was another thing altogether to be fucked by a whole series of strange men with no one else to share the burden. It was only with great restraint that Ivory held back her tears while Chief Cave Lion sat beside her, although her silence made clear how much the news shocked her. But when the chief departed, the tears and sobs she'd suppressed gushed onto Glade's shoulder.

“How can this be? What can I do?” she wailed.

Glade couldn't express more than the most empty of comforting words.

“It is an obligation that will soon be nothing more than a memory, my sweet,” she said.

As Glade so often did when Ivory was in need of distraction, she recounted tales from her life. She resumed her narrative from the moment in the dark of the night when she stood unaccompanied in the Knights' village with no obvious direction to run while all around was slaughter and rape.

“I didn't know what to do,” she told Ivory as she embraced her distraught apprentice. “I was inclined to run off into the starlit savannah where Demure and Quagga were fleeing together, no doubt, with other Knights. But I was as frightened of the lions and hyenas of the night as I was of the violence around me. Although I hated

the Knights, their women and especially their children didn't deserve the horrors they were made to suffer. As my eyes adapted to the dark I could see the sprawled bodies of children and babies amongst the corpses, some of whom had had their skulls smashed open with stones. It's difficult to comprehend the atrocity of a mutilated body and my mind refused to do so, although my eyes were dragged towards it."

At last Glade recognised a friendly figure in the dark shadows. She could hardly call it a friendly face as Tree Shrew presented only a silhouette against the shadow of the chief's hut. He was shivering with as much terror as Glade. She ran over to him past the toppled holy stones that had been desecrated along with all the other totems of the Knights' religion. He responded with a shy smile when she greeted him, as was the custom, by gripping his penis in her hand.

"It was horrific," Tree Shrew said at last. "It was Ibex who began it all. Lord Valour demanded access to his arse as he does every night and Ibex simply refused to obey. Lord Valour hit him across the face and when he fell to the ground he ordered the rest of us to bind him in cords. And nobody did a thing. He commanded me but I refused too. We'd discussed it during the day. We would all refuse to let him fuck us. He then hit me too." Tree Shrew moved his face forward so Glade could see the dried blood under his nose. "Then Ibex struck Lord Valour from behind. And then the rest of us slaves laid into him as well. At first it was with only our fists and feet, but then some of us took hold of more lethal weapons. Rainstorm pushed a flint knife into his back and forced him to the ground. I was just petrified. It was Ibex who thrust the spear up his anus. He stood behind Lord Valour as the others held him to the ground, his nose pressed into the ground, and parted his buttocks as if he was about to fuck him just as Lord Valour fucked us each and every day and shoved the spear right in. That was when

the Knight struggled out of the hut and also when we discovered that other slaves had also risen up in revolt.”

“What shall we do? Where shall we go?” asked Glade in desperation as a man from Mimosa’s tribe dashed by holding one of the Knights’ children by its legs like a dead fowl while two women from another tribe were pushing over the tall staff that supported Rock Baboon’s decapitated head. It fell to the ground and rolled over. His brains spilled onto the dark soil ground.

“I saw Macaque and Fern peek their heads out of one of the huts,” said Tree Shrew. “Perhaps we are safest amongst people from our own tribe.”

Glade nodded. Where else could they be safe?

They scurried over the dusty ground towards the hut Tree Shrew indicated and pushed inside through the antelope-hide door to where a small fire was still smouldering. It was one of the larger huts in the village and had belonged to Baron Peerless before he’d offered his services to his King. Glade expected to see only Macaque and Fern inside. She knew she wouldn’t see Baron Peerless’ wife because as they ran along she noticed her battered corpse nose-down in the dust, surrounded by her dead children and accompanied by one child, a small girl, who was wailing in unspeakable grief. There was no saving her mother, of course, as her head had been smashed in from behind and where she lay Glade could see the gashes in her chest where her entrails had been pulled loose.

There were more than just Macaque and Fern sheltering in terror in the tent. There were five or six others: a mix of men and women. Two of them came from Glade’s tribe and the rest came from tribes less well represented in the village. The sight that surprised her most was that one of the women came from the Knights’ tribe. She

was a young girl who was sobbing into Macaque's arms.

Baron Peerless' hut was large by even the Knights' standards although it wasn't as large as Lord Valour's. Even so, it became steadily more crowded as other frightened slaves sought shelter within. These were mostly women and the majority were Forest People. Glade's tribe was the one least likely to celebrate in the orgy of violence that could be heard going on beyond the hut's walls.

One of the women from another tribe, who was brown-skinned like the Forest People but had an oval face and a flat nose, stared with disdain at Macaque and the girl in her arms. She jumped up and grabbed the girl by an arm in an attempt to pull her away. Macaque's reaction was to push her off with all her strength.

"How *can* you?" the woman demanded in the language of the Knights, which was still the only language with which the different tribes could communicate, when she slumped down next to Tree Shrew.

"Dignity is my lover," said Macaque. Such an assertion was more than sufficient for Glade and her tribe.

The woman was not satisfied with that. "She is one of the accursed," she said with no trace of pity. "She deserves to die."

"Why should she?" said Macaque firmly. "What has she done wrong? She's suffered just as we have. We've been secret lovers for years. She's never been able to confess her love to her family or friends because she would be killed just as we would be. And now she has no family and, other than me, no friends."

"She is an accursed Knight," insisted the women. "Death is too good for her."

She chose not to pursue the argument as she recognised that the company with which she was sheltering was unlikely to agree with her as they were mostly pacifist

Forest People. She huddled against her companion: a man from her tribe too weakened by his freshly broken nose to offer her any support.

It was a long night during which Glade huddled together with Tree Shrew and desultorily masturbated him in an attempt to console him. Macaque and Fern assiduously guarded Dignity. They hid her behind their backs as more people thrust their heads into the hut, some looking for shelter and others looking for Knights that might still be alive. Outside the whoops and cries of triumph continued through the long hours, although Glade was sure that by now there couldn't be any other Knights that were still alive.

A pregnant woman staggered in with a small child. But she was a Knight and before she could take shelter or even ask of it she was dragged outside. Her screams were loud and alarming but lasted only as long as it took for her to be raped before she fell silent. Glade shivered. Revenge might be sweet, but it was also bloody and merciless.

It was well into the morning when Glade and Tree Shrew finally had the courage to leave the hut. The village was ominously quiet. All around her, Glade could see the aftermath of the night's carnage. Corpses in various states of mutilation and dismemberment were slumped randomly about. Most belonged to the Knights, although a few of the less mutilated belonged to slaves who'd been killed by Knights before they too were slaughtered.

The former slaves had already divided themselves according to tribal loyalty. Each hut became the territory of one or another tribe. Only those whose tribe was poorly represented in the village were forced to share huts with other people. And as the Forest People were the most tolerant of all tribes, it was in the huts in which they'd gathered

that these former slaves found shelter.

Glade and Tree Shrew wandered from hut to hut, but only ventured into those occupied by Forest People. Although Glade hated the Knights for the suffering they'd brought upon her and her people she was glad to see that a few Knights other than Dignity had survived the massacre. Significantly, the only people who offered the Knights shelter or anything other than a savage death were the Forest People. She felt proud of her tribe, especially when she observed the respect shown them by other tribes for their principled disdain for violence.

There was a Knight who had, like Dignity, conducted an illicit love affair with a man from her own clan who'd never disguised his preference for male flesh. There was even a couple with their young child who'd managed to keep their own hut. Glade was told that they were an unusual pair amongst the Knights as even before there was any likelihood of a slave rebellion they'd expressed their hatred for the ways of their tribe, although they had kept this secret from their fellow Knights. They had treated their slaves more as members of the family and were now rewarded by fierce loyalty from those who had once been their slaves and were now their protectors.

"So even the Knights could behave in a civilised way?" asked Ivory with admiration and a certain amount of surprise.

"Surprisingly, yes," said Glade. "I'd never known this while I lived with Lady Demure. But even amongst the Knights there were those who believed the way they treated people from other tribes was immoral. This couple was rewarded in their hour of need and not only by people from my tribe. It was heartening after the massacre to see evidence that even Knights could be honourable people."

"Have you often come across people like that?" asked Ivory. "People who are

kind when their comrades are cruel?”

“It *does* happen, but not very often,” said Glade. “If there is anything that gives me hope in this world, it isn’t the supposed goodness and wisdom of the spirits but the extent to which some people stay true to basic principles of goodness when all around them is nothing but vice.”

Very soon, and much too soon as far as Ivory was concerned, Chief Cave Lion returned to see the shaman and her apprentice. He told Glade that the Reindeer Herders were making more demands on her talents. A queue of mostly women was waiting to see her. Glade kissed her apprentice goodbye and left Ivory alone with the Chief. Ivory’s main hope was that the coil of brittle weave the shaman had inserted inside her would guard off impregnation. Only a woman with Glade’s experience of inserting her hand deep inside a woman’s vagina could have placed it in so deeply and yet so gently.

“Obviously I can’t be here all day to introduce you to the men who you’ll have the pleasure and duty of servicing,” said Chief Cave Lion with a sympathetic smile. “I know it will be hard on you, my dear, but remember that the reputation of the whole village rests on you. As the day goes by, my son will escort in one man after another from the Reindeer Herder chief’s court. I don’t need to remind you that the good report they have of you reflects well on the honour of the whole village.”

Ivory nodded, but she shivered with dread. Her experience with the Reindeer Herder chief hadn’t been as bad as she’d feared and she hoped that the other men would also be good lovers. She smiled bravely at the Chief who kissed her tenderly on the lips

and turned about to leave. Once again, Ivory was left alone in the Chief's huge tent lit by two or more fires whose smoke obscured the Chief as he departed. Where were the rest of Chief Cave Lion's family? Ivory didn't know and perhaps cared even less. All she knew was that this day would soon be marked by the greatest ordeal of her life so far.

And so it proved to be.

It didn't auger at all well when the Chief's son ushered in the first of the long train of lovers Ivory would get to know rather more intimately than she'd have otherwise wished. Ivory never got to know his name but he was exactly what she had feared. He was an old man, older than even the Chief, with an empty eye socket that leaked viscous pus and who took much longer to stir to erection than she'd hoped. When he was finally aroused enough to fuck her he did so brutally and unskillfully. Ivory's only pleasure was when he stopped after only a few minutes and spurted a puddle of semen inside her.

The next was a much younger boy whose lovemaking was so inexpert that Ivory suspected that it was his first time. He came to erection almost instantly, penetrated her with no warning, and his stiff penis brought her nothing but pain. Fortunately, he finished rather sooner than his older cousin.

Then there were a series of men who were all much the same age as the Reindeer Herder chief and whose fucking was more expert but left Ivory bruised and wretched. As one fuck followed another she became increasingly inured to the pain of it, although each successive one became a further source of soreness. She was able to distinguish each man more by reference to the length and thickness of the penis than by any other feature. Ivory had no idea that there was so much variation in the shape and proportion

of a man's cock, but once inside her it was just yet another unwelcome intrusion.

It was midday before the series of men at last came to a pause and Ivory could collapse exhausted on the bed. Her vagina felt numb, her face was scraped raw by the beards of her many lovers and every limb ached from the efforts she'd made to show at least some pretence of enthusiasm. She was still determined not to let down the honour of her village.

As she lay on the thick furs, she gazed upwards at the steep sides of the tepee where shadows flickered in the light given off by the fires. She listened enviously to the continuing sounds of celebration whose muffled echo vibrated against the thick hides of the tent. If only she could join in the merrymaking. If only she could be one of those dancing to the drums.

Ptarmigan entered the tent carrying a huge oak leaf on which was laid morsels of reindeer and aurochs meat. She watched silently as Ivory wolfed down the meat which served to replenish some of the energy she'd expended. Ptarmigan smiled at her when Ivory swallowed the last of her repast and flopped down on the bed. Ivory remained naked throughout. Perspiration dripped down her thighs and chest. There was a constant seepage of semen from between her legs she was sure Ptarmigan had noticed.

However, she was beyond caring what the Chief's wife might think. She knew her ordeal wasn't over and this respite was but a brief pause until once again she would have another Reindeer Herder's prick thrust deep inside her.

So it was, as one man after another was escorted into the tent. The Reindeer Herders had thick tangled beards and smelt of not having washed for a very long time. Filthy scarred fingers gripped her breasts. Slobbery lips and chipped teeth nibbled at her face and nipples. Cocks were thrust unceremoniously inside her. Not one of the men

said very much and Ivory was feeling ever more used and abused.

More old men. A few younger ones. Most men were of about the same age as their chief. They were just as heavily bearded, just as lithe and sinewy, and all in the same haste to penetrate her. Was this all she had become? A receptacle for male semen. Most was ejaculated inside her, although so much had been expended that it dripped out and provided the primary lubricant for the next fuck as her own vaginal juices were drained. The men ejaculated with a gasp, a curse or a grunt, before they finished with her. None of them showed her more than the most perfunctory respect after they had used her. Ivory believed they viewed her hardly as human at all. She was just meat to be savoured, tasted, used and discarded.

At last, the pause between one man and the next stretched out for so long she could be sure that the ordeal was over. At least for the moment. She rolled to one side in a foetal ball and rubbed her fingers over her reddened raw vulva. She could smell Reindeer Herder odour all over her. What she most wanted to do was to wash off all this recycled perspiration and rest for as long as she possibly could.

Glade must have known this was what she wanted, as it was she who next entered the tent. She carried a clay pot of lightly warmed water; and with a cloth of deer-hide and very few words she washed Ivory's body of the semen stains and stale odour that caked her pale skin. Her words were sympathetic and reassuring. "You poor poor dear!" she said again and again.

Ivory was at last able to articulate. "Are there more men?" she asked.

"Are you hungry for more, my sweetest?" asked Glade with a smile. She clearly intended it as a joke. When she saw that Ivory was too distressed to respond with reciprocal humour, she let her smile evaporate. "No, there are no more men. At least,

not for a while. Get dressed when you can and we'll join the merrymaking."

Ivory had lost her appetite even for that. "I just want to sleep," she implored.

Glade studied her steadily. "Too much too soon," she said mostly to herself. "I'll speak to the Chief. I can't allow you to suffer more than you already have."

Ivory was barely aware of her lover's departure and slumped down again. She gripped the bed furs to her bosom, and stared at the flickering shadows on the tent walls. All she wanted was sleep, but such blessed relief just would not come. She was so engrossed in her misery and shame that she hardly noticed whether time was passing fast or slowly. She could hear the singing and dancing and music playing from outside, but although part of her would love to be one of those enjoying the party she much more desired oblivion.

Glade arrived later with Chief Cave Lion and his wife. They hovered above her as she lay crumpled up inside the comforting womb of the bedsheets.

"It would not honour our village at all," said the shaman, "to bestow on the Reindeer Herders a wretch like this."

"The Reindeer Herder chief has said he would relish once more her flesh," said the chief. "I can't deny him that. Nor can I dishonour his family and court."

"As I've already said," Glade remarked, "I am more than willing to serve the Reindeer Herder court in the capacity my apprentice does not yet have the training or stamina to do. I'm sure that if my apprentice has the opportunity to rest, she will be better able to serve the Reindeer Herder chief. There is a real risk that she will become nothing but an empty shell and her lack of vigour will be nothing more than a disgrace."

"You are the shaman," said the Chief. "The Reindeer Herders respect you as such and would not think it right to use you as they would your apprentice."

“As you know, my shamanic skills extend to those of the carnal nature,” Glade insisted. “The Reindeer Herders will not be disappointed and you shall be known as the chief who made the greatest sacrifice by offering his shaman to the service of their virile pleasure.”

“But you’re also much older than the apprentice,” the Chief reminded her. “You no longer have her lustre of youth.”

“In the giving of satisfaction,” the shaman said as she smiled knowingly at the Chief’s wife, “experience can bring more delight than can the young but naïve. When a man enters the portal of desire, what matters is less its adornment by young and buxom flesh but how well it can sate a man’s lust. I insist, my lord. My apprentice needs rest. Perhaps when she’s recovered from her exertions she can give better of herself to the Reindeer Herder chief whose body she only this morning craved.”

The Chief mused for a moment. He scratched his thick beard and pinched his forehead in his gnarled fingers. “I am reluctant to provide the Reindeer Herder court with a woman who no longer has your apprentice’s beauty and youth,” he said at last. “But I recognise that your apprentice has much more to learn in the ways of making love and needs to show rather more endurance. There are no other suitable women in the village, but I cannot fail my duty as the Reindeer Herder’s host. So, I have no choice but to accept your offer.”

“Thank you, my lord,” said the shaman who smiled reassuringly at a much relieved Ivory.

“But when the Reindeer Herder chief beckons for your apprentice,” Chief Cave Lion continued, “she shall be obliged to answer his call.”

Ivory looked up at the Chief. “Thank you. Thank you,” she whispered.

A huge weight was suddenly lifted from her. Her weariness overcame her and she quite suddenly gave way to sleep in the thick fur of Glade's arms.

Chapter Eleven

The noisy festivities that had continued through the day were well over when Glade eventually returned to her tepee. The village was now silent apart from the muffled snores of the Reindeer Herders asleep in the chill open air and the occasional howl or bark from distant nocturnal beasts. Ivory stirred as Glade rustled about. Her bleary eyes fixed on her lover. Glade was weary but her fatigue was quite different from that which had overwhelmed her apprentice.

“Have you...?” asked Ivory. She struggled to find the words to describe the duty for which the shaman had volunteered to substitute.

Glade nodded. “It was more exertion than I’ve had for many years,” she confessed with a smile, “but I’m feeling fine. No need to fret.” She pulled off her furs and nestled naked under the bedsheets next to her young lover. “You needn’t be concerned about the stench of male sex on my body. I took the precaution of washing before I entered the tent.”

Ivory smiled. It was an anxiety she’d not been aware of but somehow the knowledge that she needn’t be so reminded of her sexual torment comforted her. She enveloped an arm round Glade’s shoulders and kissed her tenderly on the lips.

“Thank you,” she whispered as she gazed lovingly into the shaman’s large brown eyes.

Glade could see that Ivory was no more enthusiastic than she on the sexual congress that normally accompanied their being in bed together, so she asked: “Do you want to know what happened on the days after the slave rebellion?”

Ivory nodded. Glade’s life story fascinated her. The world beyond the mammoth

steppes was so alien. Even the notion of a climate warm enough that people didn't need to wear clothes, together with the titillating insight that many chose not to do so, was intriguing enough.

“It took only a day or so for the new regime in what had been the Knights' village to take shape,” Glade continued. “The emancipated slaves settled in clusters of huts near each other according to the tribes to which they once belonged. My tribe and Mimosa's were the ones most heavily represented, presumably because ours were the tribes most recently enslaved. It saddened me that there were so many whose tribe was represented by so few survivors. Some of the dispossessed chose to associate with our tribe, whilst others gathered together as a tribe of orphans. All the few surviving Knights chose to shelter with the Forest People. One virtue that distinguishes my tribe of which I'm proud is our total lack of race hatred.”

“So what happened to the tribes of the orphans?” Ivory wondered.

“They were very nearly extinct. The Knights' policy of conquest and enslavement had the result that few of those from the many tribes that once roamed the savannah now lived in sufficient numbers for their tribe to survive. The Knights had been like a wild fire in the forest that burns up everything in its path.”

The two most populous tribes were also the ones most unlike each other. Glade's tribe of Forest People was egalitarian and easygoing. Mimosa's tribe of Mountain Warriors was hierarchical and disciplined. Glade's people were pacifist and gentle, which was definitely not true of the Mountain Warriors. Glade's tribe knew nothing of

clothes, whilst within hours of the village's liberation the Mountain Warriors were adorning themselves with the pelt of slaughtered animals. These were the first clothes that Glade had ever seen, though unlike those in the frozen north they were decorative adornments not used for keeping the Mountain Warriors warm and certainly not for reasons of modesty. Unlike the furs worn by Ivory's tribe, the animal skins were flamboyantly arranged such that the bosom and genitals were always on display. It was as necessary a part of the Mountain Warriors' culture as it was of the Knights' to flaunt testimony of their sexuality.

The Forest People had much time to make up after the years of servitude they'd suffered. Unlike the Mountain Warriors who found their release in violence and the wilful desecration of the religious icons the Knights had held so dear, Glade's tribe found consolation in sharing one another's bodies. And also with whomsoever else they were sheltering with. Not everyone from the other tribes appreciated this. Some soon made their excuses and settled in huts where they weren't surrounded by the ceaseless carnal recreation that was so natural to the Forest People.

"You lot are as bad as the fucking Knights!" complained one woman as she left the hut to live in one settled by people of a dark brown, curly-haired race. "All you ever do is fuck each other!"

Nonetheless, Glade was no more disposed to moderate her behaviour than anyone else from her tribe. The most natural thing in the world was to fuck. In common with her fellow Forest People she did so publicly and with as many people as were willing.

Her first and most treasured fuck was with Tree Shrew, while being cheered on by Macaque and, rather less enthusiastically, Dignity who clung tremulously to her

lover. Tree Shrew had only experienced sex with men during his years of slavery, but he much preferred to fuck rather than to be fucked. Tree Shrew and Glade were vigorous and insatiable lovers who paused only to recuperate before they resumed their coupling. Glade's cunt had known so little pleasure during her years of service to Lady Demure. It had been her mistress whose welcoming fleshy lips had most often enjoyed the internal penetration of fist and fingers. She never reciprocated and neither Quagga nor Mimosa was inclined to offer her vagina much more than the most hesitant attention. Now she was being fucked by a man's cock and, what's more, where she most enjoyed it. This was a treat Glade couldn't get enough of.

Naturally enough, there were other bodies than just Tree Shrew's for Glade to savour. There was Tapir who in his years in the Knights' service had acquired a taste for anal intercourse, but this was a pleasure Glade allowed him for only a brief moment. There was Pangolin whose greatest pleasure was to lick and chew Glade's clitoris in the hope she might ejaculate on his face, which she didn't always have the spirit to do. There was Macaque who, with the nervous but willing assistance of Dignity and the rather bolder Fern, smothered Glade with passionate kisses and licked her vagina clean, while she was also being fucked by Tree Shrew. There were so many combinations and configurations to enjoy after the years of the Knights' unimaginative lovemaking.

As Glade chewed at the growing stubble about Dignity's crotch, she was reminded of Demure whose vagina was the one with which she'd been most intimate for so long. Despite her joy at no longer being a slave, she was surprised to discover that she was yearning once more for those pink inner lips and that hard clitoris.

"After all the suffering you'd endured?" remarked Ivory with astonishment.

"Despite all my years of experience, amongst so many different tribes and with

so many men and women,” said Glade, “the passions of the flesh and the avenues it has taken me remain the greatest of all mysteries. As much as I recognised that Lady Demure regarded me more as a plaything than a lover, I’d come to feel affection towards her. She had, after all, been the person, male or female, with whom I’d most often made love in all those years.”

The way in which the village was now organised wasn’t at all to Glade’s liking. When she watched the Mountain Warriors preen and stride about, she wondered how long they would remain tolerant of those in their midst whose way of life was so very different.

“They’re as bad as the Knights,” remarked Macaque bitterly when a Mountain Warrior had been chased away after he’d unsuccessfully demanded that Dignity be surrendered to what he believed were her just deserts. “It seems we’ve deposed one set of tyrants only for them to be replaced by another lot that’s just the same.”

Glade understood Macaque’s sentiment. After all, her lover was in real risk. Furthermore, there were also physical similarities given that the Mountain Warriors’ skin was as black as that of the Knights. Skin colour varied amongst the enslaved tribes in the Knights’ village. There were as many with black or very dark skin as there were those with the brown skin of the Forest People, but the comparison with the Knights was unavoidable. Glade also had to admit that her tribe was too pacifist—meek even—to have taken up arms against their oppressors. The rebellion could only have succeeded if it was led by a tribe with a culture as violent as that of their captors. It was part of the Knights’ tragedy that amongst the last tribes they’d subjugated should be one whose rebellion was most likely to succeed.

The Forest People also lacked the Mountain Warriors’ practical understanding

of social organisation. It was inconceivable for one Forest Person to take prominence over another. This made them even less able to stand firm against the Mountain Warriors' demands. Indeed, when the Mountain Warriors did want to speak to a representative of the Forest People they were frustrated to not find anyone who would volunteer for the role.

"I don't fucking care!" said Lady Mimosa, as she was now styled. "One of you will speak for your tribe and it is of no concern to me who it is."

Glade, Tree Shrew, Fern and a handful of other Forest People stood by the shrine to Rock Baboon that had become an unofficial meeting point for the two tribes. Ahead of them stood an equal number of Mountain Warriors, together with women from other tribes who'd chosen to shelter with them and were now treated more as servants to their new masters than as their equals. Lady Mimosa wore a leopard skin fastened about her shoulders, a necklace of pebbles cascaded over her full bosom, and leather bracelets adorned her arms and legs. Her crotch and nipples were uncovered, whilst the stubble of hair on her head was hidden beneath an overbearing headpiece of bird-feathers. The hair on her head and crotch was short and stubbly. No one, not even the surviving Knights, were shaving any more. This was a custom that had died along with the Knights' gods and their sacred icons.

Glade's people were confused by Lady Mimosa's demands. They addressed each other in the same tongue, about the only legacy left intact of the Knights' culture, but there was still a gulf of understanding between them.

"Well, it'll have to be you," said Mimosa who addressed Glade by the word in the Knights' vocabulary that most nearly approximated to her name. "You were my companion during my years of thralldom to the vile and perverse black bitch. I shall

forever honour the bond that grew between us. It is this bond alone and the value I attach to it that has protected those who shelter with you.”

It was obvious that Lady Mimosa was referring to the handful of Knights sheltering in the Forest People’s huts and who never dared to venture outside for the very real fear of being slaughtered by the Mountain Warriors.

“Although it is an honour to be considered spokeswoman for my tribe,” said Glade diplomatically, knowing how unseemly it would be in her tribe to seek such preferment, “I shall do so only as your friend, not as one more senior than my fellows.”

“Have it your own way,” said Lady Mimosa. She almost spat out her contempt for the Forest People’s alien ways. “It really is of no concern to me how you naked brown tree-lovers organise yourselves.”

“What is it you want to say, my friend?” asked Glade. She was careful not to address Mimosa with an honorific that would antagonise her people’s egalitarian customs.

“It is intolerable to me and my people that you should shelter devils in our midst,” said Lady Mimosa, while her court nodded in unanimous agreement. “There is only one fate worthy for such scum and that is death. We are prepared to permit them a short and merciful death, but they cannot remain alive. If you do not surrender to us the devils in your care, then we shall have no choice but to seize them from you. Should any one of you resist us, we shall kill whoever dares come between the devil and our ancestors’ rightful revenge. We shall give you just one day to come to a decision. If you fail to decide rightly then we shall take action. There will be no further debate. There is nothing that you can say that will deflect us from exacting moral retribution.”

There was a pause as Glade and the others absorbed the news that they had half-

expected. Glade glanced at Fern who was standing beside her. Macaque had wisely stayed behind with Dignity. It was obvious now that the provocation of a Knight, however innocent of crime, standing shoulder-to-shoulder, as she would be, with Macaque, would have enraged Mimosa and her entourage. Now that they had made clear how little mercy they were prepared to show, there was no likelihood that Dignity's life would be spared.

Glade had learnt well from her years with Lady Demure. Tact and a modicum of accommodation was always the most advisable stance to take when confronted with unreasonable demands.

"We shall discuss your demands amongst ourselves and come to a decision," she said. "I just hope that our show of compassion to those so desperate to seek our charity doesn't prejudice our future good relations with you and your tribe."

Could anyone in her tribe be as tactful as Glade? She very much doubted it. Already she could sense the bristling outrage amongst the Forest People who shared the view that, dreadful though the Knights' crimes had been, not all of them deserved to die.

"So what did you do?" asked Ivory. "Did you see sense and sacrifice the evil black savages? Surely you knew that the game was now up and you had to submit them to what they deserved?"

"Is that what you think, sweetest?" asked Glade slightly reproachfully. "No one deserves to be punished because of someone else's crimes. A race or tribe doesn't deserve to be annihilated because some or even the majority of it has behaved abominably."

Ivory frowned. It was obvious to her that the Knights of the Savannah who had

shown so little mercy to Glade's tribe should expect no reprieve. However, she'd come to understand that in this way, as in such others as Glade's promiscuity and her lack of veneration towards the spirits, there was a gulf of opinion between them that could never be bridged.

"If you didn't do what Lady Mimosa demanded, what did you do?" asked Ivory as she rested her cheek on her lover's shoulder.

"There was remarkably little debate about it," said Glade. "Just as Mimosa believed that it was unthinkable that we shelter the few remaining Knights, so too did my tribe find it inconceivable we should do otherwise. As there was no other choice available to us, we decided, with very few exceptions, to leave the village almost immediately. Soon enough, anyway, that the Mountain Warriors would be ill-prepared to stop us."

"And where did you choose to go?"

"That's not a difficult question to answer," said Glade. "Our tribe was used to the comfort and shelter of the forest. For us, the years in the open savannah were a time of purgatory. What we wanted to do was return home to the forests of our birth. Those who accompanied us from other tribes knew nothing different so the prospect of choosing a life where the sky was hidden under a canopy of leaves was rather less inviting, but what choice did they have? They preferred our tolerance and liberty to the ways of the Mountain Warriors."

The exodus from the village took place before the Sun had progressed much further across the sky. As the Forest People had hoped, Mimosa's tribe was wholly unprepared for the sight of so many people, including the few remaining Knights, trekking into the wide open spaces in the direction that all of them so well remembered

as the path that had originally brought them to the village. Precautions were made to hide the Knights in the centre of the procession so that they couldn't be easily picked off by the Mountain Warriors strolling about the village armed with the weapons left behind by the village's original masters.

"How many were you?" wondered Ivory.

"Our band made up about a third of the village's original slave population. There were perhaps as many as thirty of us. We were a large enough body for us to have little to fear from the lions and hyenas of the savannah that would happily attack us individually. There were more Forest People than those from any other tribe and less than a handful of the Knights whose lives we were saving."

"You must have been frightened about leaving the sanctuary of the village," Ivory remarked.

"We were rather more frightened about the wide open spaces of the savannah," said Glade. "Few of us had ever been allowed to wander beyond the village, so we had little idea beyond our fragmented memories of what it was like to walk under the blue open sky. I was aching to tread once again on the soft mossy ground of the forest, to no longer have to squint in the bright light, and to pluck fruit from the tree. Furthermore, we all believed that it was the spirits of the forest that protected us. In the savannah far away from their influence, we were vulnerable to predators and the unfriendly spirits of an alien world."

Ivory's only faith was in the spirits of the mammoth steppe. She couldn't understand how anyone could find solace in the dark shadows and dripping leaves of a forest. But the spirits that guided her at the moment dragged her back to sleep on Glade's comforting bosom.

Glade's tepee was brightly illuminated by the filtered light of the sun when Ivory once more gained consciousness. She soon became aware that she wasn't alone. Glade was sitting cross-legged in front of the hearth while opposite her sat Chief Cave Lion and, beside him, the Reindeer Herder chief. Ivory sat up sharply and gripped close to her naked breast the furs that served as blankets.

"I see you are awake," said the Chief. "I trust you are well rested?"

Ivory nodded. "Yes I am, my lord."

"Good. Good," said Chief Cave Lion. "However, you will be sad to know that it is today that the Reindeer Herders will be leaving us."

"Our herd is restless," said the Reindeer Herder chief. "More than two days in one place and not even our tamed wolves and all the spirits can restrain them. It is with regret that my people and I shall depart. But we shall take with us the memories of your fine entertainment and delicious food."

"And food not just for the stomach," Chief Cave Lion reminded him with a smirk, nodding at Ivory's naked body.

"We must leave very soon," resumed the Reindeer Herder chief, addressing Ivory. "My wives have permitted me one last fuck with you. It will be many seasons until once again I can savour flesh as fresh and unscarred by the elements as yours."

"Then we shall leave you," said Chief Cave Lion as he raised himself up off the floor. He made his way out of the tent, while Glade kissed Ivory almost chastely on the cheeks.

With that, Ivory was left alone with the Reindeer Herder chief. At first she was apprehensive, especially as the man disrobed himself almost as soon as Glade had departed. His penis was already erect and twitching with excitement. However, Ivory had recovered from her efforts rather better than she'd expected. The sight of this man's naked body arose in her the lust she feared was lost forever. Although her crotch was still sore from the pounding to which it had been submitted the day before, it was soon lubricated by her vaginal juices and the Reindeer Herder chief's penis slipped inside her with ease.

Ivory enjoyed this lovemaking rather more than any she'd experienced the day before. This was because the Reindeer Herder chief was both more considerate and more skilled than his fellows. His thrusts were leisurely and deep. They only gradually built up a tempo that were in time with Ivory's reciprocal thrusts. He was a muscular man. He was able to lift Ivory's whole body off the ground even though she gripped him only by the grip of her labia and her thighs wrapped around him. He took his time to ejaculate, which he did when Ivory also climaxed. And this wasn't the first time in their lovemaking that Ivory came to an orgasm. Despite her weariness, she achieved satisfaction not once, not twice, but several times. Only with Glade had she ever before enjoyed such recurrent release.

The two lovers fell down together on the bedclothes. The Reindeer Herder chief's penis flopped onto the thick black down of his inner legs. He supported Ivory's back with a strong lean arm.

"Are there other tribes beside you who herd reindeer, my lord?" asked Ivory.

"Not that I know of," said the Reindeer Herder chief ruefully. "Many generations ago our ancestors hunted mammoth and deer as you do, but we learnt how

to tame the reindeer with the help of our tamed wolves. We discovered that they provide a ready source of food and clothing through even the severest of the winter months. It may be many years yet until our wanderings once again cross the path of the Mammoth Hunters. In the Winter months, our travels don't take us nearly as far south as you. During the Summer, our travels take us as far as the very edge of the ice cliffs that mark the end of the world."

"Do you ever come across other tribes in the north, my lord?" asked Ivory, whose curiosity had grown greatly after hearing Glade's stories of the tribes of the tropical south.

"Occasionally," said the chief. "Very occasionally. There are few who can survive the rigours of Winter as well as us. There are nearly fifty souls amongst us. Most other Northern tribes we've encountered live in groups of fewer than ten."

"What people are they, my lord?"

"There are people who live by the sea where they hunt the seals and great auks that bathe on the beach. Sometimes they even venture into the turbulent water to catch fish and crabs. Sometimes, a great monster of the deep, like a sea cow, shark or whale is washed ashore and they have more food and flesh from this lucky find than your tribe does from the biggest bull mammoth."

Ivory had difficulty understanding the Reindeer Herder chief as the words he used to describe these exotic marine beasts were ones rarely used in her village. It frightened her to know that there were animals that swam in waters greater in extent than any lake or river she'd ever seen that were so large that on land they were too feeble to even pick themselves up and return to the water.

"There are other tribes we have met," continued the Reindeer Herder chief with

a faraway look that betrayed his eagerness to return to his wandering. “Strange people they are indeed. They band together in small groups of a handful at most. They are so unlike our tribe that we wonder whether they’re human at all. They are incredibly strong, with huge brows, great noses and no forehead. These people are neither vicious nor malevolent and they generally avoid us. They speak not one word of our tongue and they are surely the ugliest people in the world.”

While the chief spoke, Ivory stroked his penis although she didn’t really expect it to return to life. But she saw a twitch of vigour in its veins and she addressed herself more energetically to the task. Her efforts were well rewarded. It was desperation that impelled Ivory to this reprise of lovemaking just as it was for the Reindeer Herder chief. Their efforts were rewarded by a second and more passionate series of orgasms.

Just like the Reindeer Herder chief, Ivory didn’t know when, if ever, she would again enjoy such young and virile sex.

Chapter Twelve

There was at first a sense of cheerful bravado accompanying Glade and her company as they paraded across the savannah with the Knights' village receding ever further into the distance. They were sure that once they were back under the canopy of the great forest, their ordeal as slaves for the shaven-headed warriors would become nothing more than an unpleasant memory. However, as one day followed the last and there was still nothing on the horizon ahead that resembled the forest Glade so yearned for, she wondered, as did the others, whether they had been reckless to have fled the security of village life.

Every day, Glade and her companions had to seek food, shelter and, most difficult of all, fresh water. This was a task for which the Knights in their company were the most capable. They instructed Glade in the life-saving skills of sucking dew from leaves and grass in the early morning, of puncturing succulent but treacherously spiked plants for their moisture, and of laying animal hides down at night to gather the morning dew. Few of Glade's companions had any experience of hunting the fleet-footed deer and antelope. It was frustrating to be surrounded by so much game that no one knew how to trap or kill. There was so much food on the hoof, in the air and in the trees, but most of it remained beyond the reach of the hungry Forest People. There were zebra, gnu and antelope that were too fleet to outrun. There was also rhinoceros, elephant and giraffe that only the foolhardiest hunter would dare approach.

Sunset brought blessed relief from the oppressive heat and gave the refugees an opportunity to rest, but it also awakened the predators whose bright eyes reflected the flames of the fire around which the travellers huddled.

The novelty of being out in the open air initially enflamed the Forest People's libido, but this caused disgust and discomfort amongst those from less promiscuous tribes so out of respect Glade's tribe had to temper their ardour. There wasn't, for instance, much group sex given that there were so few who would participate. Glade restricted her choice of sexual partners to Tree Shrew and the happy trio of Macaque, Dignity and Fern. Other Forest People were similarly restrained. Only the few remaining Knights rivalled their lack of inhibition. For the first time in her life Glade became aware that sexual promiscuity was rather less prevalent amongst the tribes of the world than she'd previously imagined.

Nevertheless, even the delights of Tree Shrew's penis began to pall, especially as he was becoming too fatigued for physical activity. Soon the troop was spending the nights huddled together for company rather than engaged in sex. While unbroken savannah continued to extend in all directions, Glade became increasingly convinced that they were irretrievably lost. No one knew the exact way home and the few signs they used to navigate by, such as the height of the sun at midday and the memory of their original journey, were far from faultless.

"I'm not sure we even want to go to your forest," complained Baobab, a man from another tribe. "Why can't we just settle down by a stream or a lake somewhere?"

"How can we find food in such a place? What can we eat?" wondered Fern.

"There's plenty of game in the savannah," Baobab continued. "What's so wonderful about forest animals?"

As the days passed by and the complaints became more vocal, Glade became afraid that the group might fall apart. Only the Forest People were adamant that their destination had to be the forest and that no other was acceptable.

At long last, there was evidence on the horizon that the travellers' arduous trek might soon be over. It was Tapir who first saw a line of green spreading out in front of them, although it was at rather an unexpected angle to the direction that the troop had been walking. As they excitedly adjusted their march towards this hopeful sign, it became ever more evident that it was a long expanse of tall trees from which could be heard the agitated clamour of monkeys and forest birds in the highest canopies.

"Home. Home. Home," chanted Glade. Her stride got ever longer and a warm glow grew inside her. Soon she would once again be sheltered by the benevolent forest spirits and could feast on the trees' rich fruits.

"Is *that* what a forest looks like?" asked Dignity, who strode beside her and squeezed her hand. "All those tall trees! Are there demons in the shadows?"

"Not at all," said Glade, who enthusiastically proceeded to recount all the delights of the forest she had known so intimately for all her childhood. The rich pickings on the forest floor. The shelter from the sun's incessant heat. The shadows that protected her eyes from its glare. The tangle of branches and leaves that kept large predators at bay.

It was dusk when the troop finally arrived at the forest edge. They eagerly rushed beneath the overhanging shadows of the trees, glad to be away from the oppressive heat and the ever-watchful eyes of lions and prairie wolves. Dignity and the other Knights were rather more apprehensive, as were those from other tribes. The forest was very dark and its noise at night was different to but no less intimidating than that of the open plain. When fires were lit, the shadows of the forest loomed much closer than they did under the shrubby trees of the savannah.

Dignity retreated into the comforting arms of Glade and Macaque, relishing

their tongues and teeth on her dark skin, less from desire than from the need for familiar company. Tree Shrew fucked Fern by the fire. Her cries of passion made well known her relief of at last being free from the unending flat plains, but Glade could see no reciprocal delight amongst those taller, shorter, darker or flatter-faced people whose tribes had never before entered a forest where not even the moonlight, let alone the light from the stars, ever bathed the foliage.

However, when morning came and sunlight filtered through the canopy to the fern and moss covered ground, a dreadful realisation came to Glade as it did to the other Forest People. These trees were *not* the ones with which she was familiar. The cackling monkeys were *not* ones Glade had heard before. This may be a forest but it wasn't the forest she'd once known so well.

"What does it matter?" Venerable reasoned imploringly. He was the Knight whose family had been spared because they'd treated their slaves relatively well. "This is still a forest. It's as good as any."

"You don't understand," said Tapir. "It may be a forest, but the spirits who safeguard us don't abide here."

"I'm sure the spirits of this forest will be as kind to us as those of our forest if we treat them with respect," remarked Macaque, mindful of Dignity's exhaustion.

The troop wandered through the overarching foliage with a sense of trepidation. How different would this forest be? There were mushrooms and fruits and nuts. Many were familiar, but some were not. They knew enough not to experiment randomly with the benison of this forest. Just as in their native forest, evil spirits could lurk in the most seemingly harmless fungus or within the flesh of the most tempting fruit. But which was blessed and which cursed? Above their heads, the beady eyes of forest birds and

monkeys inspected them. They sometimes cracked into mocking cries that frightened the Forest People as much as their companions, as they were so unlike the calls they distantly remembered.

After a day of wandering through the thick vegetation, their pace slowed by those who hadn't learned the way of walking over the treacherous twig-strewn forest floor, the troop at last came upon a clearing through which flowed a wide-open river. It wasn't a very wide river. It was narrower than most of those that flowed through Glade's ancestral forest. It was clear and not at all muddy. It was too shallow for hippopotami, Glade noticed with relief, but not so much that a crocodile mightn't be lurking under the water. Nevertheless, it was evident that the Knights and the other tribes-people were immediately cheered to emerge from the forest and once again see their shadows.

"This is perfect," remarked Baobab with a grin. "There's water to drink. Stones we can use for tools. And we're not likely to be pounced on by leopards or bears."

"And look!" said Venerable, pointing at a pair of antelopes that were drinking by the river. "There's also game. What we can't get from the river, we can still get from the forest."

"We should set up a village here," said Venerable's wife, Modesty, holding their two-year old child close to her bare bosom. "It's much nicer here than where the chimpanzees and gorillas roam."

The Forest People were aghast, Glade amongst them. None of them had known village-life before they were enslaved and they'd never considered this to be a life to which they should once again get accustomed. Glade had assumed that their troop would settle down to live a life rather more like what they had once known: one of

ceaseless wandering through the forest taking of its bounty as they went and settling down each night in a new and yet comfortingly familiar grove.

“Are you sure that’s what we want to do?” asked Tapir nervously.

“Of course it is,” said a newly emboldened Venerable. “We can make of this river bank a village where our children can wander freely without being attacked by baboons, where we can fashion our weapons in the clear light of day, and where we can walk without scarring our feet on the forest floor.”

The traditional way of life of the Forest People had no appeal to those from other tribes. However, as this forest had a quite different character from the Forest People’s ancestral home they weren’t altogether at ease either.

“I think we should explore the forest further,” said Fern, whose gaze returned to the comfort of the dappled woodland whose trees were still so tantalisingly close.

“But we can also put down a settlement here,” said Glade diplomatically. “We can do both. The forest is ours to do with it what we will. We’ve not seen signs of any other people living here. We can live by the river and sleep here at night. But we can also wander abroad and discover what riches the forest has to offer.”

It was to Lady Demure and her astute political skills that Glade owed her newfound skill of proposing solutions that appeared acceptable to everyone, but it was still too soon for her to admit this even to herself. She was gratified to see that even Tapir was satisfied by this compromise.

“After all,” she clarified, “those who wish to wander forever in the forest can do so and still be part of the same company that lives by the river. There is surely bounty in the forest that can be brought back and shared with everyone.”

This appeal to the Forest People’s tradition of working together didn’t allow any

possibility for dissent.

“Well, let’s find out what there is!” said Tapir with resolve. He trembled with anxiety at the prospect of spending much longer in the open where lions and hyenas might roam unhindered by the dense foliage.

Alas, it soon became obvious to Glade, Tree Shrew and those others who accompanied Tapir that not only was this a forest different in type to that which they’d known so well but also in extent. It took them less than half a day to walk from the river to one edge of the forest. It took rather less than that to reach the forest’s other edge. This was a forest defined by and dependent on a river that carried its attendant foliage along the open savannah upon which no other forest could be seen.

This revelation was confirmed on succeeding days in their further wanderings abroad from the steadily better established village. The forest that Glade remembered with love stretched onwards in all directions, interrupted only by clearings and the occasional river. This forest was an interruption in a savannah otherwise untroubled by dense foliage. Even if they wished, the Forest People could only wander along a winding trail that was forever within half a day’s walk of the river they’d discovered. It was not a forest of endless bounty and they would have to harvest it in quite a different way from the way tradition had taught them.

Glade and the other Forest People had to accept their lot and resign themselves to a sedentary life by the riverside. It wasn’t a bad life, however. Glade’s tribe had the skills and knowledge to forage from the forest, whilst the others, who barely ever ventured beyond the river banks, had useful but complementary skills. The Knights were skilled at weapon-making and stone-knapping. Baobab could catch fish in the shallow waters with spears made rather more effective with the stone-tipped points that

the Knights hammered out. An array of mud, stone and dung huts very like those in the Knights' village were constructed in which the villagers sheltered at night, with the exception of the Forest People. They chose to rest as close to the woodland's edge as they could. They either slept in the open air or under improvised shelters when it rained.

Glade and Tree Shrew fucked with fresh abandon as their strength increased with the more nutritious food and the opportunity for rest, although the joy of their lovemaking was tainted by their memories of enslavement. Now that Tree Shrew knew that the production of babies was contingent on his fucking, he made clear to Glade that he'd like to father a baby with her. Fucking and fathering had been two unrelated phenomena in their earlier life, but now the link had been established it became part of their shared ambitions whenever they had sex. This was one that Glade was as eager to fulfil as Tree Shrew. Moreover, the couple now had an aversion to anal sex. They were both scarred by the all-too-frequent assault on their anuses and associated it with the horrors of slavery.

Glade also spent time with Macaque and Dignity who had settled together in a hut that they'd constructed more for Dignity's benefit than Macaque's. Fern still occasionally accompanied the three of them in the passionate Sapphic lovemaking that Glade had an appetite for, but she also shared her body with Tree Shrew and steadily more often with Mahogany. He was a swarthy brown-skinned man from a tribe who'd originally lived in a range of hills at edge of the savannah as far from the Knights' village as Glade's forest. Fern was rather more often to be found in his hut than with the other Forest People, although there was obvious friction between Fern's promiscuous preferences and Mahogany's more monogamous ones.

Although Glade loved Tree Shrew, she was increasingly attracted to Dignity's

petrol-black skin and the taste of her vagina. With her, there was none of the jealousy that was becoming more prevalent even amongst the Forest People whereby established couples had become more exclusive in the company they made love with. Glade suspected that this new pattern resulted from the newfound realisation that the only sure way a man had of knowing that his partner bore his child and not someone else's was by ensuring that she only had sex with him and not anyone else.

Glade and the Forest People continued to venture deep into the forest and found new prey, new food and new sources of fresh water. They were blessed with the ability not shared by the others of never getting lost in the dense thicket. They also discovered that they were not the first people to have lived in this forest. Scattered charcoaled remnants of fires were spread about the forest, rather like the ones the Forest People had left behind when they'd wandered through their ancestral forest. However, these were the embers of very old fires and mostly too well hidden in the shrubbery or under fallen leaves for any but the keenest eye to notice. There was other evidence in the form of rotting traps for small game and the odd stone tool. There had once been a sizeable community of people living in the forest, but one which evidently was no longer around.

"Do you think we'll ever meet these people?" asked Fern over the village fire as the community gathered together to eat the fresh kills the Forest People had brought back, which included a small antelope and a young okapi. "They can't *all* have gone."

"If there are any left at all," Mahogany mused bitterly, as he let the juice from the okapi's flesh dribble over his chin. "They would have been the Knights' slaves just as we were. Do you think a tribe less than half a moon's walk from the Knights' villages would be spared any more than our tribes that lived much further away?"

Dignity and Venerable both lowered their heads in shame. It was too plausible

not to be true. Although Venerable had never participated in the murderous slave-gathering raids of his people—a principled objection that had cost his reputation dear amongst his fellow Knights—he had an acute sense of culpability regarding his tribe’s legacy.

“Why did you spare him?” Ivory asked Glade unsympathetically as she listened to her lover’s tale under the bed sheets. “If he never did anything to stop the slavery and murder, he was as guilty as any of them.”

“He was brave simply to refuse to participate,” said Glade. “The other Knights believed that their campaigns to gather slaves were brave and honourable and they’d accused him of cowardice. It cost him his status and the Knights prized that above all else. His family and he became the constant butt of abuse.”

“But didn’t he keep slaves? Surely, that makes him just as bad.”

“At least he treated his slaves well,” said Glade. “You must understand that there are different customs and ethics throughout the world. It is more difficult to act morally when everyone else is immoral than when everybody behaves well.”

“Hmm!” said Ivory, who was unconvinced. “And did you ever return to the forest of your birth?”

“No, I didn’t,” admitted Glade. “I was never to see it again.”

“Didn’t you want to?”

“I did. We all did. But we became quite settled where we were. Furthermore, we were soon to learn that even if we did return to the forest we’d once known as home it was no longer so welcoming.”

As the moon waxed and waned on its cycles, Glade’s new village became a more tightly knit community. The villagers lost much of their original tribal character

in a new emergent culture of multi-ethnicity and mutual tolerance that was totally unlike that in the Knights' village.

Other people that had also once lived in the Knights' shadow arrived in the village. There was a diaspora of newly dispossessed wandering the broad savannah and looking for a new home. Unsurprisingly, the fact that Glade's village was in a forest acted like a magnet for other Forest People who arrived singly or in pairs after their aimless roaming across the open plains. Some arrived dangerously scarred by the predators that lurked in the savannah. One such was a boy just on the edge of puberty who at last found the sanctuary he'd been looking for only to die within days of the wounds he'd sustained from being mauled by a wolf. On occasions, people arrived at first dreading that Glade's village would treat them cruelly, but then thrilled to find that they were accepted, even welcomed, in this miscegenate community. And why shouldn't they be welcomed? There was plenty of food and the newcomers had much needed skills and knowledge.

"What of the Knights?" Ivory asked. "Surely plenty of them were wandering the world after their kingdom had been overthrown."

"You might have thought so, but I never met one," said Glade. "Perhaps they were too frightened by the threat of violence. Even my tribe would be less than happy to shelter one of the more brutal Knights. Even the rebel Knights in our village wouldn't be happy. In fact, Fern told me that she once saw a family of dark-skinned people in the distance who did all they could to stay hidden. It was a couple and three children. They'd be unlikely to know about my tribe's forgiving temperament."

What was most disturbing to Glade was the news carried with the arrival of a group of four Forest People and a baby Knight that they'd taken into their care. They

emerged one day from the forest with one of them nursing a spear wound in the chest from which she later died. Their story was that they had succeeded rather more by chance than design in finding their way back to the ancestral forest. At first they were delighted with what they found. Naturally they paid homage to the trees that had once been their saviours. However, they soon found that the vacuum left by the enslaved Forest People was now filled by another tribe who didn't venerate the tree spirits and weren't at all welcoming. In fact, rather more Forest People had found their way back to the ancestral forest than those who'd managed to flee from it. They'd been hunted down and slaughtered as if they were game by the forest's new residents. And like animals of the forest, they were devoured in cannibalistic orgies. This troubled the villagers just as much as the massacre of the Knights.

"They're nothing more than beasts!" exclaimed Orchid, the woman who was later to die. "They desecrated the trees. They stripped them of their fruit and deliberately started fires to burn them down so that they could build wooden villages in the clearings. They killed the sacred gorillas and murdered even pregnant antelope. Our home is no longer our home. It is a place of brutality and murder."

"Where did these people come from?" wondered Macaque.

"I don't know," Orchid said. "But they are not true people of the forest. They know only how to ravage and lay waste. They destroy and don't allow the spirits to recover. They pay homage to mysterious deities whose faces they carve into the trunks of living trees. They are short, stout people with flat faces and skin halfway in hue between ours and the Knights'. The men have sheaths in which they secure their penises so that they seem to have mighty pricks as long as an arm. They pierce their cheeks and ears with sharpened bone. They are devils."

Glade discovered more about the new inhabitants of her beloved forest. Until then, she believed that the only true evil in the world was that unleashed by the Knights. Now she understood that there were other evils. Perhaps the world contained more evil than good. Perhaps her new village was a rare island of tolerance and goodwill in an evil world.

“And was it?” wondered Ivory.

“No,” said Glade firmly. “Most people in the world are like your tribe. You’re neither wholly good nor wholly bad. Even amongst the mostly good, there can be evil. As you know, amongst those who are evil, such as the Knights, there are those like Dignity and Venerable who can be good and honourable. Perhaps there are some who are good amongst the devils that conquered my forest. But where there is most evil, it is that much harder for good to survive.”

Ivory was unconvinced by Glade’s plea for tolerance.

“The cannibals who invaded your forest deserve to be roasted alive on spits as they no doubt did the rightful inhabitants who returned there,” she said.

Chapter Thirteen

The relatively balmy, but still chilly, days of Summer gradually gave way to those of Autumn. As the oak and ash foliage changed hue, Ivory's life settled into a pattern as deceptively stable as Glade's had once been. She wasn't pleased that she'd become the chief's concubine, but the duty brought with it the benefit that she no longer had to accompany the other women in their daily woodland forage. And however jealous she was of Glade's love, she'd grown to accept her lover's occasional infidelity. In fact, she was even persuaded to share her connubial love for Glade with Oak Leaf.

As a lover, Oak Leaf was no match at all. It was Glade as ever who took the lead, but as Oak Leaf's inhibitions shed while her passion grew, she was revealed as a lover whose enthusiasm compensated for lack of practice. Although Ivory appreciated the taste of Oak Leaf's tender, firm flesh, she also regretted that the woman with whom she shared her body with the shaman was not the husband Ivory had once expected as her due.

Not all Ivory's life was a constant bout of lovemaking, although it sometimes seemed to be so. There was much to learn from the shaman and most of this was of a practical nature. She was taught the properties of selected herbs and fungi and for which ailments they were most efficacious. She was taught about their non-medicinal recreational use and exactly how they were to be prepared. She was taught how honey and fruit could metamorphose into alcohol. Much of what Ivory was taught was concerned with the care of illnesses and wounds for which no drug was appropriate. She learnt how to set splints for broken limbs and how to identify those ailments for which the best advice was rest and recuperation.

Glade also instructed her apprentice in incantations and dances about which she adamantly claimed there was no mystery or magic. “It’s what people expect from a shaman and it wouldn’t be right to disappoint them.”

The shaman taught Ivory wholly practical skills such as how to mould clay into the shape of casks and urns and then heat them into firm but fragile use. Ivory learnt how to weave reeds into baskets or cord. She learnt how to knap flints and carve bone to make delicate instruments that could be used to sew together wounds or clothing. Glade also taught Ivory some rudimentary words from the many languages at her disposal that she used in her incantations.

“What language did you speak when you lived in the river village?” Ivory asked.

“When we spoke to those from other tribes we still used the language of the Knights,” said Glade. “This was the one legacy of the Knights that survived, although Dignity tried to learn the language of the Forest People. She had difficulty understanding the concepts of forest-life, but she was soon able to talk relatively freely. It was peculiar to hear my tongue uttered by a non-native. She’s probably the only person I’ve ever known who learnt to speak our language and who wasn’t born in the forest. The Knights’ other practices and customs were soon completely forgotten. As the moons passed, we were no longer recognisable as the shaven creatures from the time of our enslavement. My hair grew from stubble until it cascaded over my ears and eventually onto my shoulders. Not all tribes grew hair like mine or even yours. The Knights had straight hair like ours, but it was jet black, darker than even their skin, and shone with a bluish lustre in the sun. Other tribes had dull dark hair that sometimes curled around on itself. Fern’s lover, Mahogany, had hair that barely grew longer than a finger in length and it was so tightly curled that it seemed even shorter.”

Tree Shrew and Glade laboured hard in their ambition to have children but their lovemaking soon became as much an act of desperation as one of pleasure. Glade at last believed she was pregnant when two or three moons passed by when she no longer vented blood between her thighs. She was troubled not by the familiar pains of menstruation but by new more frightening ones. Modesty advised her, as she gripped her baby to her bosom, that these were signs that she would soon show more visible evidence of oncoming motherhood.

Then, after a night of stabbing pain and vomiting, Glade miscarried. This was the first of many such miscarriages that were to blight her in the future.

“It seemed as if I was destined to never have children,” Glade sighed.

“But you did later,” Ivory reminded the shaman.

“For someone who’s made love to as many men as I have and so often, I should now be the mother of an entire tribe,” Glade remarked. “But the first loss was the worst of all. It troubled Tree Shrew even more than it did me.”

He truly and deeply wished to be a father. After Glade miscarried he made love more often to other women, including Dignity. Most of his lovers were Forest Women, such as Duiker, a girl two or three years younger than Glade, and Genet, a woman several years older. For the first time in her life Glade felt the pangs of jealousy, even of rejection. She relapsed into the custom of fucking the men of the village as randomly as she could and slept every night together with Macaque and Dignity.

The life Glade was now enjoying was as idyllic as any she would ever know. It was almost a welcome reprise of childhood. Everyone was accorded equal status and it seemed that the village was bathed in smiles. However, as Glade couldn’t yet know, this was a state of affairs that wouldn’t last forever.

As the moons passed and the villagers mostly forgot their habit of servitude, they were reminded of their shared legacy when more strangers found their way through the forest to the village. Most were not Forest People and had abandoned villages that had been seized from the Knights. The new regime that prevailed after the revolution wasn't to everyone's liking.

Mimosa's tribe had ascended in status from being just one of the many enslaved tribes to one that assumed primacy over all the others. Those like the Forest People who were least adaptable to the Mountain Warriors' culture discovered that they were no longer so welcome. As the refugees arrived in dribs and drabs, some opting to settle down in the village and others to move on, they carried news of the world Glade had left behind.

A new history was taking shape of the recent revolution and it was one which differed from the account Glade knew from overhearing her captors' conversation. The story now was that there had been a rebellion led by a martyr who had died an honourable death and was now venerated as the father of the revolution. Glade was surprised to learn that the martyr's name was Rock Baboon and she wondered whether it was the man of the same name who'd been murdered in her village. Perhaps it was just a very common name. The tale was also of the Mountain Warriors' Queen who had led the resultant revolt and that it was she who'd assassinated the King of the Knights. This surprised Glade even more. She'd not been aware that Mimosa's people even had a Queen. But the stories that circulated were undoubtedly rousing. These were tales of her bravery in the face of the Knights' cruel vindictiveness and of how she inspired revolt among other tribes as well as the Mountain Warriors. The legend of her courage and leadership was further embellished by reports from the more recent visitors who,

even though they'd abandoned the savannah, were united in their respect for this Queen. Glade was also stirred to admiration.

Then she discovered that the Queen's name was Mimosa. And not only this, but that she had been the slave and forced concubine of the wicked and thoroughly evil Queen of all Knights.

This was the first time that Glade discovered how legends were manufactured, of their potency and, most of all, how very untrue they could be.

"Are you saying that this Queen Mimosa was the same woman who shared your hut with Lady Demure?" asked Ivory who wondered how this could be.

"The very same."

"How can that be?" wondered Ivory. She attached great value to the legends of her tribe and had never once doubted their truth.

"Evidently, Mimosa had chosen to reinvent herself as she would like to be remembered," said Glade with an ironic smile. "The worst of it was not just that Mimosa was now the person of the highest status in what had once been the Knights' domain but that her people had resurrected the same hierarchical order that was so alien to my tribe."

As was to be the pattern for the rest of Glade's life, when change came, as in retrospect it was so obvious it would, it came unexpectedly. It was while Glade was making love with Macaque and Dignity that she heard a hubbub of excitement from outside their hut. Although it was midday and most people would normally be either hunting in the forest or sheltering in their huts away from the oppressive midday heat, these were the animated sounds most often heard at dusk or in the early morning.

Glade was enjoying cunnilingus and didn't welcome the interruption. Dignity's

strong white teeth were chewing her labia and her own tongue and fist was busily agitating Macaque's moist vagina, which had already spurted onto Glade's chin and cheeks. The smell of Macaque's pleasure was overpowering and intoxicating, but Glade was intent on returning her tongue to Dignity's salty sweat-sodden black skin, perhaps even to chew once again on the odorous hairs under her armpits.

The light into the hut was momentarily obscured as Tree Shrew scrambled in. He crouched down by the three women and smiled indulgently at their lovemaking. It was likely that he was tempted to take part as he would have been very welcome to do, but instead he addressed the women with urgency.

"We have visitors," he announced.

"So?" said Macaque. "Can't it wait? We're busy."

"There are seven or eight of them," Tree Shrew continued heedlessly. "They're Mountain Warriors, like Mimosa, and they want to address the whole village."

"Do they wish to join our village?" asked Dignity. She asked in good faith, but it was clear she was alarmed by the announcement. No Mountain Warrior had ventured into the village before and she remembered too well their threats to kill her and the other surviving Knights.

"I think they're a kind of delegation from the Queen," he said. "You know, this Queen Mimosa we've heard so much about."

"I think we'll stay here," said Macaque, on behalf of herself and her lover. "My last memories of that woman aren't very good ones."

Glade decided otherwise and followed Tree Shrew out of the hut. At the village's heart was a gathering of all the villagers with the exception of the refugee Knights. Or all the Knights that is, except Venerable who sat behind everyone else

hoping that his shoulder length hair and thick beard might disguise him from the delegation who were sitting opposite the villagers. The Mountain Warriors were a mixture of men and women, all with bushy black hair. They were armed with stone-tipped spears and wore about their shoulders, but not below the bosom, the skins of zebra, cheetah and baboon, intertwined with bright feathers.

“Didn’t they cover their genitals or breasts?” asked Ivory.

“There are fewer tribes than you imagine that believe it shameful to display proof of their sex,” Glade remarked.

The delegation was kneeling and strangely silent. This simple fact was enough to hush the normally boisterous villagers. Glade could see that it would be prudent that one of her company should take the initiative of addressing the visitors and as she had learnt a few words of Mimosa’s language during her enslavement, she could see that the onus was on her.

“We welcome you to our humble village,” she said in as close as she could remember to the mode of address Mimosa might employ. “We wish you fruitful hunting and good eating.”

“You speak the language of the Mountain Warriors?” asked the short slightly tubby woman who was acting as the delegation’s chief spokesperson.

“Only a few words,” said Glade. She then spoke in the most universally understood language: “Most of us speak only the language of the detestable Knights.” And, as she guessed was appropriate, she diplomatically spat on the ground.

The woman was clearly impressed by Glade’s show of abhorrence toward the Knights and spoke almost kindly.

“The Knights’ language will have to do,” she said in a thick accent with a

clumsy syntax that betrayed lack of recent use. “You will be pleased to know that after a period of transition after you have all learnt the language of our Queen, you will no longer need to utter the hated hyena barks of our cruel tormentors. In fact, you will be forbidden to do so.”

This declaration sent a shiver down Glade’s spine, as it also did amongst the other Forest People. They were not accustomed to being told what they should or should not do. What language they chose to speak was surely not a decision to be made by people from another tribe.

“I am Lady Geranium, daughter of Lady Diascia and chief of my village,” the woman said. “We come with the blessing of Queen Mimosa to bring you salvation and protection. I would ask you all to bow your heads in respect to our Queen who has brought liberation and order to the world.”

The villagers did so, although rather more from fear than from respect.

“As you know,” continued Lady Geranium, in her rusty version of the Knights’ language, “until recently we were all in the thrall of the evil shaven demons. It is thanks to the leadership, wisdom and courage of our Queen that we are now liberated and need no longer submit to their perverse sexual demands or humble ourselves to the menial chores they were too lazy and stupid to perform themselves. We have all suffered, our Queen as much as any, at the hands of their despised leader and our Queen’s mistress, although such a title is now wholly inappropriate for one of the damned.”

Lady Geranium paused for effect and scrutinised the faces arrayed in front of her, particularly so, Glade thought, at Venerable who must be hoping he’d not been recognised as a member of the damned.

“Nevertheless, despite the heroic efforts of our Queen and her warriors, the

demons' evil yet persists in the world," the woman continued. "The perverts still roam the savannah and beyond, carrying with them their foul ways and their idolatrous religion. Although we have disposed of all those we have found and trampled into the dust the carved idols they venerated, there remains the risk that they may once again band together and terrorise us. Indeed, there are often reports of evil that can only be attributed to the cruelty of a race of which this world is best totally rid. As long as there remains the risk that even one of their tribe yet roams free, our Queen has sworn to protect all those within her reach."

A distinct hint of menace was carried by Lady Geranium's words that reminded Glade of Mimosa's unswerving beliefs. She glanced at Venerable as did others in the village, which unfortunately alerted their guests to the same individual.

"As I said, the Queen has sworn to defend all those within her realm who are under threat from the demons," continued Lady Geranium. "I shall leave in this village three of our number who will execute this task and who shall instruct you in the customs of the Queen and her subjects. We shall construct shrines to the worship of spirits whose eyes will watch over you when the warriors cannot. For this service, the Queen expects from her grateful subjects only a small tithe. A trifling price I'm sure you'll agree for the security of knowing that the demons shall never again plague the world."

From then on, Lady Geranium elucidated in detail what duties were expected of the village. These principally required the villagers to put aside a proportion of the harvest from the forest and the river that would be collected by the Queen's representatives every other moon. This was in addition to the duty of feeding and housing the three warriors who would now be permanent guests in the village. As the woman continued, Glade felt bit by bit the slipping away of the way of life that had

grown so organically amongst the villagers. It resembled very much the rule of the Knights, different only that instead of enslavement in the direct service of their new masters, duty was now required from a distance. As she studied the stern gazes of the warriors surrounding Lady Geranium, it was obvious that the village could only survive if it agreed to her terms.

What troubled Glade more than anything else was whether she should also surrender to Queen Mimosa's rule and whether there was another choice. There was also the nagging and increasingly stark concern about the safety of her beloved Dignity.

At last, Lady Geranium paused to signal that she'd finished her prepared speech. She smiled at the company gathered around her, but it wasn't a warm smile. Rather, it was one of triumph.

"The demons are sly," she resumed. "They infiltrate innocent communities, confident that, no longer shorn of their hair and hidden amongst other races, they can pass unnoticed. They pretend to be from another dark-skinned tribe: sometimes even the Queen's own. However, we have become expert in identifying such devils in our midst. We know that the villagers who shelter these monsters do so in pure ignorance and are therefore blameless. Even here, so many days' walk from the next village, there is such a menace."

Lady Geranium nodded at her fellows, three of whom stood up and waded through the villagers who'd been sitting cross-legged during her address. Everyone knew where they were heading, including Venerable, who meekly surrendered himself to the three warriors.

His act of placation wasn't enough. He was grabbed forcefully by the shoulders and dragged roughly to the front. Although he didn't struggle, he was punched several

times in the face by a Mountain Warrior who wore a head-dress of a leopard's skull and appeared to be more senior than the others. Venerable's face was soon a bloody wreck. One eye was dripping blood and his nose and lips were burst and bleeding profusely. He was then punched in the stomach so that he fell onto the ground as a huddled wreck in front of Lady Geranium.

"It may surprise you to know," said Lady Geranium conciliatorily, "that this man who has inveigled his way into your village is a demon. They are clever tricksters and I am sure that none of you knew that you were harbouring such evil in your company. He will not survive the day, but he will be questioned before he is dispatched. It is certain that where there is one such as him, there are others. It is our service to you and our duty to the Queen to hunt out all such demons and dispose of them."

Glade regarded the frightened trembling black bundle at Lady Geranium's feet that already seemed less than human. What little dignity he had was lost as he evacuated his bowels. This unconscious act earned him a kick in the face that sprawled him face-down onto the dust. Would the same treatment be meted out on Dignity and the other Knights?

The villagers dispersed, not one of them looking quite as grateful as Lady Geranium supposed at her promise of salvation. Glade was anxious. Would the new visitors find Macaque and Dignity before she had the chance to warn them?

"Pssst!" she heard. She looked about her and spotted Tree Shrew standing in the forest shadows. He signalled towards her urgently. Although Glade's original intention was to go straight to Macaque's hut, she dashed over to him. She was glad to return to the comforting shadows of the tall trees.

"Did you hear what they're going to do to Dignity?" she asked in a low whisper.

“Only if they find her,” said Tree Shrew. “I sneaked off as soon as I caught the gist of what that woman was saying. I warned the others about what was coming and they’ve all fled into the forest.”

“Thank the spirits of the canopy!” said Glade with relief. “But they’ll be hunted down and killed. They’ve got to get a long way from here!”

“The Knights and some other villagers are running through the forest to gather by the great bark tree. We must get there too before the Mountain Warriors have the opportunity to get organised. Thankfully, they aren’t as skilled as us in navigating through the woods.”

Glade nodded. “I’d be wise to go now too. It is better that we flee singly and not in a group. To do so would just attract attention. Be careful who you talk to. Some villagers might be more eager to earn the favours of our...” Glade hesitated as she comprehended the implications of her own words, but she continued nevertheless. “...of our new masters, than to protect the Knights. I don’t think everyone has forgiven them.”

“Do you really think so?” asked Tree Shrew ingenuously.

“Don’t tell everyone,” Glade continued. “It may be the Knights they want to kill, but I don’t think a person who obstructs the Mountain Warriors will be shown any more mercy than was shown Venerable.”

Glade hastened into the shelter of the forest and glanced back only briefly at the village where she had lived for nearly a year. She was already remembering her days there with sadness: a life which only that morning seemed set to last forever. She knew well the great bark tree where she was to congregate as did any of her tribe who’d wandered the forest and were familiar with the trees of the forest that were most fruitful.

None of the other tribes could have found their way through the dense foliage as easily as the Forest People. The Knights would make somewhat slower progress. She paused only to pluck fruits or scabble for mushrooms to replenish her energy, but she had never before rushed through the thicket with such haste. Her fear was that she was being followed, or, if not her, someone else from her tribe who was following Tree Shrew's directions.

She caught up with Modesty and her child before she'd run half-way to her destination. There was no sign of Dignity and Macaque, but there were three Forest People and two other Knights in this company. These Knights were a couple, like Modesty and Venerable, who'd survived the revolution because they'd shown kindness towards their slaves, but they were younger and childless. Modesty was agitated and kept glancing back over her shoulder.

"Have you seen my husband?" she asked Glade as soon as she greeted them. "Is he coming from behind? I thought he might be with you."

Glade was tempted to lie. She could see Modesty's distress and didn't want to worsen it. But what could she say?

"He's dead," she said at last. "He was killed by the Queen's emissaries."

"You saw him being killed?"

Glade lied, but only to emphasise the futility of Modesty's concern. "Yes," she said. "But he died quickly. He is even now with the spirits of the river."

As she spoke, she envisaged not his death, which she described more as that of Flying Squirrel when her people first met the Knights, but the suffering he was no doubt still enduring as the Mountain Warriors interrogated him. Modesty would know as well as Glade that this would not be painless, but rather more like the torture the Knights

once used to inflict on their slaves. He would already be welcoming the prospect of death.

Modesty collapsed into a wailing grief that startled the monkeys in the trees above them. They launched into a cacophony that reciprocated Modesty's misery.

"My husband was a good man!" she wailed. "He didn't deserve to die. Many Knights did, but not him. His happiest days were when he lived in the river village with you Forest People. Even before the revolution he loved your tribe. He said that, instead of being our slaves, you should be our mentors. Your peaceful ways and your tolerance were an inspiration to him. And now he is dead. Dead!"

The other two Knights, Fortitude and Mercy, were embarrassed by Modesty's outburst. The Knights had no tradition of expressing anything more than respectful comfort to the dead. They were too young, in any case, to know the right thing to say. Glade handed over the young child to the couple to take care of and showered Modesty with hugs and kisses that at last pacified her.

"We must hurry," she told Modesty. "The Mountain Warriors will be looking for us. You must think of your young son."

Modesty nodded. Tears had dampened her face as it had Glade's shoulder and bosom.

"At least we knew some happy days together," she said philosophically. "Perhaps my husband didn't die in vain. He showed that even though my tribe was cruel, we could also be capable of kindness and of living together in harmony with people from other tribes."

Chapter Fourteen

Birth, death and marriage. These were the three most important events in life. These were also the occasions where Ivory, as the shaman's apprentice, was now required to play an important part. It was Glade whose role was the most vital, particularly with regards to giving birth. Her midwifery skills were in greatest demand during the summer, as this was the time of the year when most women gave birth. Sadly, Glade and Ivory were also in attendance for the sombre duty of burying the bodies of a quarter of those same newly-born who the spirits had deemed were not to stay long in the world.

If death took away an older member of the tribe, especially a man, the solemn ceremony of commemorating the passing of his life was conducted by Chief Cave Lion. A man had to reach adulthood and to have wed to be so honoured. Fortunately there had been only two deaths that summer, apart from that of Ivory's mother. Glade recited songs of a dirge-like nature in these ceremonies whose lyrics she fashioned to celebrate the virtues of the deceased.

Weddings were occasions of great rejoicing. These ceremonies were always led by the chief. The principal duty for the shaman and her apprentice was to provide intoxicants and song. There was only one wedding that summer and that was between Elk Antler and Dandelion. Ivory's feelings were decidedly mixed. Even while she was being coached by Glade in the words and rhythm of the wedding song, Ivory lamented that it wasn't she who would be taking the wedding vows. Rather than give her away, the chief was much more likely to just fuck her.

As Ivory became more confident in her role as the shaman's apprentice, she also became steadily more convinced of the spiritual value of the sacred rites. This was very

much in spite of Glade's scepticism. Ivory believed the rites awakened the spirits with at least as much conviction as Glade insisted that they were an empty pantomime whose main value was to satisfy the villagers' need for ceremony and mystery.

"You don't have to believe in the spirits to act as their messenger," Ivory argued. "They're still there. Can't you feel them?"

Glade shook her head sadly. "The only spirits in the rituals are those awakened by alcohol and hemp. If you wish to believe in the validity of the rites and their efficacy don't let me persuade you otherwise. I often feel like a fraud. Perhaps it's best that my successor should be someone with faith. But you have much more to learn. The nights will only get longer and the harsh winter trek is not much more than a moon away."

Winter was the season of hardship. It brought want, sometimes starvation and always death, especially amongst the children. This was the season when the shaman's services were most in demand and this year Ivory would share in her duties. She would help bury the dead, comfort the living, and seek succour and benison in the most unpromising wintry valleys. Already the swallows had flown off, the mammoth herds were restless and the sky was streaked by migrating geese. Sometimes there was a sprinkle of snow on the grass at night. Every morning the earth was hard with the night's frost. Soon, it would snow and not melt in the morning sun. Then the villagers would have to trek southwards away from the carpet of white snow that only the hardiest animal could survive.

"What if we stayed here all winter, like the Reindeer Herders?" Ivory asked Glade. "There are musk oxen, elk, hare and fox."

"Then your tribe would no longer be the tribe of Mammoth Hunters," said Glade. "There are no aurochs. No rhinoceros. The snow drifts cover every tepee from

the frozen soil to the height of a man's waist. There isn't enough food for everyone to survive the winter. If the village dwindled in size through starvation to no more than a handful, Chief Cave Lion would be saddened to have dominion over only as many people as he can count on one hand."

"I always feel sorrow when we depart in the winter," Ivory sighed. "It must be blissful to live in one place all the time. Didn't you feel sad when you left your village by the river all those years ago?"

"I did," Glade admitted. "Very much so. But I was a child of the forest. It also pleased me to wander freely under its canopy."

The Forest People were the only refugees who felt any joy at being in the woods when they gathered together well away from the river. The Knights made up a third of their number. Only two villagers came from other tribes and they had come only because they were the Forest People's lovers. Some Forest People, like Macaque, had come because they couldn't bear to be parted from their lovers, but most abandoned the river village because they didn't wish to yield their hard won freedom to Queen Mimosa's tribe.

It was a sombre gathering. The refugees were anxious that Lady Geranium's warriors might pursue them so they spent a restless night under the tall trees, aware that the following day they would need to get much further away. Glade was now part of a ragged troop in a mostly unfamiliar forest and she had abandoned some of her closest friends and lovers. Macaque and Dignity were amongst the refugees but not, Glade was

sad to see, either Tree Shrew or Fern.

It wasn't until after more than a day's travel that the company felt sufficiently safe that they could risk the noisy pleasures of sex. When the Forest People did so, their lovemaking was altogether more restrained than the traditional wild orgiastic coupling.

There was no real discussion as to where the troop should go beyond that it should be as far as possible from the plains where Queen Mimosa ruled. The troop processed along the meandering river, which they relied on to satisfy their newly discovered appetite for fish and other river life, but stayed mostly within the shadow of the trees at the forest edge.

The river steadily changed in its character as the refugees wandered. It became wider. It was joined at intersections by other rivers and streams. At first the river was shallow enough for the refugees to wade over, so their trail alternated from one bank to the other according to how easy it was to proceed. After a while, it became too wide to cross so easily. It was also much more dangerous. Hippopotami and crocodiles frequented the deeper waters in much greater numbers. The river had now become much less friendly, although there was a corresponding increase in its bounty of fish, water fowl and otter.

It also became obvious that Glade's troop weren't the only people in the forest. They found the charcoaled remains of fires had been abandoned for no more than the passage of a single moon. There were signs on the trees and forest floor that others had recently wandered along the same animal trails that they were following.

"We should make friends with these people," remarked Macaque excitedly. "They are people of the forest as we are. Surely they would recognise us as kindred spirits."

“Or they might just as easily kill and eat us,” said Grasshopper who was one of those who’d accompanied Orchid to Glade’s ancestral forest. The deep scars on his buttocks and chest were a permanent reminder of this bloody encounter.

In any case, the Knights in the company wanted to get beyond the forest. They hoped that the river might lead to another open river bank where they might once again lay down their roots. However, as the days passed by, this possibility became steadily more and more remote.

Glade’s troop did eventually meet the mysterious forest dwellers. It was in a forest clearing of the kind that had become more common as the river became wider. In these open spaces, baboon, deer, antelope and even rhinoceros and elephant gathered, though these animals were prudently wary of their human visitors. Along with the larger game, there were also similarly large predators, including leopard, bear and even lions.

There were perhaps a dozen or so naked forest dwellers walking across the clearing with their children. Both companies, including the children, were wary and hushed. Although there were similar numbers on each side, the indigenous tribe was armed with rather better spears. The men and women had sharpened bones threaded through their nostrils and earlobes.

“It was the first time I viewed my tribe as others might see us,” Glade told Ivory as they gathered medicinal herbs and fungi in a copse just half a day’s walk from the village. “We must have appeared as threatening as the Knights should have seemed to us when we first met them. I thought that because we were accompanied by children we would seem less like invaders and more like innocent trespassers, but these bone-nosed people regarded us with suspicion and probably even fear. Although with our long hair and bushy groins we couldn’t have looked less like the shaven Knights, we

were still armed with spears and flints.”

There was a long tense moment during which one set of people with unsmiling faces regarded the other. Eyes flicked warily from side-to-side. The natives tightly gripped their children’s hands. Something sooner or later would have to give and Glade was adamant that she wouldn’t be the one to make the first move.

It was Fortitude who finally gathered the courage to speak. Just as Flying Squirrel had, he stepped forward towards one man who, for no reason than his position relative to the others, seemed more senior than the others. He addressed him in the Knights’ language, which was, of course, the only one he knew. His words were as meek and unthreatening as it was possible with a vocabulary more appropriate for aggression. He gestured towards his company and told the bone-nosed people that he and his friends had come in peace, wished them no harm and wanted only to exchange gifts. He held out his spear in the only conciliatory gesture his tribe knew.

If he’d expected a warm welcome, he was to be very disappointed. Rather than smile with the same warmth that Fortitude expressed, the natives were agitated. They shouted at each other and their visitors in a language that was as incomprehensible to Glade as Fortitude’s was to them.

A spear was thrown at Fortitude which punctured his thigh just above the knee. As he fell to the ground a stone hit him in the chest. Glade didn’t want to witness more and fled as fast as she could into the forest away from the scene of bloodshed. As she ran, following the same path as the others, she could hear Mercy screaming behind her as she also ran. Fortitude’s wife was torn between her natural desire not to share her husband’s fate and her guilt at abandoning him. They ran and ran—the Forest People the more swiftly—until, when it at last seemed safe, they rested, panting and spitting,

in the shelter of the forest canopy under an echoing cacophony of startled monkeys.

“So these River Forest People were a wicked tribe like the despicable Knights and Mountain Warriors,” remarked Ivory.

“I don’t think they were,” said Glade. “Yes, they did attack Fortitude. It’s very likely they killed him too, although we were never to know for sure of course. But I think it was because he spoke in the language of the Knights. They probably recognised it from the time when the Knights invaded their forest and enslaved them, just as they did my tribe. If they were truly evil, why didn’t they chase after us? Why did they spare the two children, even though they ran rather slower than anyone else and could easily have been captured? I think they were just frightened and reacted like everyone does when confronted by a threat. You’d act just the same if you were threatened by a lion or a hyena. You wouldn’t be so stupid as to fight it and you would most certainly not expect to make friends with it.”

Ivory was unconvinced. “The climate may be warm in these far distant southern lands where you come from, but the people appear to be cold and heartless. The Knights, the Mountain Warriors and the cannibals who invaded your forest: they’re all monsters. All they know is brutality and cruelty. They are naked and bestial savages. I am lucky indeed to have been born amongst a people governed by spirits who make us wise and tolerant.”

“Wise and tolerant?” wondered a bemused Glade. “How are you any more so than the people I once knew?”

“Look at the welcome we gave the Reindeer Herders. Recall the welcome we offered you even though your skin is a dark evil hue,” said Ivory passionately. “The brutishness that you tell me of doesn’t exist in the mammoth steppes.”

Glade was about to counter this but she thought better of it. “You’re right,” she said conciliatorily. “Yours is a tribe that has learnt to live with its neighbours. But if your lands were threatened by another tribe or if the Mammoth Steppes were more heavily peopled, can you be so sure you would be so very different?”

Glade’s party accepted with reluctance but no disagreement that it was no longer safe to continue their journey through the forest and that it would be more prudent to skirt along the woodland at the edge of the adjacent plains. However, it was rather further from the river to the forest edge than when they’d first ventured in. It took the wanderers several tense days to push their way through the thick foliage until they saw once again the cruel unobscured sun. However, what they saw in the distance towards the west was a sight they had never expected and didn’t understand at all.

“It’s the ocean,” said Audacity, the last surviving male Knight. “I heard about it from those Knights who’d journeyed there in pursuit of fresh slaves.” He paused embarrassedly as he became aware that he’d just reminded his company of what they’d rather forget, but then continued. “It’s a huge expanse of water, like a pond or a wide river, only it is believed that there is no further shore. Some shamans say that the entire world is bound by water. Beyond that there are only stars.”

“Water!” Macaque exclaimed. “How can there be so much water in the world? But look! The Sun has a companion on the ocean’s surface.”

“That is merely its reflection,” said Audacity. “And I’ve heard that at night the Moon has its own reflection.”

The party paused in wonder at the sight they saw, but as they all needed a drink they directed their endeavours to reaching the ocean.

“What’s the ocean like?” asked Ivory, who had never seen it.

“One thing it doesn’t offer is water to drink,” said Glade sadly. “We were most disappointed when several days later we finally reached the shore and discovered that it tasted of salt and made several of us vomit.”

The walk to the shore was mostly downhill, sometimes down moderately steep cliffs at the foot of which were pebbles and sand although the ocean itself was still quite distant. Fortunately, springs and small rivulets streamed along deep crevices in the rock, so Glade didn’t have to wait until she reached the sea to slake her thirst.

Most of the plain resembled the savannah Glade had known from her captivity, in which elephant, giraffe and antelope roamed. There were also patches of ground, often of boulders and huge pebbles, on which the flora had only a very tenuous hold. There were small ponds of stagnant water in which lived strange water animals, such as crabs and shellfish, that none of Glade’s troop had before imagined might ever exist. Steep-sided hills were scattered about the landscape upon which countless birds congregated.

The closer Glade approached the ocean, the more she saw peculiar birds totally unlike the vultures, ostriches or finches of the savannah. Many had white feathers and some were as large as eagles. Their squawks were chilling to people who’d never heard such sounds before.

The seashore was even more peculiar. The very edge of the ocean was composed of sand and pebbles. Not even grass or palm trees could establish their roots in such soil although they ventured as close as they could. Shellfish, small crabs and even a few

turtles were scattered about the sand while above flew dense flocks of many different species of bird. Some were tiny. Some were large. Resting on stone ledges by the shore were peculiar beasts, such as seal, sea cow and sea otter, that were totally beyond anyone's wildest imaginings.

However, nothing was more awe-inspiring than the ocean itself which churned and crashed on the shore. The water became progressively smooth towards the horizon, although occasionally the smoothness was broken as sea beasts—many larger than a man but some that dwarfed even the most massive elephant—briefly broke the surface only to dive back again into the ocean depths. There were also small white islands out at sea that Glade could see floating by.

"I've heard of those," said Ivory excitedly. "They're icebergs. The Reindeer Herders have seen them flake off huge ice cliffs and crash into the ocean. Do they really float as far south where it's so warm you don't even need to wear clothes?"

"They do," said Glade. "Mostly during the Spring. We had no notion of seasons so we didn't know that this was the time of year that icebergs are in their greatest number. I also didn't know they were made of ice. There is no ice in the savannah or the forest. They were strange distant islands that made no sense to me at all."

Having come so far to the seashore, Glade's troop was reluctant to leave it far behind. There were no predators. The lumbering seals and sea otters were too slow to give them chase. There were rich pickings of stranded fish and crabs that could be gathered without venturing into the water. Even though the salt water was undrinkable, there were many streams and rivulets that cut across the beach and their water was as clean and pure as that from any river. It was a pleasure to walk on soft sand that didn't gash the feet although it was sometimes too fine to walk along at any great pace.

“Did you meet anyone on the shore?” asked Ivory. “Were you the only ones there?”

“We knew there were others,” said Glade. “We saw the remains of small camp fires in which there were the charcoaled bones of fish and seal. There were also huge stacks of wood piled on top of the steep sided hills that could only be used for fire, but none were aflame. Nevertheless, we didn’t actually see anyone for days. We knew, of course, that we would eventually do so. I was convinced that we were being watched from a distance: perhaps from behind the palm trees or from the caves in the cliff sides of the hills.”

When Glade and her companions did encounter the Ocean People, it was almost as if a delegation had come to meet them. A group of more than a dozen tall and self-assured brown-skinned men strode purposefully towards them across the sand from out of the palm trees. They were also naked, with thick beards and long hair tied back in braids. They carried wooden flint-tipped spears and weapons of a more alien nature.

It would be foolish to flee such a resolute group, but Glade reasoned that everyone could see that she and her companions offered no threat. Most of them were female and there were also the two children. Surely, the Ocean People could see that they were no slave-gathering expedition.

“Did the Ocean People welcome you?” asked Ivory, who always liked to hear happy endings to a story.

“Well, not exactly,” said Glade. “But they showed no fear or apprehension, though they insisted by their gestures that we should drop our weapons. They walked straight up to us and spoke in a soft, slightly lisping language whose words, of course, meant nothing to us. They touched us gently with the back of their hands. Some even

sniffed our skin and ran their fingers through our hair. Their own hair was curly and a sort of reddish-brown. It was quite unlike the long straight hair of my tribe and of the Knights'. It was an altogether peculiar encounter, but curiously not at all threatening. When they gestured that we should follow them, we did so with rather less fear than we might have anticipated."

Glade scrutinised the men with great interest as she and her party were escorted by the Ocean People across the sand, then over pebbles and finally stable soil. The men were all eminently fuckable and Glade couldn't decide which of them she'd most relish making love to. Perhaps she could fuck all of them. Whether singly or together: she wasn't too bothered. Her slightly nervous excitement was shared by many of the other Forest Women, though not at all by the Knights. Dignity held Macaque's hand tightly. Modesty gripped her son to her bosom with no less anxiety. Glade reasoned that so far they had no cause to fear their imminent reception at the Ocean People's encampment.

"Were you welcomed there?" asked Ivory, who feared there was some sting to Glade's tale.

"Yes, we were," Glade admitted. "As we were soon to discover, the Ocean People were as much strangers to the violent ways of the Knights and the Mountain Warriors as my tribe. They could see that we were lost in an alien land. Visitors were so rare see they had every reason to welcome us. It also helped our case that we were mostly women. It is rare to find a tribe whose men don't welcome the presence of more women in their community."

The children and women of the Ocean People's village excitedly crowded round Glade's companions. They pinched and stroked their flesh while they were proudly paraded by their menfolk. It was a matter of animated curiosity that Glade and her

companions looked so different not only from the Ocean People but from each other. So also was the unexpected fact that they spoke not one word of the Ocean People's language.

“What was the Ocean People's village like?” Ivory wondered. “Did they live in tents?”

“Not at all,” said Glade. “They lived in wooden huts covered with palm leaves and threaded together by cord. The village was scattered about in the shade of tall palm trees not far from a small river that trickled into the sea. It was in huts like these that we all soon lived. Our own homes, however, were rather less expertly built than those of the Ocean People. We were welcome to stay with them for as long as we observed the Ocean People's rituals, helped gather food and provisions and, naturally, provided the men with willing sexual partners.”

“Were they as promiscuous as your tribe?”

“No,” said Glade. “Not even as much as the Knights were. But men throughout the world welcome a variety of women to fuck and they particularly welcome women who have no disinclination to give them exactly what they want.”

And this was what Glade did.

The right opportunity didn't come immediately: certainly not when she and her companions first arrived. However, her predatory eye soon identified which men were unattached and which, whether attached or not, had an eye for her. It was obvious that one of the younger men was especially taken by her. Although he had a handsome body, he also had an unfortunate stammer and had lost an eye and some of his nose in a past encounter with a leopard or bear.

It was no effort at all for Glade to seduce him. She sat beside him as they ate the

meal of fish and antelope that had been prepared and brushed her knee against his leg. He was initially reticent and uneasy about Glade's forwardness, but when the moment was right and it was sufficiently dark, she let her hand fall on his crotch and stroked his penis. Glade was delighted to see it swell from her ministrations.

Success!

And at last, having enjoyed mostly the flesh of only women since she'd left the river village—even though Macaque and Dignity were such delightful company—she was to relish the joy of a man's prick thrust deep inside her. She took the young man by the hand, not at all sure what the strangely sibilant phonemes of his name might mean, and escorted him to a shaded spot within a secure distance of the village fires and onto a mattress of sand that accommodated their bodies far more comfortably than hard earth could ever do.

As she took his penis into her mouth and trailed her fingers over his pebble-hard testicles, she looked into his shadowy ecstatic face and reflected on her good luck. At last, after all her wanderings, she had found a place where she could truly be at home.

“And were you?” asked Ivory.

“For a while,” said Glade. “For a while.”

Chapter Fifteen

It was the time of the year to travel south. Everyone knew it. It was less than half a moon since Ivory's village celebrated the Autumn Equinox with traditional solemnity, but the snow had settled at night and not melted, the mammoths were restless, and the sky was thick with flying geese.

"Tomorrow!" announced Chief Cave Lion. "Today we gather what we need for the journey. Tomorrow we leave."

Ivory was as reluctant to leave as anyone in the village, but the chief had spoken and the auspices were right.

"I hate Winter!" Ivory sulked as she and Glade sorted the herbs and medicaments needed for the trek south. These they tied together by cord and stuffed in the deer-skin sacks the shaman and her apprentice would carry with them. When they were ready, Ivory and Glade accompanied everyone around what for so many months had been where the villagers gathered to feast and celebrate. They then waited as the village congregated in anticipation for the start of the long southwards trek along the path they traditionally followed in either direction once a year. Northwards in Spring. Southwards in Autumn. The southern plains were undoubtedly beautiful and Ivory was in awe of the mountains that signalled the trek's southernmost point. Unfortunately, this land was at its most inhospitable when its bounty was in most demand.

Ivory was to abandon to the mercy of wolves and lions the village that was her Summer home. She gazed longingly at the tepee she and Glade had shared for the last few moons. She would carry the most precious things that could be collected from their home in sacks strapped to her back, but what she would most miss was the humdrum

daily routine and the warmth of a fire that was never extinguished. Until now, of course. When the villagers returned in the Spring, everything in the village would have been sniffed at and pissed on by wild animals. Most tepees would collapse under the weight of snow and then be trampled on by large beasts.

Chief Cave Lion eventually emerged from his tent. It was the custom that he should be the last man to leave. He scraped aside the snow and kissed the bare earth. He raised his spear on both outstretched arms above his head and strode to the head of the waiting column of villagers who despite the warmth of their thick furs were already shivering in the chill Northern wind.

There was one last ceremony to be observed before the village could at last begin its trek. This had to be performed by the shaman accompanied, naturally, by her apprentice. Glade and Ivory walked hand-in-hand together towards the sacred stones that marked the village's boundary with the shaman singing in her rich alto voice and her apprentice in a reedy soprano. The words were in the tribe's tongue—not one of Glade's choosing—and they were addressed to the spirits of Winter and Snow to guard the village and defend the spirits of their ancestors.

As her mother was one of the spirits to be protected, Ivory took this ceremony very seriously. It was imperative that her mother should rest in peace and shield the village from the evil spirits of the long night. It hurt her though to reflect that Glade attached no great significance to the ceremony. But then what could the shaman know? She hadn't been born in the Mammoth steppe and none of her family was buried in its frosty soil.

The ceremony was soon over. The sacred stones had been blessed. The village was bade farewell as tradition demanded. The Mammoth Hunters could now sleep at

ease confident that everything possible had been done to guard their summer home. As long as the goodness of the spirits prevailed, the village soil would welcome them back at the Spring Equinox.

Every day of the southwards march was hard. Generally, progress was frustratingly slow. The travellers were weighed down with provisions. Fresh meat needed to be gathered each day. The travellers generally tried to keep in step with the migrating mammals such as mammoth, rhinoceros and great deer, although they were also mindful of an accompanying migration of cheetah, leopard and hyena that could no more survive the winter than their prey.

Ivory wept when she finally lost sight of the village far in the distance across the open steppe. Wolves and lions would already be tearing at the furs they had left behind and trampling over the shattered shards of earthen pots and bowls. She squeezed Glade's hand though she was careful under the watchful eye of her fellow Mammoth Hunters not to make her display of affection too obvious.

“It must have been very pleasant to live with the Ocean People all year round and to never have to migrate,” Ivory remarked, envious of the better life Glade had once known.

“Life was certainly comfortable,” admitted Glade. “There was so much food in the ocean that could be harvested with the right tools for those brave enough to swim out to sea. The Ocean People never knew hunger. Every day the sea provided a bounty of fish, crab, lobster, shrimp and sometimes seal or dolphin. Even the sky had its bounty

of birds that the Ocean People caught in nets they threw off the side of steep hills. There were also more familiar animals such as deer, okapi and antelope that wandered towards the sea and could be easily speared on the sand or pebbles where they were no longer so fleet of foot.”

“The Ocean People must have considered themselves fortunate to have so much ready food.”

“They might have done had they ever known otherwise, but they very rarely thought about it. The Ocean People put far more significance in the merits of philosophy.”

“*Philosophy?*” wondered Ivory, who had no idea what the word meant.

“Yes,” said Glade as she wearily adjusted the weight of her deer-hide sack on her back. “Philosophy is the art of debate and reason. It is what the Ocean People most enjoy doing. They gather together in small groups in the shadow of trees or under the stars and talk. They talk about the existence of spirits, the size of the world, and the nature of the moon and stars: anything and everything.”

“Why’s that called ‘philosophy’? Isn’t that just what everyone does anyway?”

“Yes, but not everyone does so methodically. And not everyone shares the outcome of these discussions with the rest of their tribe.”

“What was so wonderful about that?”

“I was very impressed,” said Glade who chose not to counter Ivory’s scepticism. “The Ocean People made many discoveries through their debates that had a real practical bearing. You might remember, for instance, that the Ocean People maintained huge fires on top of the steep hills. Why do you think they did that?”

“To keep them warm when they camped there,” said Ivory who wondered what

was so special about that. “And to cook food. How can anyone survive without fire? It’s as essential to life as water, food and the sun.”

“They also used the smoke from the fires to communicate over long distances,” said Glade. “They’d devised a language of smoke signals that they used to send messages from one village to another. That was how they knew that Knights were hunting for slaves along the sea shore and why there were never any Ocean People for them to find. Each village would warn the other villages of the Knights’ precise movements.”

Ivory was also impressed. “By the spirits! What a clever idea. Perhaps we could use such an art to communicate across the Mammoth steppe.”

“Your villages are far too widely spread for that to be possible. And there are too few hills across the plains. It was more practical for the Ocean People as their camps are spread along the coast line. This skill of speaking over distances beyond the echo of the loudest shout was just one fruit of their philosophical debate.”

“What else did they discover?” wondered Ivory who was excited at the notion of such wisdom and knowledge.

“They discovered a way to count numbers greater than the number of fingers on a man’s hand. They calculated exactly how many moons there are in a year. They knew exactly on which day the sun is at its highest and when it is at its lowest. This is something your tribe can do only by measuring its elevation in the sky against the position of sacred relics. They debated the existence of spirits which, like you, they believed was the explanation for anything they didn’t understand. They discussed the nature of the world which they believed was shaped like a pebble or an egg. They made decisions as to the relative value of gifts and how trade between villages should be

measured. And they also debated whether a village should be led by a chief.”

“It is as natural as the fact that birds fly and winters are cold that a village should have a chief,” Ivory asserted.

“There was no chief for any clan of Forest People,” Glade reminded her apprentice. “Nor did we have a chief when we lived by the river.”

“That’s because your people are ... peculiar,” said Ivory as tactfully as she could. “Just as you wore no clothes and had sex all the time, so you didn’t have a chief.”

“Well, the Ocean People wear no clothes either,” said Glade. “And they also don’t have a chief. As far as I know, none of their villages have a chief and of this they are very proud.”

“So how do they ever make decisions?”

“Each village has a counsel of men and women who are elected by all the villagers because they are believed to be the ones best fit to make wise decisions,” said Glade. “Even though this counsel can make decisions for the whole village, there are also greater discussions where the whole village can attend in which everyone, whoever they are, can speak. It’s in this way that decisions that affect the welfare of the whole village are determined.”

“There must be a lot of rubbish spoken in these meetings!” exclaimed Ivory. She wondered how the Ocean People could lead anything but the most chaotic lives without the reassuring guidance of a chief.

“Indeed there is,” said Glade, “but there’s also a lot of good sense. When a decision is made, everyone knows why and everyone accepts it as the communal will. It works extraordinarily well. The Ocean People are enormously proud of their method of government. There had once been a time when their villages were governed by

chiefs, just like yours, but such a system of government is now completely discredited.”

Ivory was still far from convinced. “Were you and your companions permitted to join in these discussions?” she asked.

“Yes we were,” said Glade, “but only, of course, when we’d learnt to speak their language. This was where I had an advantage over Macaque and Dignity and, indeed, all my companions. It wasn’t only the Knights’ language I was able to speak and understand rather better and more fluently than most other people. I was also the first to master the Ocean People’s language. And I learnt it not only from discussion with the other women in the village, but also, and rather less openly, from the men who fucked me.”

“Didn’t the women mind?” wondered Ivory, who still found it incredible that there were women throughout the world so careless about the object of their men-folk’s lust.

“Yes, they did,” said Glade. “They minded very much. This was another new experience for me. Amongst my own people, there was no such thing as sexual jealousy. Amongst the Knights, there was no issue of sexual infidelity. But here, for the first time, I was living amongst and having to conform to the ways of people who, like your tribe, generally maintain stable monogamous heterosexual relationships. As someone who’d never known anything like that before, it was very peculiar for me. Consequently, although I maintained casual sexual relations with nearly every man, and many women, of the village, very few of these were publicly known. I even had to hide the carnal nature of my relationship with Macaque and Dignity with whom I shared a hut.”

Ivory sniffed, though she wasn’t sure whether it was because she disapproved of her lover’s troilism or because she was envious. She just didn’t understand why

Glade couldn't be content with the love of just one good woman. Why did she need further carnal distraction with other men and women? Ivory was sure that if she wasn't bound to the chief and if Glade could just forswear the temptation of other women, they would make a perfectly content couple.

During the time she lived amongst them, Glade wondered at the Ocean People's customary predisposition towards monogamy. Now her tribe was so outnumbered, she was forced to question the liberal sexual practises she still thought were natural. Was she simply upholding a tradition of promiscuity which also gave her immeasurable pleasure? Was she wrong to seduce so many men and women who would otherwise be faithful to their wives or husbands? If it was wrong, why did it feel so very right? When had fucking ever become something to be rationed in such a mean-spirited way?

It was ironic that in a society which generally debated anything of a philosophical nature with respect to this issue Glade knew nobody other than Macaque and Dignity with whom she could discuss the differences of sexual custom. Nevertheless, although the two lovers didn't care who else Glade was fucking they were very jealous of one another. Macaque feared that Dignity might leave her for a male Knight whilst her lover feared that Macaque's promiscuity might tempt her to seek other company. Glade had become peripheral to their relationship.

"If you wish to fuck other men or women," said Dignity in the language of the Forest People which was all she ever used nowadays, "then do so. But we are guests of the Ocean People and we should respect their ways."

This was unarguable. The Ocean People had welcomed them with no preconditions. Their culture accorded great value to hospitality and as their community was blessed with such abundance of food and space it could easily absorb the additional

burden of Glade and her companions. The Ocean People were happy to have the Forest People and the Knights in their midst as long as they did nothing to offend their hosts. It was useful to have extra hands to help the community maintain fires, build shelters and hunt for food in the sea or on the land.

“Why did you ever leave the Ocean People if they were so perfect?” wondered Ivory when the Mammoth Hunters’ convoy drew to rest under an overhanging cliff and began piling up fallen branches to build a fire for the night.

Glade eased off the sack from the straps that had secured it around her shoulders. She smiled at her pale-skinned apprentice and shook her head sadly.

“As I said,” Glade repeated. “I was welcome in the community for as long as I did nothing to offend it.”

“Was it your promiscuity that offended the Ocean People in the end?”

“Indirectly,” said Glade as she supported her weight on her ankles by the fire, careful not to dip her furs into the surrounding snow. Fur could very easily get damp and allow cold moisture to seep through the seams.

The Ocean People’s sexual ethics weren’t as precisely defined as those of Ivory’s tribe. In general, men and women formed monogamous relationships from which children resulted. Before that, relationships could take any form though these were normally, but not necessarily, heterosexual and between just two people. Despite all the philosophical debate on other subjects this convention was taken so much for granted that it was never questioned. In fact, the subject about which the Ocean People felt most passionately and argued incessantly was the virtue of the democratic decision-making process that governed their society.

“From what you tell me about the Knights’ society,” Dolphin remarked as he

rolled off Glade's body under the shadow of the coconut palm trees, "it's no wonder their society came to such a savage end. What is true of the Knights is surely also true for Lady Mimosa's people. It is the inevitable fate of hierarchical societies to be riven by discontent and rebellion."

Glade was by now quite accustomed to how easily any subject of discussion could take on a philosophical bent. Even though only a moment ago Dolphin had been fucking her, it took hardly any time for a chance comment to kindle a political debate.

"Why do you think your society is more likely to last than a hierarchical one?" Glade asked not so much because she doubted him but in the spirit of free debate.

"Because it has," said Dolphin, resorting to the 'argument by example' that was considered one of the better debating techniques. "And also because: who can rebel against a society that works to the advantage of every individual? If a society serves everyone's best interests then nobody would rebel against it. Not if they are rational, of course."

Glade didn't doubt the rationality of the idea that no one would rebel against a democratic or representative society if it was perceived to be in his or her interests, but she knew from her time as a slave that there were those who thought not in terms of the interest of the community but of themselves as individuals. Such people would ask not what they could offer society but what society could offer them. If it didn't serve their interests, they might well do something about it.

"Such people are despicable," remarked Ivory as she and Glade huddled together in the chill night air on the thick mammoth fur that lay beneath not just them but other sleeping couples.

"You're bound to think that," whispered Glade, who was mindful that others

might not appreciate overhearing her conversation with her apprentice. “Especially now, at this time of the year, when the village has to work together as one body to traverse the many days of steppe and woodland towards the mountains in the south. However, not everybody regards their welfare in such honourable terms.”

Ivory and Glade had some license in the dark and the exigencies of the cold to nestle as close to each other as a married or courting couple, but they were careful not to touch each other as intimately as they wished or to exchange anything other than sisterly kisses.

In previous winters, Ivory had travelled south in the company of her mother and, in happier times still, with her father. Hierarchy and status were maintained even during these long treks. Chief Cave Lion and his family led the procession, while the shaman and the senior hunters’ families followed at the rear. Everyone else was sandwiched in between. When the trek came to a halt, either to rest for the night or to hunt game and recoup energy, the tribe organised itself in much the same fashion. It was unheard of anyone who was not in the chief’s family to run ahead of the procession. Nor would the village willingly allow anyone to trail behind where they were easy prey to lions or hyenas.

Ivory’s status in the village had changed since the last migration and she could no longer walk with the other families. This privilege made her feel more isolated and lonely. She could chat with the hunters’ wives and daughters, but mostly it was Glade who she relied on for companionship.

If there was any compensation for the adversity of the winter trek, it was that Chief Cave Lion couldn't take advantage of his young mistress. It wasn't acceptable for the chief to flaunt his infidelity towards his wife in public, especially at a time when the travellers were steeling themselves for the hardship and privation ahead in the lengthening winter nights.

“What led to you having to leave the Ocean People?” wondered Ivory. “Was it your promiscuity? What else could it have been?”

“It wasn't me alone that offended them,” said Glade.

The Ocean People were frequent visitors to each other's villages. They would announce their arrival by smoke signals that gave information such as the exact configuration of the expected company and the expected day of arrival. When they arrived, the guests brought offerings and expected the same in return when they were hosts. The long winding coast offered a scattering of various riches. On one beach there might be a wealth of chalk and flint. From another: opal or amber. From yet another: an abundance of great auk that nested far south during the bitter Northern winter and whose flesh was much desired. In all the time Glade lived with the Ocean People there was no sign of the Mountain Warriors. Perhaps Queen Mimosa had no interest in extending her empire beyond the Knights' original range. Glade was quite content with this state of affairs.

“We shall be entertaining visitors from a village many days to the north,” Dolphin told Glade as they relaxed naked on the shore. The patches of fine sand that

adhered to Glade's thighs were made sticky by Dolphin's semen and their shared perspiration.

"Oh yes?" said Glade, who knew that Dolphin would only mention such a routine event if there was good reason.

"The company is of three men and three women," continued Dolphin. "The women will stay with us and we are expected to offer the men three unmarried women from our village. That is the way in which men and women in our tribe get to meet and marry."

"Yes," said Glade who already knew this.

"One of the women is described as having dark skin."

"Dark skin?"

"Like your lover Dignity. I don't think she is a native of our tribe. Do you think she might be one of the Knights you've told me about?"

"I don't know," admitted Glade. "There are many tribes with dark skin. Queen Mimosa's tribe has skin at least as black as the Knights."

However, it was more likely to be a Knight than a Mountain Warrior. Why would anyone who wasn't from the Knights' unwilling diaspora wander so far from the open plains?

Dignity and Macaque were more anxious than Glade about this dark-skinned visitor. This anxiety was shared by all of Glade's company of migrants. Some feared that she might be a secret emissary of the Mountain Warriors. Others worried that another Knight in their midst could upset the delicate balance of tolerance and understanding that had grown between the last remaining Knights and those who had once been their slaves. Dignity hardly considered herself a Knight anymore.

Nevertheless, the mystery of the dark-skinned woman's ethnic origins would soon be resolved. A party would officially welcome the visitors and observe the official exchange of unmarried women. This ceremony caused great excitement amongst the Ocean People. Because of the woman's unusual ethnicity, it was considered appropriate that there should be a representation of the village's very own migrant community. It was believed that their presence would further demonstrate the extent of the village's unprejudiced hospitality and open-mindedness.

However, when the three naked men and three naked women came striding towards the village across the sand, carrying with them gifts of amber, antler and flint, Glade got a shock she had never expected.

The black woman who strode with the others and who laughed and joked with the other two lighter brown-skinned women was quite definitely not an Ocean Person. It was also obvious from her height and build that she wasn't a Mountain Warrior. In fact, now that Glade knew from her long association with Dignity what a Knight looked like when the head was no longer shaved, it was obvious to her that this woman was a Knight.

The long straight hair that obscured the black woman's face didn't cover her body at all. And it was this more than her face that Glade recognised before the three women and their companions were within a hundred strides of the reception party.

Not only was the dark-skinned woman a Knight, she was also the woman who had once been Glade's mistress.

The woman who was about to enter Glade's life once again was the woman she had once known as Lady Demure.

Chapter Sixteen

“Demure,” the woman who had once been Glade’s mistress replied hesitantly in the Knights’ language. “Not *Lady* Demure. I no longer have a title, just as I no longer have an estate or a husband.”

Glade crouched down beside Demure under the shade of a palm tree. The appearance of both women had changed in the intervening years. Their hair was much longer and fell over their faces. Although Demure was as elegant as ever, there were small scars on her knees and ankles that hadn’t been there before. The face that peered out between the hanging curtains of black hair exhibited a hint of humility that had been totally absent before.

Demure studied Glade carefully. Perhaps she wasn’t certain whether she did recognise the strange woman who’d approached her so boldly after the initial welcome party dispersed. The fact that Glade addressed her by name in her own language must have disconcerted her.

“Have you lived in this village for long?” she asked Glade cautiously and still in her own language.

“For more than two years,” said Glade, careful not to use the honorary titles that had once been mandatory. “And you? How long have you lived with the Ocean People?”

“For about the same length of time,” said Demure who appeared to still be puzzling as to who Glade might be. “The village where I lived is towards the North.”

“Do you know what happened to Quagga?”

“Quagga? Why should I be interested in the fate of a wild horse?”

“You ran away with Quagga on the night of the rebellion,” said Glade. “She was your slave...”

Demure’s face suddenly shone with the light of recognition and understanding. She placed the long delicate fingers of one hand on the inside of her companion’s thigh. Despite Glade’s resentment at her one-time mistress’ ill-treatment, this excited in her a spasm of excitement she’d not felt for years. Demure traced her hand up the thigh towards Glade’s crotch which opened instinctively as did her mouth.

“As you were also my slave...” she said with a wicked smile. “And now you are known as...?”

Glade was reminded with a jolt that Demure had never known her name. Nor was it likely she’d known that of Quagga or even Mimosa, who was now a more powerful woman in the savannah than Demure had ever been. The name she gave in reply was the one by which she was known by the Ocean People. It actually meant ‘beach’ as their language lacked the vocabulary to describe woodland.

“You were always a very pretty girl,” said Demure, whose smile steadily deepened as her fingers delved deeper between Glade’s inner thighs.

Glade placed a steadying hand on Demure’s. “Tell me about Quagga. What happened to her?”

“The slave who accompanied me when I fled the village...?”

Glade nodded. “She was my friend...”

Demure pressed her other hand over Glade’s and gazed into her eyes with a sympathetic earnestness that seemed almost genuine. “Then I’m sorry to have to tell you this...” Demure began, pushing her face close enough to Glade’s for her breath to brush against her cheeks, “...but your friend is...” She paused again for affect and held

her gaze long enough to gauge Glade's reaction. "She is dead."

"Dead?" One of Glade's few pleasures during the time she was in Demure's service was the love she shared with Quagga. "Was she savaged by a lion? Was she attacked by wolves?"

"She was hit by a spear while we were fleeing from a troop of barbaric warriors," said Demure. She squeezed Glade's hand and brushed aside the hair over her face. She pressed her lips to Glade's forehead, nose, chin, and then her slightly parted lips. Glade felt ashamed to acknowledge that she was already sexually aroused by the attentions of her former mistress even while she was being told this dreadful news. "Your friend had been my faithful servant for many moons. Every night I relished the pleasure of her body against mine as we sheltered from the animals of the night and fled the cruel barbarians who massacred my tribe. One day our luck deserted us and we unexpectedly encountered a hunting party. Your friend was struck by a spear as we fled. Unfortunately I wasn't able to rescue her, but she is now surely dead. The mountain barbarians are truly pitiless."

"Mimosa is now their queen," said Glade.

"A queen?" wondered Demure, with genuine interest inscribed on her face. "The barbarians have a queen? Who is this *Mimosa*?"

"She was your other slave," Glade reminded her. "The dark skinned one."

"And now she is a queen!" said Demure with evident admiration. "Who'd have thought that one of my slaves would rise to such a height. She was a feisty girl, but not an enthusiastic fuck. Not like you, my darling." She cupped a hand behind Glade's neck to pull her towards her and delicately placed a finger on the very tip of her former slave's clitoris. "You were always my favourite fuck. No one I have known, either male

or female, has ever given me as much passion and love as you. No one has given me such powerful orgasms.”

Reluctantly Glade eased Demure off her, but was as aware as her former mistress how extraordinarily excited she was at their unexpected reunion. Her breath was short. Her heart was beating ferociously. Her brow had exploded in perspiration.

“Why have you come to live in this village?” asked Glade. “Was it because you’d heard that I was living here?”

“No, not at all,” said Demure, who was not so easily distracted and made sure that her hand still rested on Glade’s thigh. “I am a woman in pursuit of a husband and this village has many men in pursuit of a wife.” She returned her lips to Glade’s and kissed her again. “But had I known you were here I would have come much sooner.”

“Get off me!” cried Glade who at last expressed her indignation. “I’m not your slave any more. In this village we are all equal. You have no hold on me.”

“Of course not, sweetheart,” said Demure in a chastened tone. “There is a new world order and amongst the Ocean People there are no mistresses and there are no slaves. Please forgive me the error of my old unreconstructed ways. The shock of losing everything has been hard on me and I was *so* pleased to meet a former lover.”

“I’m not your lover now.”

“That may be so,” said Demure regretfully. “But could you at least help me build a shelter for the night?”

Glade thought at first she would say no. *Never!* But instead she nodded. “Yes,” she said meekly. “I’ll help you.”

Ivory was shocked by Glade’s show of forgiveness. “After all that the disgusting woman had made you suffer...” she said to the shaman as they trudged in the crisp

snowy footprints of those ahead of them. “You should have shunned her. She should have been expelled from the village. She had mistreated you for many years.”

“That had been in the past,” said Glade. “I was sure she was a reformed woman. I was ready to forgive her.”

The truth was that Glade didn’t believe that Demure had changed at all, but she still extended her forgiveness. The fascination her mistress had exercised on her during her years in captivity and the memories of the love they shared were as strong as ever. Glade helped Demure construct a hut and, indeed, put rather more effort into it than her former mistress. And then, when they’d finished and there was at last a place of privacy for them in the village, she and her former mistress fell together onto the sandy floor and abandoned themselves to urgent, passionate and exhausting love-making.

It was much more like the physical carnality of full-on fucking with a man such as Dolphin than the relaxed and gentle lovemaking she normally enjoyed with Macaque or Dignity. Demure assured her that she’d not made love to anyone with as much enthusiasm or with as many orgasms in all the time since the rebellion; and Glade believed her. Just as she was certain that Demure had not led a life of celibacy—it was unlikely that she had only recently chosen to pursue marriage and equally unlikely that she had remained chaste—Glade had enjoyed enough sexual encounters to recognise real passion. Just as Glade was drawn to Demure by the woman’s sexual charisma, she could see that her former mistress’ need for her body was genuine.

The biggest difference from the years when she and Glade were tied by the institution of slavery was that Demure now had to ask for Glade’s love rather than simply demand it and expect it to be given. She now had to reciprocate the love she was given by some of her own. Glade was gratified to see that this was one lesson of sexual

etiquette that Demure had mastered and expressed with genuine affection.

“If only I had treated you with the love you deserved, my sweetest,” said Demure sweetly as she held Glade tightly to her bosom.

If only she had, thought Glade. All that unearned chastisement... There was the occasion when her nose bled for hours after a particularly savage punch but she was still expected to make love to the woman who'd just hit her. There were the vicious and unrelenting slaps her mistress unleashed on her when Glade was little more than a useful punchbag.

“Why have you chosen to live amongst the Ocean People?” Glade asked her lover.

“I was lost and lonely,” said Demure, “They welcomed me. I'd been wandering alone for many moons and was hungry from eating only raw fruit and vegetables. When my slave...” She corrected herself. “When Quagga died, I no longer had the skill to make fire. My knowledge of life on the savannah was only useful to escape wolves, jackals and lions and to find the most basic food. When I strayed beyond the savannah I could no longer fend for myself. The Ocean People saw that I was in a sorry state and they took pity on me.”

Glade wasn't quite sure that Demure's account was wholly true. “Other Knights were also roaming the savannah,” said Glade. “You weren't the only one. You could easily have sought them out and gained safety in numbers. And why did you come as far as the coast. It's a very long way from the savannah. I don't believe you stumbled across the Ocean People merely by chance.”

“That's what happened to you,” Demure reminded Glade, who had told her of her own travels. “You and your troop followed the river aimlessly until it took you

within sight of the ocean.”

“I don’t believe you ever do anything by accident,” said Glade, revealing a degree of insight that Demure might not have suspected. “You must have chosen to avoid the other Knights. You knew that they would be hunted down like mad dogs after the rebellion. I heard your husband talk to you about an unsuccessful hunt for slaves by the sea. You knew there was a tribe that lived on the coast. And a tribe, moreover, that had never been conquered by the Knights.”

Demure nodded good-humouredly, although her eyes also narrowed. “Yes, you’re right,” she said. “I was fascinated by what I’d heard about the Ocean People. Any tribe able to fend off the Knights must surely be worth getting to know.”

“What do you think of the Ocean People now?”

Demure was diplomatic. “They are generous and hospitable. They are peaceful, ingenious and inventive. They are a noble tribe. And I hope by dint of marriage to become a full member of the tribe.”

Although nothing was ever said between them, Demure and Glade both accepted that they were lovers who would now share the same hut. Their bodies could hardly bear to be apart for even a moment before their reciprocal desire pulled them together. Nothing was more natural than to exchange kisses, to cuddle and for their fingers to roam within each other. When Glade regarded Demure’s face, her bosom, her crotch, the contours of her body, even her slender fingers and narrow wrists, she knew for sure that this was what she’d yearned for in all the intervening years and what she never wanted to lose again.

Neither Macaque nor Dignity was at all pleased with this state of affairs. It wasn’t simply that there would be one less lover sharing their hut and bodies. In fact,

such a change of affairs was long overdue. Their love for one another could no longer be compromised by a wayward third partner. What horrified them was Demure's very presence in the village, let alone the fact that Glade and she would share the same bed.

"How *can* you?" said Macaque with genuine astonishment. "If there is any woman in the world you should loathe without reservation it is that disgusting cunt."

"I never liked her," said Dignity, who clung to Macaque for comfort. "She was cruel and unkind to everyone. It wasn't just the slaves who suffered. She once beat my father with a cudgel when he didn't proffer what she considered enough respect. All the women in our village were wary of her. It was said that she'd fucked every man in the village on her path to marriage with Lord Valour. And even then she had no reservations about letting a man or woman fuck her when it was to her advantage. She had a fearsome temper. She never let matters rest until she got her way."

"If even the Knights hate this bitch, how can you be so different?" asked Macaque. "You can have the love of almost all the men and women in this village, but of all the bodies you can enjoy you decide to live with the one person who, if she were not a guest to this village, I wouldn't hesitate to throw to the mercy of jackals. And my hope would be that they would show her no mercy at all!"

"Please reconsider," said Dignity who loved Glade the more now that she was about to leave their shared hut. "You can make love to Macaque and me whenever you wish."

As indeed she did that night. As Glade nibbled at Dignity's vulva and licked her pursed anus with her tongue and as their bodies rolled over together with the added weight and support of Macaque's, she was reminded of another body just as black and perfectly formed. One whose straight nose and delicate fingers and full round buttocks,

let alone the texture, colour and scent of her skin, belonged to the same tribe but who was uncompromising if selfish, loving if manipulative, and passionate if calculating. Glade didn't understand why she was drawn to someone whose vices were so evident or why these were the very qualities of Demure that Glade loved the most.

"It doesn't make sense," said Ivory, who was forced to speculate about the sanity of the woman whose bed she shared. "You knew it was foolish. You knew that Demure was a vicious woman. And yet you chose to live with her in the same hut. It isn't prudent or rational to be so intimate with pure wickedness. Unless, that is, you are wicked yourself."

Glade contemplated this thought as they trudged past a herd of grazing horses. "Some say that I *am* a wicked woman," said Glade philosophically, a trait that Ivory now attributed to her life with the Ocean People. "They say it's a sin to be promiscuous and unfaithful. But I don't believe that I am or ever have been truly wicked. I've never deliberately harmed anyone."

"This woman was once your slave-mistress," said Ivory. "She *was* wicked, wasn't she?"

"Perhaps," said Glade. "Perhaps she was. But she was not as vicious as the Knights who slaughtered the Forest People. She was never as cruel as the Mountain Warriors were towards the Knights when the opportunity came for revenge. She was never gratuitously cruel in the way that a lion is with his prey. Everything she did was in her own self-interest, but she only harmed someone if they were in her way."

"If that's not wickedness, then what is?" exclaimed Ivory.

Glade sensed that a distance had grown between her and the rest of her immigrant community now she and Demure were living together. The Ocean People were less troubled. They knew nothing of Demure's role in the Knights' village and no one had the spite to tell them. Demure never mingled with Glade's original companions. She spoke the language of the Ocean People and, of course, that of the Knights, so there was no barrier in communication, but she must have known that those who had been slaves of the Knights were unlikely to welcome the wife of a village chief in their midst. She must have recognised that those Knights who'd chosen to live as equals with their former slaves wouldn't appreciate being reminded of their former relative status. In fact, beyond bland pleasantries, the only immigrant she ever spoke to was Glade and even then she showed absolutely no interest in the welfare or goings on of people who had in many cases come from her village.

It was the Ocean People and in particular the men that interested Demure the most. When she told Glade that she was a woman in pursuit of a husband she hadn't lied. Every night she gave her body unreservedly to her lover. The couple enjoyed animal passion that stained the sand with their conjoined perspiration and left their vulvas sore and swollen for much of the following day. However, during the day Demure was a woman who focused her energy on getting to know those men in the village most in need of a woman.

Glade's and Demure's independent but parallel pursuit of sexual satisfaction seemed much the same to the Ocean People who thought it natural that two such predatory women should sleep under the same roof, although few imagined how close their relationship was. Dolphin confided to Glade the next time they nestled together in

a quite spot away from his wife and three children that he'd also enjoyed Demure's body.

"Whatever difference there is between how you two minxes share your bodies is immaterial," said Dolphin. "There are some in my tribe who don't like to see the virtues of the village men being compromised by two immigrants. That may be why your friend Demure had to leave the village in the North where she used to live."

"I thought she'd left wholly voluntarily," remarked Glade as she ran her fingers through Dolphin's thick pubic hair.

"Not totally," said Dolphin. "My wife has spoken with the other two women who'd accompanied Demure to this village and who, incidentally, have already found husbands without the trial and experimentation she appears to need. It seems she'd so annoyed the elders of her village that they asked her to leave. As no one would willingly abandon a woman to the perils of wild beasts and starvation, she was offered the opportunity of finding a husband elsewhere. It was proposed that a village that already had a sizeable number of immigrants would be the one best suited to her. I don't know how Demure antagonised the elders, but I wouldn't be at all surprised if it was because of her casual seduction of men without regard to ethics and custom."

Glade smiled faintly as she reflected that Dolphin's words were probably also a warning to her. She'd become steadily more discreet in her rotation of lovers since she first came to the village but there was now no man, except the very young and very old, whose cock she hadn't tasted.

"Fuck!" said Demure when Glade told her of Dolphin's words. "What the fuck is he suggesting? I'm nowhere near as promiscuous as you. In fact, I've barely fucked much more than a handful of men. And I don't believe that in my last village I did

anything other than what I am doing now and that is to actively seek a husband.”

“But you still didn’t get married,” remarked Glade. “That was a long time to seek out a husband and not find one. Especially given the dedication with which you pursue your mission.”

“I’m very choosy, sweetheart,” Demure protested as she stroked Glade’s arm lovingly.

“Was it because you’d fucked all the men that you were expelled from the other village?” Glade challenged her.

“I wasn’t expelled,” said Demure. “I left voluntarily. There was no man in the village I thought would make a suitable husband, so I had to seek one elsewhere.”

“Is it *really* a man you want?”

“Of course,” said Demure adamantly.

“And how can that be? It’s me you love the most. I know from when I lived in your village that it’s the love of women you most enjoy. Why then do you need a man?”

“The reason is simple,” said Demure without a hint of bitterness. “Men rule the world and it is only through a man that I can possibly hope to share that power and responsibility.”

“Is that what you want?” asked Glade who was unsure whether her lover was being ironic or mischievous. “You want power through being the wife of a powerful man, just as you had by being married to Lord Valour.”

“How else could I have ever become a Lady?” countered Demure. “I was born to humble parents. My father was nothing but a simple knapper and his ambition rarely extended beyond a single day’s hunt. It took determination and perseverance to gain the love and respect of the man who was soon to be lord of the village. And had it not

been for my encouragement and advice, Valour would never have risen to any rank of significance whatsoever.”

“But Demure, darling,” said Glade who was suddenly anxious for her proud lover. “This is not the Kingdom of the Knights of the Savannah. This is an independent republic of democratically governed villages. There are no lords and ladies amongst the Ocean People any more than there ever was amongst my tribe.”

“There is nowhere in the world,” said Demure, “where human nature is different to what I know it to be. When a man senses the chance to rise above his fellows then he will take that opportunity. If that man is helped in that endeavour by the woman at his side then he is more likely to succeed. Although there is a veneer of equality and an associated pretence that there is no rank or hierarchy, no man can resist the temptations of power and status. My duty is to find the man in the village who can best rise to the challenge.”

Glade decided not to tell anyone, least of all her lovers amongst the Ocean People, of what Demure had told her, but she hoped that her lover was mistaken in her analysis. She didn't relish the idea that the Ocean People could come under the sway of a single powerful man, however much he might profess to the virtues of democracy and equality. Glade hoped that the philosophical discussion that characterised the village's government should stay so forever.

It wasn't just that she enjoyed witnessing the debates that took place between the elders and the others. It wasn't just that the very notion of there being individuals of more power and status than others was fundamentally alien to the ethos of her tribe. It wasn't even that she didn't believe that wise government by an individual was possible, although she had yet to see any evidence of this.

What most troubled Glade was the very notion that the real power behind the throne, whether or not it was officially recognised as such, should be a woman as ruthless and single-minded as Demure.

Chapter Seventeen

As she did every year, Ivory found the long march south arduous. She was fatigued and shivered uncontrollably from the cold. Winter had arrived early. Although the snow was powdery, it was settling and had become ever more difficult to trudge through. A journey such as this would be tiring in any season, but was even more so when confronted by snowy gales and encumbered by furs. The need for good stitching was more than ever evident as ice-cold water inexorably seeped through the seams.

The villagers followed the route they'd travelled the previous year and indeed since time immemorial, but this year it was obscured by early snow cover. Chief Cave Lion halted the procession at regular intervals to prod through the crisp but thickening snow with a spear to identify the landmarks that would confirm that they hadn't deviated from their intended course.

Herds of mammoth, horse, deer, aurochs, bison and antelope were also advancing across the snow-swept plains in the same southwards direction. Packs of wolf and hyena were trailing the herds and occasionally harried them. These predators were as much determined as the Mammoth Hunters to fill their bellies before the migrating bounty had passed by. Some animals such as bear and beaver preferred to remain in the North and contend with the winter snow. They slept through the bitter cold curled up in tight balls of thick fur deep inside caves or burrows. Some beasts that wintered in the North such as fox, hare and leopard underwent a transformation that turned their fur so white that they couldn't be seen against the all-embracing snow.

"We must rest for a day," announced Chief Cave Lion as the travellers paused beneath the shadow of a huge leafless tree. "The hunters must gather food and the rest

of us must gather our strength for the march ahead to the southern mountains. There is a cave half a day's walk from here. The hunters will scout for bears and lions that might be lurking inside. When we know it's safe, we'll rest there for the whole of tomorrow."

A cheer arose from the weary travellers. Such breaks were unusual on the journey, but the Chief evidently recognised how harsh the elements was this year. The break might delay the travellers' arrival by a day, but perhaps more children would survive.

Ivory had never seen this cave before. This deviation from the normal route was one the Chief must have remembered from a southern migration many years earlier. The entrance to the cave was high up on a limestone hillside that the travellers reached by plodding through the patchy snow of a forest floor. It was a relief when it at last loomed into view. However, the Chief was right to be wary about wild beasts. A huge cave lion came into view at the cave's mouth as the Mammoth Hunters ascended the hill, but no lion could withstand a battery of flint-tipped spears and burning flame. At first the lion appeared ready to stand firm and there was the risk that the battle to take possession of the caves might be bloody and dangerous, but he eventually backed down and scampered away. This was a good omen as it suggested that the lion was alone and didn't belong to a pride.

Before the Mammoth Hunters could relax, it was necessary to decide where they would sleep according to their relative status whilst also keeping safe from the constant risk of predators and people from other tribes who might have a claim on the caves' shelter. Ivory and Glade were accorded a location in the cave commensurate with their ambiguous status. This was very nearly as deep inside as the innermost cavern where Chief Cave Lion and his family reposed in relative privacy behind a curtain of furs

suspended on hastily assembled branches.

Almost as soon as the company settled down, Glade and Ivory, in their capacities as shaman and shaman's apprentice, were required to minister to the travellers' complaints and concerns. These were mostly just the sprains, scratches and chilblains that everyone suffers from on a winter trek, but two young children were suffering from a fever that could be either a childhood ailment or a seasonal illness. Glade warned Ivory that many more travellers would soon suffer from colds, coughs and worse. Their duty was to determine if the symptoms could be addressed by swaddling the patient in thick furs or whether they were symptoms of worse sickness to come.

"We all suffer from winter ailments," Glade said. "It's as inevitable in the shorter days of the year as the cold wind and the white snow. We must do what we can so that those who are sick and poorly don't have to be left behind. There's only one fate for those abandoned and the sight of the cave lion is a clear reminder of what that might be."

When their duties were performed, Glade and Ivory could at last relax together while freshly slaughtered game was roasted on the flames of the fire and a thin gruel was prepared from the meagre vegetables and mushrooms that had been collected on the wayside.

Ivory warmed her hands and face on the fire. She was grateful for the furs that covered her: the warmth in the cave was not as evenly distributed as it would be in a tepee. The cave walls were only dimly lit by the fires but Ivory glimpsed the small shadows of bats, rats and mice with which the travellers shared the shelter.

“How could you be happy to live with Demure again?” wondered Ivory who found Glade’s choice thoroughly incomprehensible.

“I’m not sure I was happy as such,” said Glade carefully, “but I would have been unhappy if she wasn’t there. My relationship with Demure was an addiction. It gave me intense momentary pleasure but it was also doing me no good whatsoever. It was self-destructive but I couldn’t do without it.”

“There must have been something good about Demure,” remarked Ivory conciliatorily, “otherwise you’d never have fallen in love with her.”

“The smell of her skin,” Glade recalled. “The taste of her cunt. The way she anticipated my physical needs before I was aware of them. All these things were good. But she wasn’t a good person at all.”

“Did she find the husband she was seeking amongst the Ocean People?”

“She spoke their language, although not as fluently as I did, and the time she didn’t spend with me was engaged in conversation and debate with the men of the village. She rarely spoke to any woman other than me, but I was the one who provided food and kept our home clear of parasites and vermin. It was obvious that Demure didn’t choose the men she pursued on account of their physical attractiveness. In fact, I don’t think Demure had ever been physically attracted to men, however much she enjoyed having sex with them. I don’t know whether I should be flattered, but I truly believe that I was the only person in her life she ever truly loved.”

Ivory sniffed disapprovingly, but she understood Glade’s description of love as an addiction. Ivory’s own peculiar object of obsessive desire was Glade. She could

expect nothing more than a very discreet and circumspect show of affection from the older woman she was sitting next to while they were under the constant gaze of the others. There was nowhere private that they could retreat to. The cave's inner chambers were claimed by the Chief and his family. Outside the cave was a carpet of snow and also, no doubt, a hungry cave lion still scowling vengefully within a short walk of the cave from which he'd been evicted.

When sleep came it was very welcome. Ivory had slept uneasily over the last few days, but here with her head nestled on Glade's furs and with no shrill wind she slept so deeply that even the bite of a cave bear stirring from an unsuspected cavern and now seeking prey could not have awoken her.

Much work needed to be done when the sun next rose above the distant plains. The stitches in Ivory's furs needed tightening. The fires needed kindling. Ivory also had to accompany the other women in the foraging of roots, nuts, berries and mushrooms on the forest floor around the cave. The women ventured abroad only very cautiously given the constant risk presented by the cave lion that couldn't be very far away. Even without this fear, there was always danger from bears, wolves and leopards hidden in the woods. Ivory and the other foragers were accompanied by two reluctant hunters who would much rather hunt hare, antelope or great deer than chaperone the women in their unheroic duties.

The sun had only just passed its zenith when Ivory and the other women returned to the cave. They were weighed down by what they'd foraged and were looking forward

to a respite from the icy northern wind. There was great rejoicing when they returned: the hunters had brought down a great deer with wide antlers in the forest along with a brace of forest fowl and hare. The travellers would eat well that evening.

“We must celebrate our good fortune!” said Chief Cave Lion. “Have you brought mead with you, shaman?”

Glade nodded. She produced two leather flagons of strong mead which would need to be diluted with melted ice to be palatable. As there was no guarantee that any provision would survive the trek, today was as good a day as any to drink the strong liquor. It would also be a welcome relief to the family that had been carrying the heavy flagons.

The villagers were soon in celebratory mood as the deer and fowl were roasted on the huge log fire while the women prepared vegetable stew to accompany the meat. Ivory sat beside Glade who entertained the company assembled around her with tales of hunters pursuing mammoth or rhinoceros across wide plains and the glory earned by the inevitable slaughter of these proud beasts.

Ivory sipped at her mead. She sincerely loved the shaman even though it troubled her that Glade had once been so foolishly besotted with the wicked black woman who'd earlier been her slave-mistress. How could she have been so foolish: she who was now so wise, compassionate and companionable? Ivory loved Glade's anecdotes. She revelled in the tales Glade told of her travels. She adored it when Glade sang and her voice soared over the crackle of the blazing fire, over the hubbub of conversation and echoed on the cave's dark damp walls. In whichever language she sang, apparently chosen by whimsy, no one could misconstrue the passion, the longing, the pathos and sadness she expressed.

The good humour continued well into the dusk and the subsequent feasting. Ivory was happy to kneel in her lover's shadow and chat with the other women. No man would dare speak to her while she enjoyed the Chief's protection. The animation in Ivory's laughs and chuckles didn't need the stimulus of inebriation. Every now and then, Ivory's ears and eyes focused on the woman she loved. Her heart beat with silent adoration and pride at the shaman's wit and wisdom. It would be a hard task indeed for Ivory to succeed Glade as village shaman, however well her education progressed.

"I see that you're all enjoying yourselves," said Chief Cave Lion who knelt on his haunches beside Glade and Ivory. He'd obviously had more than his fair share of the clay cups of diluted mead that were being passed around the company. There was a strong smell of mead on his breath and his eyes were unfocused. "It's a good thing you are! Tomorrow we climb over the hills to descend into the valleys. We'll need every morsel of strength to reach the southern mountains." He slurred slightly and wobbled on his feet. "Are you ready for the march ahead, my dear?" he asked Ivory.

"Yes, my lord," said the shaman's apprentice apprehensively.

"It's a long journey and we shall have little opportunity for sport," said the Chief suggestively.

"Indeed not, my lord," replied Ivory who already guessed where the Chief's remarks would lead.

"We should therefore take full advantage of every moment that avails itself to us," continued the Chief. "The spirits of the mammoth steppes are now distant and only the spirits of our ancestors guide us on our way. The journey is hard and few are the opportunities for a fuck."

Ivory sighed under her breath. She could never be safe from the Chief's

predatory lust. “There is little opportunity to do so here, my liege. Privacy is scarce and the cave walls amplify every sound.”

“Then we shall have to be very quiet, my dear,” said the Chief, as he gently lifted Ivory up by her elbow and nodded his head meaningfully toward the rear of the cave where his family was stationed. A great bison pelt was hung over the narrow entrance to hide the makeshift chamber from prying eyes.

Ivory gazed pleadingly at Glade who momentarily paused in her story-telling but decided that it would be imprudent to comment. Ivory rose and allowed the Chief to escort her behind the great mammoth skin with one hand held in his and her other still clutching the roasted leg of a partridge. Although little could be seen of Ivory’s face under her wild hair and in the shadows cast by the fire, the apprentice was obviously embarrassed by the Chief’s blatant request. It was one thing for the Chief to fuck Ivory in the secluded privacy of his home and quite another to publicly announce the irregular nature of his relationship with her. How could Chief Cave Lion now claim to be the village’s moral arbiter? How could Ptarmigan abide the humiliation?

Ivory was initially relieved for the sake of Ptarmigan’s dignity when she saw that she was already in the Chief’s quarters. She hadn’t had to bear the humiliation of witnessing her husband flaunt his infidelity to the entire village. She was kneeling by a relatively small fire that she tended with a stick. There were no other people on this side of the mammoth pelt. Ivory was alone beside a recently kindled fire in the company of only the Chief and his wife.

And then it occurred to Ivory that Ptarmigan’s shame was actually being compounded by the current situation and not lessened at all. The Chief was effectively proclaiming to his tribe not only that he was unfaithful to his wife but that he didn’t

care that she knew.

Since Ivory's first tentative and not wholly successful Sapphic encounter with Ptarmigan under her husband's lascivious eyes, this experiment in sexual arithmetic had been repeated with rather less ceremony on several subsequent occasions. Ivory wasn't sure why Chief Cave Lion wanted his wife to have intimate relations with his youthful paramour. Was it to further humiliate her? Was it just his sexual desire to fuck more than one partner at the same time? Was it, as he claimed, merely to ensure there were no secrets between him and his wife? Or was it because the Chief's wife also desired sexual relations with a woman?

Ptarmigan was a woman reluctant to make a lewd display of nakedness in front of her husband while Ivory licked her vagina or kissed her on the mouth. She didn't have a natural inclination toward open sexual expression like Glade or even Oak Leaf. But she was also the only other woman whose body Ivory had known. And, as the Chief told his young lover on several occasions, other than her husband, Ptarmigan had never made love to anyone else in her life. What had become increasingly apparent to Ivory, though perhaps less so to the Chief, was that his wife took genuine pleasure in their lovemaking. However, she was far too reserved to express any but the most timorous passion while being observed by her jealous husband. As she always was.

And as she would soon be again, concealed by the shadow of the mammoth's pelt behind which the other travellers' merry-making could be easily heard over the crackle of the burning logs.

"The fire is very warm, isn't it, my dear?" said the Chief as he pulled Ivory's body towards him and slid his hands inside her dense furs.

Ivory understood what the Chief was suggesting, but the air was actually rather

cool and she was also apprehensive that one of the small creatures cowering in the shadows might crawl over her body. Bats were fearsome creatures in any place and any season, but here in their natural home they were far more frightening.

“The fire is indeed warm, my lord,” said Ivory tactfully, “but not enough for me to throw aside my furs. But I can part the furs to warm my skin against your even hotter flesh.”

The Chief smiled with drunken lecherous delight. He pulled his fur britches down to his knees and parted his hooded furs to bare a penis that stood proudly erect and whose intentions were apparent to all. Ivory reciprocated by unfastening her furs so that her front was also exposed and lay recumbent in as amorous a pose as she could to match the Chief’s obvious ardour.

“But my body alone won’t be enough to warm you, my dear,” said the Chief suggestively. “It is cold and the night’s chill can only get worse.”

And then, as Ivory guessed he would, the Chief gestured towards Ptarmigan.

“Come, wife,” he said. “How can we warm our youthful guest?”

Ptarmigan was not a great wit and had no snappy rejoinder to her husband’s banter, but she knew exactly what was expected of her. She strode across the cave floor from the other side of the fire and progressively loosened her furs with each step.

The lovemaking between the three partners was a sloppy affair. Chief Cave Lion had imbibed too much mead to be either expert or able to withhold his ejaculation. The chill of the air and the occasional brush of Ivory’s flesh against the cold, unpleasantly gritty, cave floor did nothing to enhance her passion. The Chief’s semen dribbled down Ivory’s inner thigh, squeezed out from within when she relaxed her vaginal muscles. Small traces of sperm speckled the long tangled hairs of her vulva. The only thing to

warm her pale flesh was Ptarmigan's similarly partly unclad body pressed against her. The Chief was above her. His arms were stretched out over the two women beneath him as he strived to release what semen he could still pump out from his aching testicles into Ptarmigan's tight and swollen cunt.

At length, he surrendered to nature and released barely a drop into the proffered receptacle. He fell backwards just beside a blazing log at the fire's edge. His furs were open at the front and revealed a chest sunken with age and scarred by battle, legs that were lithe and hairy, and a limp penis that flopped unprepossessingly to one side.

"And so, my darling wife," the Chief slurred, "I have kept my promise. I haven't wasted my sperm." He then laid his head to one side and stared steadily towards the flames coming off the fire.

Ivory and Ptarmigan remained together in a long embrace. This was partly because their bodies were radiating warmth that neither woman wanted to relinquish. It was also because after so many days of abstinence on the long snow-covered trail, Ivory was reluctant to part so soon from Ptarmigan's close intimacy. Moreover, it was evident that Ptarmigan was also reluctant to abandon so soon the pleasure of Ivory's flesh. Indeed, the Chief's wife was so emboldened that she took advantage of her husband's averted gaze and pressed her nose again and again into Ivory's modest bosom and entwined her fingers in Ivory's thick pubic hair. Ivory recognised Ptarmigan's hesitant audacity and discreetly encouraged her by pressing down the hand that nestled against her crotch and pushed it more forcefully against her swollen clitoris. She lifted Ptarmigan's head up off her chest, pulled it level to her face and kissed her gently on the lips, chin and cheeks.

"What did the Chief mean by saying that he doesn't want to waste his sperm?"

Ivory asked.

“He worries that he won’t have fathered enough children,” said Ptarmigan in her curiously accented dialect. “He’s said he no longer wants to waste his seed in any receptacle except my vagina.”

“But he still wishes to fuck women other than his wife?”

“It is his right and privilege to do so,” said Ptarmigan loyally.

“And do you mind?”

Ptarmigan pressed her face against Ivory’s and nuzzled her about the ears and then pressed her lips gently on Ivory’s lips.

“I enjoy my time with you,” she said shyly and softly.

“More so than with your husband?” asked Ivory, who however nonchalantly she replied was struck with alarm by the implication of Ptarmigan’s words. Were these lesbian encounters organised by the Chief genuinely for his wife’s pleasure and not merely to satisfy his voyeuristic tendencies?

“It is different,” said Ptarmigan softly. “The Chief is my husband and it is my duty to bear him children. When I make love with you it is for pleasure alone.”

“I see,” said Ivory, who took the cue and reciprocated Ptarmigan’s words with caresses, deep kisses and an urgent fingering of her vagina. All the while the Chief lay nearly unclothed on his back, surely at risk of catching a chill.

However passionately, if discreetly and silently, Ptarmigan made love to her in the furs that warmed their backs while their bosoms were pressed against each other, Ivory wondered—but prudently didn’t venture to ask—whether Ptarmigan loved her for mere pleasure or whether she loved her with the emotion that Ivory felt towards Glade.

Ivory didn't share these reflections with her older lover when the Chief finally recovered his wits and dismissed her. He looked distinctly uncomfortable as he made sense of the undignified state in which he was slumped and secured himself as well as he could inside his thick furs.

"The Chief was *very* foolish," Glade remarked when the feasting was finally over and the two women could nestle together in the corner of the cave that for one last night was to be their bed.

"Foolish. Why?" asked a bleary-eyed Ivory. She wondered whether Glade had peeked past the mammoth pelt and seen the Chief lying half-naked by the fire.

"I know this is by no means the first time that you and he, and of course you, he and his wife, have enjoyed carnal pleasure together. And I also can't pretend to fully understand the morals and ethics of your tribe. But although no one has said anything openly, it is public knowledge just why he took you to one side and detained you in his quarters for so long. It is one thing for the Chief to have sexual relations with other women than his wife and another for the village to be made publicly aware of his sexual dalliances, even with women like us who are neither married nor considered marriageable. He was very indiscreet and he will regret his foolishness before long."

"The Chief was very drunk," said Ivory in his defence. "I'm sure he didn't really know what he was doing."

"That may be so," said Glade. "But the villagers want their chief to be someone they can rely on. We are on a long and dangerous trek south where there is no guarantee we shall find winter quarters that will adequately feed and shelter everyone. The Chief has the responsibility of safely guiding his people to their winter home. It isn't prudent for the guardian of the tribe's values to flaunt his infidelity to his wife: even if she

speaks with a curious dialect. It suggests a lack of respect to the traditions that bind your tribe together. If his only defence is that he was drunk, this is no recommendation for a man whose sagacity and wisdom has a higher value now than at any other season. No man wants to place his life or that of his family in jeopardy. What greater risk might there be than to follow a chief who loses his wits to mead, sacrifices his virtue to the shaman's apprentice, and shames his wife and the mother of his children?"

"What do you think might happen?" wondered Ivory, as she fearfully surveyed her fellow travellers who were slumbering beneath their layers of fur by the fire's smouldering embers. "Will there be a revolt like in the Knights' villages?"

"There is no one who is an obvious successor to the Chief," remarked Glade. "He is fortunate in that respect. But should his foolishness be reflected by poor decision and feeble leadership, he is unlikely to remain chief for very much longer."

Chapter Eighteen

There were very few Ocean People who welcomed Demure's presence in their village. But those few included all the elders and older marriageable men. And amongst these few, Demure was respected if not necessarily liked and recognised as someone who made a voluble, perhaps even valuable, contribution to the village's debates.

Glade was sure she wasn't the only one who recognised that much of Demure's patronage by the elderly and influential in the village was directly related to her intimate activities outside these debates, although Glade was also the only who knew the true extent of Demure's promiscuity amongst men flattered by the single-minded attention of such an attractive and determined young woman.

It was easily apparent how Demure was being rewarded for her ardent wooing of the best-connected villagers and this did nothing to bolster her popularity amongst those less favoured. Demure enjoyed privileges most normally enjoyed by those much older than her. She was excused most of the foraging duties expected of the village women although she benefited as much as anyone from its rewards. When the village was blessed by a particularly good kill, such as sea cow, shark or hog, Demure partook of the rather larger share apportioned to the elders amongst whom she usually sat.

"Don't the men mind that you have sex with each and every one of them?" Glade remarked as she sniffed the dry semen on her lover's inside thigh. "What do they think of the fact that you spread your attentions so thinly?"

"Not as thinly as you think, my dearest," said Demure with a smile as she placed a hand on Glade's head while her lover licked off the stains. "My attention is focused almost entirely on the highest ranking men in the village."

“But there is no such ranking amongst the Ocean People,” Glade countered. “All villagers are equal.”

“Most influential then, my pedantic sweetheart,” Demure said. “Every man I make love with thinks that he is the only one, that he is special, and that nobody else is so favoured.”

“Is this true of me as it is of the men?” Glade wondered bitterly.

“Of course not,” said Demure with a seductive smile. “How can that be? I live with you. I make love with you every day: often more than just once. I love you.”

“As you love Cuttlefish. Just as you adore Sea Lion. Just as you are so nearly betrothed to Cormorant.”

“Surely not Cormorant,” laughed Demure. “He’s too old for even me. I should think it would take a miracle to bring Cormorant’s cock to life. And, anyway, he’s blind and very nearly deaf.”

“Why should that present an obstacle to you?”

“Oh my dear!” Demure said with a whimsical smile. “Are you jealous? And you’ve fucked more men in this village than Cormorant has years. Not one day since I’ve lived here have you not fucked someone or other. Are you still fucking Dolphin, for instance?”

“Not for nearly a moon,” said Glade. “And you? Are you fucking him too?”

“This afternoon,” smiled Demure. “It’s his seed smeared over my flesh.”

“I thought I recognised the taste,” said Glade.

Ivory didn’t warm to Glade’s account of Demure. “Surely you knew she was just using you like she was everyone else?” she asked as they trudged up the hill away from the caves where they’d stayed the night. The detour from the normal route had

taken the entire village along a rougher track than they'd have followed otherwise and many villagers had already forgotten the benefits of a day's rest and were bitterly cursing the extra exertion.

"I did know," said Glade as she hauled Ivory up and over a large boulder that stood in their way. "And Demure didn't mind that I knew. She wasn't trying to deceive me. She was open about her skill at manipulating people and often joked about this: above all when she had some extra food or gift from the men she wooed. But nothing was stopping me from leaving Demure at any time. She wasn't holding me captive, although I doubt I'd be truly welcome back into the bosoms of Macaque and Dignity since they so deeply disapproved of my relationship with her."

Nonetheless, Glade tried to maintain her friendship with the couple with whom she'd once been so close and took the opportunity of the announcement of Dignity's pregnancy to visit them. Dignity had only the faintest suggestion of her gravid state and neither she nor Macaque was at all sure who the father could be. There were many plausible candidates and some of those were Ocean People. However, as the prospective father had equal opportunity to impregnate Macaque there was no ground for jealousy between the two women.

"The wonder isn't that Dignity is pregnant," said Macaque as Glade nestled between her arms and Dignity's on the straw-strewn floor of the couple's home. "The wonder is more that you aren't. How can so many men fuck you and you remain childless?"

Glade shook her head sadly. "It's my misfortune and destiny never to be a mother."

"Just it is with your lover also," spat out Dignity. "The world can be grateful

that she is one woman who hasn't afflicted it with her offspring. You can also be sure that if she did have a child she'd make certain that its father was one of the elders."

This Glade knew to be true. Demure had frequently remarked on her desire to become pregnant and her greatest concern was just who the father would be. But try as she would, Demure was no more successful in becoming impregnated by one of the natives of the village than she had been by her husband, Lord Valour.

"It's *so* fucking frustrating!" Demure moaned to Glade as her menstrual cycle once again culminated only in the monthly release of blood. "If I was a mother I'd automatically gain influence and respect. Instead I am treated like a mere child by the elders."

"That's not true," said Glade. "You're the only one not born by the ocean who has any sway in the meetings."

"And what fucking use is that?" asked Demure bitterly. "What this village needs to do is to step forward and take a more prominent role. We need to expand our range along the beach: perhaps build satellite villages. There is so much wealth in the sea and it is criminal that the village exploits so little of it."

"I'm not sure that the Ocean People want to form a kingdom of villages like the Knights," remarked Glade. "And I'm fairly certain that there aren't many in the village who want you to be the one who tells them what they should do."

However, Glade seriously underestimated Demure's powers of persuasion and influence amongst the elders. Although Demure never publicly expressed an opinion at all contrary to the orthodoxy of the tribe's views, Glade noticed that those men who had most recently or most often enjoyed her body were the ones who made proposals that sounded dangerously like Demure's private beliefs.

There was the issue of the maintenance of the beacons used to communicate with other villages. The proposal was raised that since the pyre had to be much higher than that of neighbouring villages because of the local geography that an extra tithe should be demanded from the neighbours as compensation. Then there was the debate whether the huts should be allocated not by the fortunes of circumstance but by reference to the individual's status. There was also the question of the share from the kills, where it was proposed that the elders should be allocated larger portions in recognition of all they had done for the village.

In all these discussions, Demure was careful to only express decidedly conservative opinions with a democratic bias. The fervour with which she defended the doctrine of liberty and equality was uncompromising, but she would eventually concede in the interests of fraternity that it might well be necessary to dilute the purity of these principles.

Although attendance at the village debates was far from mandatory, almost everyone came along. This was mostly because there was little alternative entertainment, but despite the high turnout only a few people such as Demure ever spoke whilst most other people were happy just to enjoy the company. It was towards the end of such meetings when everyone was most tired and the general consensus was that nothing of real importance remained to be debated that one of Demure's lovers would make a proposal that in some small way would change how the village functioned. And this proposal would eventually be resolved by a compromise whose actual implication no one really understood.

"Are you sure we need a small militia, Dugong?" Demure asked towards the end of one debate. "Because isn't that what you're proposing: that we have a body of

hunters trained to act as guardians to the elders.”

Dugong was confused. “I most certainly am *not* proposing that the village employs soldiers. That’s the way of the petty tyrants of old. But we must have the ability to defend ourselves against aggressors.”

“And *who* are these aggressors?” asked Demure. “I don’t see any of them at this meeting. And we have good relations with our neighbours...”

“...although the village of the Sea Otters refused to offer an extra tithe towards the upkeep of the beacon,” reminded one of the elders.

“We have *mostly* good relations with our neighbours,” Demure corrected herself. “What then, Dugong, is the need for a defensive corps?”

At the end of the meeting, however, the village once again agreed to reform its practices. This time it was to assign some of the younger hunters to guard duty despite it being Demure’s stated view that such an institution was the thin end of a wedge towards militarising the Ocean People’s culture. “But if it’s necessary to protect the elders from hot-headed fools and vicious outsiders, then it has to be so,” Demure eventually conceded.

“Why are you doing this?” Glade asked Demure when they retired to their hut after the debate. “I’m not taken in and I don’t think everyone else is. It was you who persuaded Dugong to propose that the village should have some kind of armed guard. Just as you were the one who got Sea Gull to propose that a fence be built around the elders’ huts. Just as you were the one behind the memorial to the ancestors in the village square and the unnecessarily provocative tithe on the beacons. Why are you trying to subvert the village?”

“It’s not me who makes these proposals,” Demure protested.

“That’s because you want to be seen as the great defender of the village’s traditions and so you get others to make these proposals in your stead,” Glade said. “You’d never get away with it if you weren’t fucking every man in the village with even the smallest influence. And what are you trying to do? Make the culture of the Ocean People like that of the Knights?”

“Although the Knights were undoubtedly cruel,” said Demure, “they were much more prosperous than the Ocean People.”

“Only for those who had titles and slaves,” said Glade. “What do you want the Ocean People to do next? Enslave tribes such as yours and mine rather than welcome them into the village?”

It was obvious that Glade wasn’t the only villager troubled by Demure’s machinations. There were others from Glade’s original company just as apprehensive about Demure’s increasingly prominent role in the village and remembered her only too well as the woman who’d once been Lord Valour’s wife. Demure wasn’t the only former Knight who had close relations with the Ocean People. Audacity was the last surviving male Knight, but he was so utterly converted to the ways of the Ocean People that only his skin’s charcoal darkness gave evidence that he was originally from another tribe. Although Glade, Demure and the others dressed in the style of the Ocean People and for the most part spoke in their language, Audacity had gone as far as to take a wife from the Ocean People who was now the mother of a child partway in hue between a Knight and a native. The Ocean People now mostly treated him as one of their own. However, he very rarely spoke in the meetings. He’d come from a very lowly caste in the Knights’ village and remained reluctant to speak up for himself.

But he was not to remain silent forever, although it was with a tremulous voice

that betrayed his nervousness however much he spoke the language of the Ocean People with more fluency than Demure and nearly as competently as Glade.

“Your opinions have changed a great deal since when you lived with the Knights of the Savannah,” he said after Demure had just spoken to modify a motion put forward by Dugong to enhance the quality of the elders’ housing, having reluctantly conceded that they deserved such privilege.

Demure affected not to have heard Audacity. “The value of the elders must not be understated...” she began, but was interrupted by Audacity’s wife, Sea Urchin, who held their son to her bosom.

“Why do we always listen to this woman?” Sea Urchin pleaded in a shrill voice. “What good has she done our village? Was she not exiled from the village of the Oyster Beds? And *why* was she exiled?”

“That is scarcely the issue,” said Dolphin in a stern voice. “This debate is not about our dark guest from the savannah whose tribe as we all know was slaughtered in acts of vile and unspeakable cruelty. Our concern is the proposal made by Dugong to improve the housing of the elders...”

“Elders who deserve respect,” said Demure firmly.

“Respect maybe,” said Audacity more forcefully, “but not the status of a lord or lady.” He stood up and strode dramatically around the fire that blazed in the centre of the encircling company. “I respect the elders. It is only right to do so. But what Demure wishes to do is raise the elders to the level of lords and ladies. For it is only by marriage to a lord that Demure can once again be a lady.”

“I don’t know what a *lord* or a *lady* is,” said Sea Urchin who accompanied her husband to the centre of the fire and used the nearest equivalent words in the Ocean

People's language. "But a *lady* is what this woman was in her tribe's community and a *lady* is what she wants to be again."

"We know that Demure was a *lady* in the knights' society," said Cormorant diplomatically. "She has told us that it was a title given to her by her husband and not one she chose."

"It was certainly a title she revelled in," said Macaque, who was sat down with a comforting arm around her pregnant lover's shoulders. "Don't be fooled by Demure. She's not a woman who believes in democracy. Look at what she's done while she's been living here. She's used her subtle wiles to introduce new practises that are totally alien to the customs of the Ocean People."

"That is *most* unfair!" exclaimed Demure. "I have never proposed anything at any time or at any meeting..."

"*You* haven't," asserted Dignity, "but your lovers have!"

"Answer this!" spat out Sea Urchin. "Why were you exiled from the village of the Oyster Beds? Was it because you tried to subvert the Ocean People's ways just as you are trying to do here? Don't deny that ever since you arrived there has been proposal after proposal that's bestowed new privileges to the elders, elevated the status of the ancestors and has now diverted good fishermen and hunters, who would be better employed in feeding the village, to the pointless task of defending the elders from enemies we do not have!"

"Enemies we might well have in the future," Dugong defended.

"This woman is cruel and vindictive!" exclaimed Dignity who awkwardly raised her gravid weight to her feet and pointed at Demure accusingly. "When my lover and I came to this village everyone was friendly and welcoming. Everyone shared what

they had with us even though they didn't know who we were and we spoke not one word of the Ocean People's language. Would you have been so generous if you believed we might be your enemy? It's only since Demure wheedled her way into the sexual embrace of the elders, or at least those endowed with a penis, that a divide has grown between the privileges of the majority of the village and those of the elders and, no doubt, whosoever they should wed."

"These privileges have been debated and decided on in the most democratic manner," insisted Cormorant who was unable to see who he was addressing. "They haven't been dictated to the village by tyrants."

"These new privileges will make the elders nothing but tyrants," remarked Sea Urchin. "They should be rescinded and this whore from the savannah exiled!"

"That is not right!" insisted Dolphin. "You're the one making unreasonable demands. What has been decided in these meetings is the opinion and will of everyone. Why else do we have these debates? They are to make decisions and for everyone to participate."

"Then we should discuss whether we should also expel this scorpion who has come into our midst and poisoned the will of our people," Sea Urchin insisted.

"It is not right that we should do so now," said Cormorant softly, taking advantage of his frailty and advanced years to decide the issue. "I do not believe that we should use these debates to attack a woman who has participated more actively and constructively than almost anyone else. I believe we should let hot heads cool. If the will of the village so decides it we should discuss Demure's future at a later meeting. I have never before heard such vicious calumny on a guest of our village."

"Demure is no guest," said Audacity passionately. "She is a serpent. She won't

be satisfied until she's married to an elder and becomes a *lady* again. Don't be taken in by the lip service she pays to the tribe's ethics. All she wants is power and glory."

Ivory smiled triumphantly as Glade recounted how the meeting turned against Demure. "Surely there was no one who would defend her," she said, as she clambered down a gravelly slope, anxious not to slip on the ice that persisted from an earlier snowfall.

"The elders defended her," said Glade. "Demure had done well to make friends with them. It was a clever strategy. Those attacking Demure were in the dangerous position of also appearing to attack the elders who defended her. Others defended Demure because of their respect for the elders. In fact, those who attacked Demure were in the minority and few of them were Ocean People."

"Surely you added *your* voice to the condemnation of Demure," Ivory said. "You knew what a poisonous scheming cunt she was."

"Yes, I *did* know," Glade admitted. "But I was also her lover. You don't condemn the woman you love however bad she may be."

"So, what happened?" asked Ivory as she adjusted the weight of the sack about her shoulders and back. "Did the meeting resolve to exile Demure?"

"No, it didn't," said Glade. "And indeed after everyone dispersed it very much seemed that Demure was the one who'd prevailed. The elders defended her unanimously. They'd been totally unaware that anyone in the village ever wished ill of her. They were rather disconcerted by this discovery although Demure did her best after the meeting to soothe their anxieties and suggest to them that those on the offensive were using her as a means to attack the elders themselves."

"So, she was willing to let those who criticised her be exiled rather than accept

her dues?” gasped a disgusted Ivory. “She was truly an evil woman.”

“I’m sure she believed it was a choice between them and her,” said Glade diplomatically.

“A choice between innocent souls and a devious scheming harpy,” Ivory elaborated. “That is no choice at all.”

“It was very nearly exactly what the elders did decide,” said Glade. “And it was exactly the choice that Demure was convinced they would make when she finally retired to sleep by my side. Judging by the odour of male sweat on her body, she’d worked hard to win round the elders.”

Bizarrely enough it was Glade who decided Demure’s fate and also her own. It wasn’t a role she was proud of. Nor was it one she volunteered for.

Demure had much to do to repair her reputation with the elders. As soon as the sun rose over the sea she slipped from Glade’s side, kissed her on the lips and strode off over the sand towards the huts where the elders lived. Although Demure was in more danger than she’d ever been since she first arrived in the village, Glade could see that she was actually excited by the threat. She’d been a passionate lover throughout the night and left Glade with a bruised vulva after the vicious fisting she’d inflicted.

Glade got up as early as she could to run across the sand to the shore before it roasted under the bright sun and would burn the soles of her feet. She waded out into the sea as far as she could, but not too far (as she couldn’t swim), and gathered seaweed, shellfish and whatever else she could find. The sea was a great source for all kinds of bounty that floated against the shore. There was always a haul of food and other useful flotsam that could be scavenged in the early dawn. Glade periodically returned to the shore to deposit the seaweed and seafood she’d found on the sand where it could dry.

It was while she was doing this—her body streaming with salt water and her tangled hair damp to the very roots—that she noticed that Dolphin was waiting for her. He was a middle-aged man who was too young to be an elder but was accorded sufficient respect by the village to warrant Demure’s amorous attention. He was standing by the shore, holding a flint-tipped spear and a net made from tangled kelp.

“How are you this morning, Glade?” he greeted her and gestured his hand towards a shaded space on the sand.

“I am well,” said Glade moving towards the proffered area while Dolphin crouched down on his heels, anxious to keep his buttocks and penis above the hot sand. Glade knelt beside him, careful also to keep the lips of her vulva high above the sand that would adhere to her damp skin.

“And Demure? Is she well?”

“Yes,” said Glade.

“You know that she’s been the cause of great consternation in the village,” said Dolphin. “I’ve been consulting with those villagers who accompanied you so many seasons ago. I’ve also spoken to the elders. It isn’t good for there to be strife in our village. And yet there is now discord in our midst. There are bitter accusations. There is acrimony. And this causes sorrow for the elders.”

“I understand,” said Glade.

“It is true that in the year or more since your close friend, Demure, first came to this village that she has become astonishingly familiar with the elders. And not only with them. Many others have also come to know her well. And amongst those who have known Demure, sometimes in the most intimate manner, she is considered a wise woman, a passionate lover and a beauty to behold. It is difficult for a man who has

known her intimately to think ill of her in any way. Yet, as you know, there are many in this village who know her from a time before she settled on our shore. And as you also know they have said many things about her that do not accord with the woman we know so well who is so passionate at the meetings in her defence of democracy and whose advice is so often wise for one of such tender years.”

“Demure is a woman who awakens strong feelings in men,” Glade remarked.

“Not only in men but also women,” said Dolphin cryptically. “There is one person who knows Demure better than anyone. A woman who I’ve been told by Macaque and Dignity was once a ‘slave’ to her when she was married to the tyrant who ruled her savannah village. A woman who knows well whether the words spoken against Demure are calumny or truth. You know who that woman is?”

“It’s me,” admitted Glade miserably.

“So, tell me, Glade,” asked Dolphin kindly. “What is it that we should do? There is a petition gathering force in the village which demands that Demure be exiled. The argument is that the ways of the Ocean People are incompatible with Demure’s continued presence in our midst. It is said that many of the reforms implemented in the village that have been proposed by the elders are ones which Demure far from opposing, as she appears to do in meetings, is in truth their instigator. And it is claimed that these reforms have been anti-democratic and divisive in nature. These are serious charges, but no elder is ever likely to admit that he has allowed his judgment to be clouded by the advice of a young woman. And not just a young woman, but one who is not of our tribe. Should we believe the elders who we are duty-bound to honour and respect? Or should we believe the rabble-rousers who have come from far beyond the coast and who may have motives of dishonourable vengeance in slandering a woman whose tribe

is known to have treated them badly? What is your advice, Glade?”

This question put Glade in a difficult position. From a moral perspective she knew exactly what she should say. Even if she didn't know the truth of Audacity's accusations, supported as they were by the testimony of her former lovers, Macaque and Dignity, there was the fact that should Demure be vindicated then more than just one person would face exile from the village. It wasn't possible for the village to accommodate both Demure and her accusers. But, on the other hand, Glade couldn't abide to lose her lover. What should she say?

It may have been the spirits of the Forest People who guided her. It may have been the spirit of her mother who'd been so cruelly slain on the day when Glade was first raped and when the true pitiless cruelty of the Knights was revealed. Or it may have been a sense of moral duty balanced with her loyalty for those with whom Glade had lived for so long by the river. Whatever it was, Glade decided to tell Dolphin the truth about Demure and her belief that she was seeking a husband from the elders who might very well be promoted through the affect of her reforms to a role not unlike that of a lord.

“It is well that you have spoken so frankly, Glade,” said Dolphin. “In truth, I already believed that this was so although I have enjoyed Demure's body many times. I am sure you will be rewarded for your honesty.”

“And were you rewarded?” asked Ivory, as she and Glade struggled through the chill breeze of early snow that contrasted so much with the heat and sunshine associated with Glade's reminiscences.

“No,” said Glade bitterly. “Not at all. Unless you believe that it was a reward for me to be exiled along with Demure.”

“You were exiled too!” gasped Ivory, who believed this to be the worst punishment that could ever be inflicted short of death.

“I was Demure’s lover,” said Glade. “It was inconceivable that she should leave and I should stay. It wasn’t decided at a meeting that we should be exiled. Dolphin, Cormorant, Dugong and other elders visited Demure and me in our hut when the day was over and advised us to leave the following morning. When Demure expressed her dismay she was informed, quite sternly, that the harmony and unity of the village took precedence over even her professed innocence.”

“And what did they say to you, who was truly innocent?” asked Ivory.

“They said nothing beyond wishing me all the best in a life beyond the village’s confines,” said Glade. “Nothing more needed to be said. From the moment Dolphin left me on the shore surrounded by seaweed and netting, I knew that Demure and I were inseparable and that I would be leaving with her. And even had I not been exiled it’s likely that I would have chosen anyway to leave with Demure.”

Chapter Nineteen

It was every Autumn of her life that Ivory and the rest of her clan made the same trek south. Every Spring she returned the same way. She reasoned that the journey would seem less arduous as each year came by, but this year the wind was colder, the snow heavier and the ground more treacherous. Ivory wondered whether the migration only seemed worse because it was the first time her mother wasn't there to accompany her, but Glade was as good a companion as her mother had ever been and in certain ways a rather better one.

Where the soil wasn't frozen, it was churned up by the hooves of mammoth, rhinoceros and horse as they were funnelled rather too close for mutual comfort along narrow valleys where lions, hyenas and wolves gathered in their greatest numbers.

"This reminds me of my long journey northwards with Demure," said Glade as she scraped off as much as she could of the glutinous muck that coated her fur boots.

"I still don't understand why you stayed with the conniving bitch," said Ivory.

"Often, if nothing else, it was for companionship alone," Glade reflected. "It's not easy to be alone in strange and unfamiliar landscapes. There were so many wild animals that we'd never seen before and for many days and nights we didn't dare approach any of the villages along the sea-shore."

"Why not? Surely, they would have sheltered you?"

"The fires that blazed above the hills along the shore were used to send very precise messages and they would, of course, have spread news of our exile. When we lived by the sea, we were kept informed about the affairs of far-away villages, so we knew that every one of the Ocean People's villages had been warned to shun a certain

black woman and her lighter skinned female companion.”

“So, if you didn’t go along the sea-shore, where did you travel?”

“We couldn’t head towards the South and the Sun, because Queen Mimosa’s people would find us and almost certainly kill not only Demure, but me for consorting with her. So, we were forced to walk away from the Sun towards the North. We didn’t know then that the Sun ascends less high in the sky as you walk away from it and that it shines less heartily. Although we never strayed far from the sight and sound of the sea, we didn’t dare walk along the sand or too close to the pebbles that settled in its wake. But beyond the shore was a desolate landscape: often nothing more than sand that extended far, far, far into the distance with no sign of another sea.”

Glade remembered this earlier trek with a shudder. On her trek with Ivory and the Mammoth Hunters, her principal concern was the cold that penetrated the layers of thick fur, but at that time it had been the overwhelming heat. The two woman urgently sought out any shade they could find from the unforgiving Sun. After even a few moments of exposure they were dazed and their skin would burn. Today, Glade was protected by other travellers who would help her if she missed a step or fell ill or was pursued by a leopard. Then, there were just two naked women, who carried all they had in skin pouches secured by leather straps over their shoulders.

“Just *where* the fuck are we going?” Demure asked bitterly.

Glade smiled. Demure’s anger at her predicament gave the women the strength to ward off despair. But all it took for hope to vanish was to gaze beyond the mottled shade of scrubby bushes between which they darted across the dusty, sometimes sandy, soil. Beyond was an unforgiving endless barren plain.

Glade gestured towards the empty dune-strewn horizon to the East. “We can’t

go that way because we don't know where the next spring or oasis might be." She gestured towards the distant blue aura of the ocean. "And we can't go that way because you fucked it up with the Ocean People,"

"It's not my fault they took against me," protested Demure disingenuously.

Glade resisted the temptation of countering her lover's claim of innocence. The couple had engaged in this argument many times before and Glade knew that there was nothing more to be gained. She was in possession of the inviolable truth whilst Demure possessed a self-righteousness that exceeded rational argument.

"And we can't head south because Mimosa's tribe will lynch us..."

"You can't blame me for that."

"I'm not sure I can't, you know," countered Glade who remembered only too well Demure's harsh treatment of her slaves. "So, all that's left is to walk towards the North and with the Sun forever on our backs."

"Well, at least, it keeps the Sun out of my eyes," remarked Demure, who retained her sense of humour despite their misfortune.

The two women wandered along the desert periphery for almost the whole cycle of the moon, during which Glade discovered for the first time that she and her lover's menstrual cycle was in perfect synchrony. This curiously reassuring fact was the only happy thought in a time during which both women were constantly thirsty and had become increasingly scrawny. The women pooled together their different survival skills and lore, augmented by what Demure had learnt from the now-deceased Quagga whose original home had been in a drought-prone expanse of savannah before Demure's tribe seized her. There were succulent plants that could be ripped apart for their store of water; ants and beetles that could be dug out of the parched soil; and leaves that

eventually released nutrition after considerable chewing.

When the Sun was high in the sky it was too hot to walk, so the two lovers rested in what shade they could find. During the night it was too cold and dark for the women to venture far. So, it was during twilight and dawn that the women made most progress and at midday and night when they rested.

“I’m sure you had each other’s bodies to keep yourselves warm in the cold nights,” sniffed Ivory, who was oddly jealous of Glade’s love for a woman who was now dead.

“It was never as cold as the tundra or the Mammoth steppes,” Glade remarked. “If either of us had known then how to make and stitch clothes then we’d have rather cuddled up in a bear-hide. Yes, we did embrace each other. Our body’s shared warmth was the most heat we could find. There were too few sticks or branches to feed a reasonably warm fire. But there was very little lovemaking. However much we’d have liked to, we were too weak and hungry for that.”

Ivory felt she knew all she ever needed to know about exhaustion, thirst and hunger at this moment and in this place, along a valley that was steadily narrowing towards the still distant mountains. Only her wind-lacerated cheeks and numb nose could be seen through the thick furs that swaddled her. Ivory squeezed her nose between a thumb and fingers that were bunched inside a mitten tied by cord around her wrist. Her grip was more like that of an otter or seal than of a squirrel or rat. She stared ahead through the lashing wind and hoped that the shelter of the winter retreat was just that much closer.

Sadly, the white peaks of the Southern Mountains appeared as distant as they were the day before or any other day since they were first glimpsed over the horizon.

Winter offered little comfort for Ivory and her tribe. The South was warmer than the North but it was still very cold. Every winter, the Mammoth Hunters slept in the same mountain caves in the same Southern valley, so this was home for them; but it was a home shared with other animals that had also fled south to escape the oppressive snow and brutal cold. Some beasts, like elk, bison, aurochs and Mammoth, were welcome prey. As they were crowded so much more densely together they were easier to hunt and kill. But the Mammoth Hunters weren't the only ones who wanted to feast on the unwillingly stockaded game. There were many predators, such as wolf, hyena, lion and leopard, and, unsurprisingly, hunters from other tribes.

Winter was also the only time that Ivory and her tribe ever came into contact with tribes that spoke different languages, worshipped different spirits and dressed in different ways, although none appeared as odd and none with as dark skin as Glade. They might have rounder faces, darker hair, longer noses, and be more slight or stocky. Those who migrated from the North were in the same predicament as the Mammoth Hunters, so there was mutual respect for each other. Relations could sometimes even be almost amicable.

This was unlikely to be the case with those they might encounter who lived in the South in Summer as well as Winter. They might welcome the onrush of fresh game but they didn't necessarily welcome the influx of the Northerners. Ivory didn't know much about the Southern tribes. They were often tall and dressed rather less in furs and more in hides. They were more likely to feast on horse and deer rather than Mammoth and elk.

Ivory asked Glade what she knew about the Southern tribes.

“Didn’t you know that I lived in their company for many years before I became a shaman for your tribe?” said Glade.

“Were you a shaman for these people, too?”

“Not as I am in your tribe,” said Glade. “Many of the Southern tribes have a very sophisticated faith, quite different from yours. Their rites are mysterious and complex. I speak their language, but even after several years I understood their culture rather less well than I do that of your people.”

As the Mammoth Hunters trekked further south the looming distant mountains filled ever more of the horizon.

“Not far now,” the Chief reassured the tribe at the end of the day as everyone settled around the fires. They crouched under aurochs-hide shelters supported over the frozen soil by branches and mammoth tusk while the gentle patter of light snow fell above their heads. “We shall follow the Wide River for three days and then enter the pass that opens to our left. There, at last, we shall be in the shelter of the mountains and just two days trudge from our winter home.”

The travellers cheered. They felt hearty and optimistic. Despite the fresh snow, it had been a fruitful day. The hunters had cornered a herd of aurochs and speared three of them that were now being roasted on spits over the flames of a huge fire.

One of the hunters had been gored by the bull that was defending his harem of cows, but the injuries weren’t life-threatening. Glade bathed his wounds in packed snow and bandaged them in the flayed hare-skin bandage she bundled with her herbs and medicines. Ivory helped Glade tend the wounded hunter. She had lost her earlier squeamishness and would now have no qualms about placing a hand inside the hunter’s

split-open flesh, but thankfully there was no need for that on this occasion. As Glade explained, a shaman need only put her hand inside rent flesh if there was something to remove, such as a flint-head or a tooth, but in this case their task was to clean the wound, sew it together with bone-needles and sinew-thread, and bandage it to keep out the fetid air in which evil spirits swarmed and could bring fresh disease.

“The human body is a miraculous thing,” said Glade. “Left to its own devices, it can heal itself of almost anything.”

“Surely though,” Ivory objected, “it is the spirits to whom the hunter has made offering that save his life.”

“Perhaps,” said Glade diplomatically. “But the spirits perform their wonders whether the hunter has made them an offering or has ignored them entirely. What is most important is that they should be free to get on with the business of healing with as little interference as possible.”

Ivory was excited at the prospect of seeing her winter home again. Although the tribe lived there for just three moons a year in some ways it was more pleasant than her village in the North. She wished she could see the mountain valley in the Summer, just as she sometimes wondered how the village fared in her absence. However, only the most foolish villager would choose to remain where even the mammoth and aurochs retreated. She looked forward to seeing again the Wide River on whose banks she would soon be walking.

However, when the travellers arrived there after descending the hills for nearly

a whole day, the Wide River was much less wide than Ivory remembered it from previous years. It was barely wide enough to justify its name. This river was known to be much wider in the North where it eventually emptied into a huge lake at the foot of the great glaciers. It divided the lands of the Mammoth Hunters from other northern tribes who they only ever encountered where the river was narrow enough to swim across. However, the Wide River was still a glorious sight that steadily narrowed towards the mountains through which the water tumbled and along whose banks gathered many large beasts who generally avoided the Mammoth Hunters. In midwinter, the river would freeze and it would be necessary to bore holes into the ice to retrieve fresh water and net the torpid fish that hid beneath. Occasionally, the villagers passed a large beast that had waded into the shallow waters at the bank to bathe. It was a sight to behold when a woolly rhinoceros or mammoth came ashore and shook the icy water from its mane.

Glade entertained Ivory with tales about the rivers in the south. There were animals like hippopotami, crocodiles and flamingos, along with more familiar animals like elephant and rhinoceros that would wade in the water, often just to shelter from the heat.

It was a restful, almost idyllic, evening for Glade and Ivory when they at last rested in the shade of the dark forest by the river bank, where the wood was too dense for snow to settle on the ground and within sight of the churning waters that thundered in brilliant white torrents towards the Northern lands. An occasional lump of ice floated on the surface to remind them that just as there was ice and deep snow behind them, there was more to come ahead. There were enough fallen branches and leaves for all the villagers to shelter slightly apart and this allowed them just a little more privacy

than usual. This was a privacy that Ivory enjoyed with Glade to its full as they nestled together under their thick furs. Meanwhile, the hunters were on the lookout for leopards, bears and wolves that might chance their luck.

Ivory's pleasure was interrupted for only a short while, when Chief Cave Lion made an appearance under the pretext of reassuring them that the end of their winter migration was imminent. Just one day more. Or two days at the most if the weather worsened. But Glade and Ivory knew by his furtive manner that what he really wanted was to nestle under the furs with the two women, which of course he did.

It was a snorting, bestial, but brief lovemaking, with little opportunity for foreplay before the chief penetrated both Glade and Ivory in turn. He finally ejaculated into Ivory's anus before he scrambled out from under the furs with semen from his limp penis dripping down his hairy legs and onto his leopard-skin boots. He gently kissed both women goodnight before departing. Glade licked clean the traces of semen from her lover's buttocks before they became dry powder and also to further forestall the day when Ivory might become the mother of yet another of Chief Cave Lion's progeny.

It was nightfall the following day when Ivory at last came within sight of her winter home. She recognised the valley as they approached. The trees that sheltered the pass were slightly taller than the year before, but there was the same weather-carved rock at the head of the valley and the same gradual narrowing of the pass that revealed itself as the way became steadily steeper.

A chatter of excitement spread amongst the villagers. Some burst out singing, which Glade soon orchestrated with her stronger voice towards the hunting and drinking songs that were most popular. There were even a few extra choruses added to the more obscene stanzas in which hunting and drinking inevitably culminated in

fucking. Only a few months before, most of these references to sex would have mystified Ivory, but now she understood them all too well. Now she could envisage rather more vividly the implications of sex with a wild boar or multiple penetrations by goblins and sprites, she also understood why these choruses brought blushes to the cheeks of the older women.

There was a bounce to Ivory's step as they climbed the mountain. A pride of lions under the shelter of a tree reluctantly scampered out of the way from the noisy procession. Even a small herd of grazing rhinoceros chose to wander afield rather than confront such a boisterous crowd.

As they walked, the clan was now happy to shoulder the deer-hide sacks that held their possessions in the secure knowledge that they would very soon be able to relax and settle down. Ivory gazed about her at the familiar signs of their earlier winter migrations. There was the tall tree where she'd once seen a huge eagle tear into the flesh of a dead fawn with its talons. There were the crashing waterfalls that thundered down from the ice-melt of the glaciers and would soon flow along its course to feed the Wide River, which was now behind them and no longer very wide at all. There were the rivulets and streams bridged by huge boulders that had fallen from the cliff-side of the valley walls. And the valley narrowed steadily and bit by bit until it was the width of only a few mammoths.

Or one mammoth.

Or maybe none at all.

The Mammoth Hunters' procession came to a sudden halt. The way through the valley was blocked. At its narrowest point, where the villagers would march with their spears spread out to guard against the predators who took advantage of this hunting

opportunity, there was no way forward at all. Instead, towering above the villagers was a precipitous wall of crumbled rock, with boulders unsteadily tumbling down and at the peak of the valley walls a glimpse of the tongues of ice that had pushed forward the rocks and stone, thereby causing the avalanche that now blocked their path.

This wasn't the first time that Ivory had seen a valley blocked in this way. She had often wandered on her daily foraging to places where the relentless crush of mountain glaciers had pushed forward massive rocks and stones that shattered entire cliff-sides and crushed tall trees and unwary animals under their weight.

But she'd never thought that such a calamity would happen to this: the only passage she or any of the travellers had ever taken on their winter migration to the South.

Chief Cave Lion was as shaken as anyone. In fact, it was he who was the most desperate. "Fuck the spirits of the snow!" he yelled blasphemously as he scrambled ineffectually up the unyielding scree.

"What do we do?" Ivory asked Glade nervously.

Glade frowned. "I don't know."

"But there must be a way to get through..." Ivory remarked, observing with increasing despair just how steep and unsteady all the likely routes were.

"Maybe," said Glade, ever diplomatically. "But the truth is, I don't know."

Chapter Twenty

Glade was by far the villager least visibly upset by the discovery that the winter route was blocked. While the chief and his most experienced hunters spent the rest of the day and all the next exploring and evaluating the few limited options available to them, she was preoccupied in checking the health and well-being of the woman and children. While Ivory anxiously gnawed on the last morsel of aurochs meat when the village gathered around the fire at the end of the day, Glade seemed comparatively unruffled.

“I suppose this disaster is as nothing compared to the trials and tribulations *you’ve* been through,” Ivory said almost bitterly.

Glade smiled and placed a loving hand on Ivory’s cross-legged knee. “That’s all too true, my darling. Be of good cheer. It is by trials such as this that you learn to cope with all that life can throw at you.”

“We will starve if we don’t find somewhere to stay in the winter months before the worst descends on us from the North,” Ivory wailed. “Everything and everyone I’ve ever loved or known will perish under the snow, left to be eaten by wolves and vultures.”

Glade knew better than to disparage Ivory’s anxieties by comparing it with those she and Demure had suffered on their travels north. The mismatched couple’s wandering soon led them to a company of desert wanderers who understood not one word from Glade’s and Demure’s growing repertoire of languages and although they were generally friendly, it became obvious that this wasn’t a community with which the pair could remain for even as much as half a moon.

For the next year or so, the two itinerants continued to roam northwards with no

opportunity to settle down. The ocean was to their left and the endless dust and dirt of the desert to their right. They trudged sometimes through sand, sometimes through woodland, but more often over patchy bush and savannah. On occasion they followed the path of a river that took them deep inland, but as both women now knew better how to find food from the shore than from the desert as soon as an opportunity presented itself they would cross the river and resume their journey on the other bank. They never travelled with a purpose beyond the need to find a place to rest for the night. Everywhere they came across was either uninhabitable or already inhabited, so the couple's northward pursuit was essentially to find a community in which they could make their home. It soon became clear that food and shelter was most easily available on the beaches and shores that were constrained by ocean to the West and by inhospitable desert to the East. This desert became steadily more formidable as they advanced north. The sand was often so fine that it was impossible to walk on it, even if their feet could endure its burning heat by day and the constant risk of treading on a scorpion in the evening.

Just where did Glade and Demure hope to finally find? At first, it was obvious. They needed to find a home for themselves. But as they moved from one village to the next, such a relatively modest ambition seemed increasingly out of reach. The villagers had little to spare to feed a pair of alien women who couldn't even speak their language. Furthermore, since no tribe they encountered had skin as dark as Demure's, her complexion was usually enough for villagers to be superstitiously wary of both women. And this was despite Demure's willingness to trade her physical beauty to whatever demands the men (or sometimes women) might make. Another much more disturbing pattern was that the further north the two women wandered along the shore, the more

sparse the population and the scarcer the supply of food.

“We have to continue walking every day simply to find enough to eat,” Glade complained bitterly as the two women trudged under the shadow of scattered palm trees between the sands and pebbles on the shore and the expanse of sand that stretched eastwards to their right. “If we rest for long, we’ll exhaust all the little that the spirits have provided for us.”

“And very mean the spirits are too,” said Demure bitterly. “Perhaps soon we’ll have nothing to eat at all.”

Glade was convinced that this could not be true. Surely somewhere ahead of them the desert would give way to forest and savannah. Surely there would again be plentiful game and verdant pastures. Perhaps there would once more be villages and people amongst whom Glade and Demure could live. And, if not that, perhaps somewhere they could live with only one another for company and what little of their nerves that the other hadn’t frayed to shreds.

What did Glade and Demure have to eat? There was the occasional flesh of fish and turtle the two women managed to net in the sea; a more reliable diet of shellfish and seaweed; small insects and grubs from rotting trees; and sometimes dates and other fruit dropped down from trees onto the sandy shore. The larger animals they saw were either out at sea, such as dolphins, manatees and seals, or in the distant sand dunes, such as the occasional antelope or elephant. In both cases, the animals were far too distant for the women to hunt, even if they had the tools and expertise to do so.

Where too now were the villages? There was now no one foolish enough to settle on these inhospitable shores where there was so little food, so little shelter and where the oases and streams of fresh water were further and further apart. Had the two

women not learnt the practise of not eating all they could find when they could and of carrying vessels and animal hides in which to store the fruit, meat and water of an earlier day's scavenging, they would have starved to death. A bonanza of dates lasted the two women several days, during which they would have otherwise subsisted only on molluscs that weren't always as easy to find as one would like.

"It's been two moons since we last saw another soul," said Glade in the moonlight while the two women sat around a small fire under a palm tree.

"It's been four or five moons since we saw any rain," replied Demure, who was fingering a bosom that sagged from malnutrition. "Perhaps we are near the end of the world. Perhaps we'll soon come to the edge beyond which there is only the same darkness that fills the sky."

Glade nodded her head. It seemed that they'd been disowned by the world of humanity and the game and fruit that supported it.

"Perhaps as we walk away from the Sun, which is always behind us, we are also leaving behind its blessings," Demure speculated. "Perhaps the Sun is the source of rain, food and humanity and by turning our backs on it, we are heading towards only death."

"I don't know," said Glade miserably. "I don't know."

It was about this time, however, that Glade and Demure first came across the melted remains of an iceberg from the north that had somehow become beached on the desert shore. Even at this latitude, the iceberg was still cold but this was only because it had once been so very large. It was still taller than a giraffe and almost as immense as a whale, but it was rapidly melting beneath the hot sunlight on the even hotter sand. This was the first time Glade had ever felt anything as cold as ice on her skin. It was so

cold it almost burnt, but it was a welcome respite from the burning heat. The water that melted from it was fresh rather than salt. There were even a few nuts, fruit and even frozen fish trapped inside the ice as it melted.

“There must be an end to this desert,” said Glade as she and Demure set up camp for the night. “See, out there, on the waves, there are other floating white boulders.” She waved towards a procession of other icebergs that passed by over the ocean. “There must be a place in the north where the desert ends.”

“And the birds that fly north must know that there is food at the end of their flight,” admitted Demure. “I just hope you’re right.”

“What other choice have we got?” Glade asked. “We can’t now go back the way we came.”

The predicament that confronted Glade many years ago on the desert shore were very different from those confronting her now. The cold that would have been occasionally welcome then was most certainly not welcome now. And for the moment there was as yet no shortage of food.

“We’ve found no way to get through the barrier,” Chief Cave Lion announced regretfully to the anxious villagers around the evening fires. “There are no paths up the valley side that we can climb and no other valley within a half-day of here. We have only two choices. One is to winter here where we are. The other is to retreat back to the Wide River and follow it wherever it may lead. It may lead us to another valley where we can settle for the bleak winter months.”

“What do you think?” Ivory asked Glade anxiously.

“I’ve already spoken to the Chief,” said the shaman. “And he has decided to take my advice. If we stay here we will be well-fed for the next moon as the animals migrating south enter this valley and are easily picked off by the hunters. But there is no spring or river from which to drink and there will soon be no more migrating animals coming this way. We have no choice. We must follow the Wide River and hope for the best.”

The travellers were eventually drawn by argument and debate to the position Chief Cave Lion had already decided. The following day, after a night of despondent resignation, in great contrast to the optimism of the earlier night, the travellers reluctantly marched back out of the valley by the way they had entered to follow the river path to where it flowed from the white-peaked mountains.

It soon became apparent that this wasn’t going to be an easy journey. The river became faster, more torrential and treacherous as the villagers ascended the valley through which it flowed, whilst the valley along which the river flowed narrowed from a broad sweeping plain to a densely forested gorge with steep cliffs on either side. Glade became apprehensive and ran ahead to speak to the Chief while Ivory fell behind, the weight of the food and weapons she carried becoming ever more onerous.

Glade eventually returned to Ivory’s side with a worried expression on her face.

“What’s the matter?” Ivory wondered.

“There is no game migrating this way,” said Glade. “The only animals we can see are deer, antelope and bison, and they look like they live here all year. Where are the mammoth, rhinoceros and elk? I think we should either set up camp by the riverside using the forest as shelter or turn back. If the animals aren’t travelling this way, then

there may well be no food for us ahead.”

“If we turn back, where do we go from there?”

“We follow the game,” said Glade. “It may not take us to a valley such as the one we wintered in earlier years, but at least we know that there’ll be food to eat.”

However, Chief Cave Lion was not to be swayed and urged his people on through the dense forest, past the bears and leopards that preyed on small forest animals such as deer or boar. He hoped that the valley would widen like so many others did and open up to a broad vista of mammoth, rhinoceros and aurochs scattered amongst herds of horse, antelope and deer. It was therefore disappointing after two days of plodding through woodland, the children crying and the women complaining, that when the valley did at last widen it was at the foot of a cliff from the top of which the Wide River cascaded as a great waterfall many times the height of the tallest trees.

This was undeniably beautiful countryside. The waterfall crashed down into a small lake that lapped against the sides of the wooded shores, over which swooped ducks and geese and from which sipped a herd of deer under the watchful eye of a leopard. But this was also a deadly place. There was only a narrow shore on which the tribe could set up a settlement, and the inhabitable land had a restricted range—far smaller than the Mammoth Hunters were normally accustomed. They would soon hunt to death all the game that lived there and eat all the fruits of the forest.

“What do we do now?” Ivory moaned, sharing everyone’s sentiments.

“There are paths up the valley walls,” Glade remarked. “They may have been worn away by sheep, but I think also by people. I don’t believe we’re the only people in this vicinity. We must find the tribe that lives near here and ask them for help.”

“And if they won’t help us?” Ivory wailed.

“Then,” Glade said with stoic resignation, “it will be very hard for us.”

Glade knew that it is easier to be stoical at the start of a crisis than when it is fully underway and one has suffered from it for many moons. When Glade and Demure walked north along the desolate desert coast, despair truly seemed to be the only rational response. The two women’s skins were baked and peeling in the burning heat: Glade’s especially. The soles of their feet were scratched and blistered on the hot sand. They’d both suffered from eating poisonous shellfish that had emptied their already frail frames of precious fluids. And the path ahead continued to be long and arduous.

Both women blamed the other for their predicament especially now that poor health and frayed spirits made carnal release impossible.

“If you weren’t such a bitch,” railed Glade, “we’d still be living with the Ocean People.”

“Don’t you fucking blame *me*,” Demure snapped back. “It was them that kicked us out. They were just cunts.”

“You provoked them!”

“I suppose we couldn’t have stayed longer with the tribe we met by the river five moons ago if you’d not been so fucking prissy with your pussy...”

“It was because you tried seducing the men that the women forced us to leave...”

“How can you blame me for being a slut, when you’re the biggest slut that’s ever lived?”

Considering that Demure had in a sense just complimented her by the ethical

standards of her own now-extinct tribe, Glade wasn't at all sure how she should retort. In any case, rational argument was difficult to pursue.

“Cunt!” she snarled.

“Slut!”

“Bitch!”

“I hate you!”

“I hate you, too!”

But in truth both women were far too much in love with one another to properly hate each other. When they at last cuddled together by a sputtering fire in a small cave carved into a cliff a long way inland from the sea they returned to terms of endearment that belied their earlier aggression, although Glade was saddened that neither she nor Demure could generate enough juice between their legs for their lovemaking to be successful.

Glade had become ever more resigned to her fate. Soon, she was sure, she wouldn't have the energy to wake up in the morning on the sand that was such a comfortable, if barren, mattress and she would simply lie there until she was torn apart by the vultures that occasionally perched on the palm trees or the gulls that swooped on the carcass of any seal or manatee that had dragged itself onto the shore. Demure, however, was the more resilient woman even though her life amongst the Knights had been one of luxury. She would complain far more bitterly than Glade, but it was her anger and vitriol that kept her spirits the more buoyant.

But the two women's perseverance was eventually rewarded. The desert that accompanied them on their right as they walked north became less sandy. More trees and shrubs were scattered about the dusty ground. Soon, too, they saw animals they

hadn't seen for many moons. There was big game such as elephant, rhinoceros, giraffe and buffalo. There was also horse, deer and antelope, whilst preying on them could be seen animals such as cheetah, hyena and wolves.

And then for the first time that either woman could recall the clouds that drifted harmlessly across the sky gathered together in greater density and gave sudden vent to a rain-shower. The two women rushed out onto the open sand that became harder and more solid as it was soaked by the droplets of rain and spontaneously danced in the welcoming shower in a state of utter joy.

Glade circled around Demure while the dampening strands of her hair tangled together and clung to her face and shoulders. She waved her head wildly from side to side so that with each shake a fresh shower splashed over her lover. There was no sign of the distance that Demure normally maintained between her emotions and her expression of them. Her face lit up with unmediated delight as she danced with a step that she must have learnt as a child that followed a percussive rhythm in her head with a sharp aggressive stomp after every fourth beat. Each woman pulled the other towards her bosom and slapped the other's buttocks.

Then, inevitably, the dancing became more intimate, less wild and one in which the remembered rhythms of feast-days and holy rites were replaced by another beat. They lay on the muddy sand, their bodies entwined, their hips moving, but their legs entangled, the rain streaming off their bare flesh and soaking every hair of their head and their pubes.

The lovemaking was passionate, although it was still painful for Glade when Demure's fingers first plunged into her vagina: a hole that once welcomed such ingress with a spurt of juices that would dampen her lover's wrist. She hadn't regained the juice

her passion deserved as neither had Demure when Glade's tongue delved into the valley that she had so often ploughed. But the water from the sky helped compensate for the drought of juices from within to enable the lubrication required for their lovemaking to be passionate and prolonged.

When exhaustion at last defeated them, the two women lay on their backs with the rain still beating down on them: the only beings out in the open, while wiser animals sheltered under trees and nearby rocks. Where there was rain, there was food. And the more rain, the more food to eat.

Nevertheless, although the fear of starvation and thirst now receded, there were still risks. This wasn't a savannah as bountiful as that further south. There was less game and the animals were quite different. The lions and hyenas weren't as large. The giraffes towered less high. The elephants were more modest with smaller tusks. There were animals such as boar, aurochs and Barbary ape they'd never seen before. But even smaller lions could kill a human with little difficulty and a pride could easily kill them both.

So, after the moons of relatively care-free nights where the couple had slept in the open, fearing only small insects and the occasional sniffing prairie dog, there was now a need to guard against predators. But at least they didn't need to skim quite so close to the coast. And then, after a few more days wandering, Glade and Demure decided to halt their incessant wandering and settle in one place.

Doing so made it easier to catch prey, because the women could lay a trap for a small animal—a hole in the ground covered by leaves into which it might stumble—and return regularly to see whether the trap had been successful. They found a cave in which to shelter from the rain once its novelty had worn off. They could forage together

in different places and return to the same cave each night. And all these tasks they did together. In fact, the two women were inseparable.

These few moons were probably the happiest that Glade ever spent with her black lover. There were no intrigues in which Demure could engage. They relied equally on one another. There were no other lovers. And they were alone.

Or at least they thought they were.

This comfortable notion was soon dispelled when they first came across footprints that could only have been made by men, and by their depth and size they belonged to relatively tall men. They also encountered the occasional trap that was laid with ingenuity and cleverness. But of these other people there was no actual sight.

“Shall we follow the footprints to their village?” Demure asked Glade. “They’re fresh: less than three days old.”

Glade agreed.

They followed the trail of what were probably just two or three men. The broken twigs, brushed vegetation and the odd bum-shaped indentation on the moss or heather supplemented the track of those footprints that hadn’t been brushed over. After an hour’s wandering the trail went cold. The men had scrambled over rocks that left no trace and there was no visible plume of smoke from any corner of the horizon to indicate a nearby village.

But there was at least hope.

And as the shaman viewed the deceptively tranquil landscape of the towering waterfall cascading into the gloriously clear lake below, Glade could reassure Ivory with the conviction of experience that there can often be hope and salvation after even the greatest despair.

Chapter Twenty One

The warmth coming from the hastily assembled camp fire provided the only comfort for Ivory and her mostly silent companions as they anxiously awaited the outcome of the Chief's conference to which Glade was the only woman other than the Chief's wife who was privileged to attend. They had been gone for such a very long time and Ivory, like everyone else, hoped that whatever came of their discussions would at last bring direction and purpose to the villagers' wandering.

Ivory's only distraction from her fears was the execution of her communal duties. During the day she foraged in the forest with the other women for vegetables, nuts and mushrooms while the men hunted boar and deer. Ivory was pleased to find that although the Mountain Valley might not be her final destination, it provided enough food, shelter and fresh water for the moment.

As the shaman's assistant, Ivory also had to provide care and succour to the sick and injured. She appreciated Glade's training in the skill of bandaging limbs in leaves, patching scratches with berry-juice, and chanting incantations to the suffering. The ailments that most troubled Ivory were the broken limbs and old wounds that were slowly healing but still needed attention. There were also the shivers, fatigues and fevers best treated by poultices, herbs and prayer, but there was also the need to carefully manage the dwindling medicine supply. When would she and Glade again gather the fungi, herbs and weeds that gave such magical relief? Could they even be found in the mountains as they were in the forests and savannah?

It was well after the North Star had reached its apogee that Glade at last emerged from the shadows of the sheltered encampment where Chief Cave Lion and his closest

confidantes remained. Ivory sensed anxiety in her determined smile. She slipped under the furs that Ivory had pulled over her shoulders to ward off the night's icy chill and the harsh wind that rolled down the mountain slopes.

“What’s been decided?” Ivory asked.

“We spoke for a long time,” said Glade. “Not just the Chief and me, but all the elders and senior hunters. Even Ptarmigan was in attendance but as always she had nothing to say.”

“What are we going to do?”

“There were many options put forward,” said Glade who was not to be hurried. “The essential question is whether we stay or leave. This valley is rich in forest and there is much game, but it is small and there won’t be enough to feed everyone in the long winter months. We have followed the Wide River until it is no longer either wide or a river, but we don’t know where else to go. If we retrace our steps we may not find a valley better than this and we’ll have lost precious days before the worst of Winter arrives. The only alternative is to follow the tracks up the cliff-side which the scouts have verified are well-used. There must be habitable lands at the top and maybe beyond, but we don’t know how far the lands extend or whether those who live there will be well-disposed towards us.”

“And the Chief decided...?” persisted Ivory.

“The Chief and I will ascend the hillside with some of the hunters and follow the paths to wherever they lead. After we’ve scouted the hills beyond, we shall return with report of the nearest hunting grounds where we can settle. You shall stay in the Chief’s tent with Ptarmigan and provide the village with necessary spiritual and medical succour. We shall leave tomorrow when the sun rises. I hope that we shan’t be long.”

Ivory had slept by Glade's side almost every night for many moons now and she dreaded the prospect of separation.

"How long will you be away?" she asked.

"As long as it takes. Maybe days. Perhaps more."

Ivory wept. "I don't know that I can bear to be parted from you for so long," she choked.

"Relax, child," said Glade, nuzzling her beloved apprentice. "I've known worse than this and I've survived. It won't be long until we're together again."

It was true that Glade had known much greater peril. One such occasion on her arduous trek with Demure beyond the northernmost sands of the Great Desert was when she was pursued by a hyena.

Glade and Demure were always in danger of attack by predators, but they generally presented less of a threat when the two women were together. Most animals maintained a wary respect for humans especially when they carried sharpened sticks and a toolset of flints. However, this was a day on which Demure was ill. She'd eaten something that disagreed with her and was now lying in a pool of vomit and diarrhoea in the shelter of the cave they shared. The hyena that pursued Glade was young and inexperienced but most certainly hungry.

Glade had no time to plan a sophisticated course of evasive action. As soon as danger came pouncing towards her, she sprinted towards the nearest tree. Hyenas were strong and vicious but they couldn't climb trees.

It was not the first panicked flight in Glade's life. She'd been pursued by a lion, another time by a rhinoceros and on another occasion by a leopard. There were other less memorable but also potentially lethal encounters, where Glade escaped by darting up a tree or by splashing over a stream or by returning to the protection of her tribe. Glade hoped she would be just as fortunate this time.

Glade couldn't outrun the hyena for long and she could hear the approaching yelps as he steadily gained on her. Her skin was saturated by perspiration and every stride stabbed her lungs. Her feet thundered painfully on sharp pebbles and blades of grass. She was nearly at the woodland ahead of her, the hyena not quite yet on her, and she'd identified which tree to climb.

Glade couldn't recall how events followed each other in the next few minutes. She scrambled up the trunk of a tree only to drop backwards in her haste and fall beside the hyena who was startled to see the prey he'd been yelping at from below suddenly land beside him.

Glade picked herself rapidly, but not fast enough to escape the graze of the hyena's claws across her thigh. Now with blood as well as sweat coursing down her body, Glade ran towards another tree across the tangled brushwood plain when all of a sudden her feet gave away beneath her. This wasn't the stumbling that came from exhaustion or by tripping over a branch that she'd not noticed in her haste. This was the ground beneath her giving way under her weight.

She fell forward onto the slope of a hole that was deep enough to hold a buffalo or even a small rhinoceros. Her leg was caught on stakes placed deliberately upright in the hole that shot a spasm of intense pain through her body from an ankle badly sprained by her fall. She was thrown onto pebbles and stones that scratched her flesh and scored

her scalp.

And then Glade lost consciousness. But not immediately. For a time measured in moments of anxiety and fear, she hovered in a state midway between uneasy sleep and wary wakefulness. Above her, the hyena stared down into the hole startled but apparently unharmed. During her moments of consciousness, Glade watched the snarling and yelping hyena circle the newly formed hole. He was weighing the rewards of jumping into the hole for the meal of human flesh awaiting him against the risk of not getting out again.

“Go away! *Please* go away!” Glade begged pathetically as the hyena’s muzzle peeked over the rim. Saliva was dripping through his sharp teeth and below his calculating eyes.

Glade’s awareness ebbed away and she collapsed awkwardly on the pit slope, her hair entangled in brush and her leg squeezed between stakes while ants and flies crawled over her prone body.

This wasn’t a memory of misery Glade wanted to relate to Ivory. She wanted her apprentice to be optimistic. There were many stories Glade could recount of her northward wandering from the Great Desert to the Great Sea. There were stories of near-death and stories of love and triumph. And in all of these there was Demure: sometimes a saviour and sometimes a bane. On this occasion, Demure was a saviour.

When Glade’s consciousness fully returned after several days of fever and delirium it was Demure who greeted her with a face of unfeigned delight at her lover’s recovery.

And Demure wasn’t alone. She was accompanied by several warriors with straight noses, long straight black hair and brown skin. They wore fur around their

crotch and shoulders which was a bizarre sight for Glade, as it was for Demure. Neither of them had encountered a tribe before who were attired in such a way. And more bizarre still was that they wore clothes irrespective of how warm the day was.

When Demure realised that Glade had been missing for an unusually long time, despite her illness not only did she trace her lover's whereabouts from the trail she and the hyena had left behind but she also found the tribe who'd built the trap into which Glade had stumbled. And then she somehow persuaded them to rescue her.

Glade soon discovered that this was a tribe that hunted game and knew nothing of fishing although they lived fairly close to the sea. They were as promiscuous as any tribe that Glade had met apart from her own. The clothes they wore served less to cover the genitals than to enhance them. They were delighted to welcome two new women to their orgiastic ceremonies. And Glade and Demure were soon not so much just participants but pretty much the star attraction.

This intermingling of bodies—men and women fucking together like bonobos—was a key part of the tribe's rituals. Almost all sexual activity took place in public. So enthusiastically did Demure participate in the sex (and Glade too when she recovered) that the couple earned the privilege of being able to live with the tribe for a whole year.

Glade and Demure soon discovered why the tribe had adopted the habit of wearing clothes. In the warm sun, clothes were nothing more than ornamentation, although they were useful in that stone or wooden tools could be tied to them and their hands left free. It was when it was cool that clothes were most useful. Glade and Demure discovered for the first time in their lives that north of the Great Desert there were seasons in which it was sometimes warmer than it ever was further south and other

seasons when it was decidedly cold. It was sometimes so cold that the rain fell from the sky in soft white flakes. Outlandish though it was to Glade, she also chose to wear furs to cover her skin, although not necessarily her crotch.

Demure's scheming inevitably caused trouble for the two women again. This time it was a result of her attempt to inveigle herself with the village matriarch who, although a passionate participant in the ceremonial orgies, was far more attracted to men than women. Demure's attempts to become one of the matriarch's lovers backfired when the outcome was that two of her regular male lovers transferred their affection to Demure and her exotic skin colour. This aroused jealousy and then rage in the very woman whom Demure should have known better than to upset.

So, Glade and Demure were once again wandering vagrants. This time their travel northwards was between the ocean on one side and a range of mountains on the other, although the distance between the two was so great that it was only on days when the air was extraordinarily clear could that they see both these glorious sights at the same time.

The spectacle of the mountains looming from the far distance was at first as strange as the ocean had once been. Just as they had known rivers and lakes before they'd first seen an ocean, the two women were familiar with hills. However, no freshwater lake had prepared them for the ocean's immensity and nothing had prepared them for the majesty of the white peaked mountains. This was particularly so because this was the first time either woman had ever seen a permanent covering of snow. These mountains were as impassable a barrier as the ocean or desert. The glaciers spread over the valleys and the windblown air was sometimes very cold.

The couple meandered across the fertile plains sometimes within sight of the

snow-covered mountains and sometimes of the ocean's open expanse. The species of animal they encountered varied according to the mountains' proximity. The closer the mountains, the more sheep and goats. Towards the balmy shore, the more antelope and giraffe. But wherever the women roamed so too did lion, leopard and hyena.

The couple stumbled upon many different tribes and villages in their northward trek. Some tribes they lived amongst and others chased them away. Most often they were treated as outlandish curiosities: most especially Demure, whose skin colour was a matter of ceaseless wonder. It was fortunate indeed that Demure was unperturbed by this. However, as the months and years passed she became steadily more humble, more conciliatory and far less prickly and proud than when she was a Lady amongst the Knights. The need to survive took priority over everything else and one thing categorically true of Demure was that she was a survivor.

Glade was conscious that it was she rather than Demure who shouldered the greatest share of the daily chores required to stay alive. It was she who did the most gathering and hunting food. It was she who mostly assembled, stitched and repaired the furs they now wore against the evening chill. And it was she who learnt the languages and dialects in the villages and settlements they passed through. But Glade's resentment was forestalled by Demure's flattery and lovemaking. Glade could forgive her lover anything as long as she was blessed with compliments and passionate love.

Demure was expert in inveigling herself into any community in which she got a toehold, although she was often also the reason why this affiliation didn't last for long. Demure's machinations almost always conflicted with the jealous womenfolk who didn't appreciate the fact that their men were fucking the foreign black-skinned woman.

There was great diversity between one tribe and another and those from south

of the Great Desert. Not all tribes gathered in villages. Sometimes a tribe gathered in units of no more than a handful of individuals where maybe two or three families lived together and relied on a wide hunting range and a small cave to survive. Other tribes lived in villages of thirty or forty people; although sometimes the numbers were nearly double that. Their homes ranged in sophistication from huts of straw and mud via tents of animal-hide to wooden frames bound together by vines and animal intestines. There were tribes that Glade and Demure encountered who had no permanent settlement at all. They endlessly wandered the savannah on the trail of antelope or buffalo herds. They would pick stragglers off when the need arose and kept predators such as lions at bay with their long spears.

The customs and spiritual beliefs of the tribes were as diverse and various as the languages they spoke. Most tribes were relatively peaceful. They would offer hospitality to the strange pair and were sometimes surprised when the women demonstrated their gratitude by the free gift of their bodies. Nevertheless, the two lovers soon learnt that the warmth of the welcome faded over the length of their stay although this could sometimes be stretched out for several moons.

Some tribes were aggressive and even violent. On a couple of occasions Glade and Demure suffered the humiliation and shame of forcible rape and beatings. However, although the women were treated brutally, they were at least abandoned to their own fate and not killed or eaten. Glade's experience of rough-handling by Demure's tribe had prepared her for the worst, but her lover was inconsolable long after the blood had dried up, the semen washed off and the bruises healed. Glade was ashamed to admit that the extent of Demure's distress gave her a certain degree of secret satisfaction.

Further and further north the couple wandered: the summer months long and hot and a chill descending in the winter months. These were the months when the lovers saw the virtue of wearing furs against the blasts of cold air that descended from the mountains, but the women were so unacquainted with the custom that their attempt at covering themselves was forever a source of amusement to the tribes they encountered who had far better dress-sense. It took Glade a long time to master the art of securing furs together so they didn't slip apart. Her crotch and legs were never properly covered which scandalised those tribes whose principal reason for covering the body was for modesty.

This wasn't always a problem for the women. There were days, sometimes half a moon or more, when the women saw nobody. There were other occasions when the communities they encountered were densely packed together. This was especially so along the rivers that tumbled and crashed down from the white-peaked mountains. The many villages strung along the river banks often shared the same language, the same customs and ate the same kind of food.

It was on one of these rivers that Glade first encountered a tribe who could travel across water not only by swimming, as did the Ocean People, but on rafts of wood held together by the same vines and animal sinews that secured the wooden frame of their huts and shelters. It was an extraordinary sight to see men and women row from one shore to another, past the occasional crocodile and hippopotamus, propelling themselves forward by long branches that were used either to push against the river bottom or, even, and this was stranger still, used like the paddles of an otter or a seal to drive the rafts forward. This was sometimes done in tandem where two people on either side used flattened branches to push the raft forward even against the prevailing current.

“Can there be anywhere in the world where people are more clever and ingenious than this?” wondered Glade with amazement as she and Demure sat by the riverbank.

They were in open-mouthed awe at the traffic of rafts up and down the river. Here was a place where people not only lived by the riverside but on its very surface. What next? Perhaps one day people could even learn to fly!

“You’re too fanciful,” said Demure as her lover speculated. “Humans can do much but without the intercession of the spirits how could they ever fly or cross the great ocean?”

“If we can build a craft of wood and rope and sail the rivers, maybe we will one day conquer the air and the ocean.”

“The spirits have created us and the other animals of the firmament,” said Demure, no doubt recalling the lessons of the priests and shamans of her youth. “The bird and the bat have the sky. The monkey has the tree. The fish has the waters to swim through. Humans have dominion over the land in harmony with the lion and elephant. We have our place in this world and that is where we should stay.”

“Was it on such a raft that you came to the lands of the North?” Ivory wondered when Glade told her about these strange people.

“Indeed it was,” Glade told her. “There is a Great Sea between the warmer Southern lands and the Northern lands of snow and ice. But it wasn’t by choice that Demure and I crossed these waters. Who would have chosen to exchange the warmth of the Southern sun for the permafrost and savannah of the North? But rest now. It will be a difficult day tomorrow. We must sleep.”

Ivory laid her head on her lover’s bosom, her face burrowing into the thick fur

that sheltered all but her nose from the cold that permeated the already chill air. And Glade was right. The following day would be hard. How hazardous would it be for her lover and the Chief to explore unknown territory?

The following morning, Ivory stood beside Ptarmigan and the Chief's entire family, with the village gathered anxiously by, as in the company of Chief Cave Lion and hand-picked hunters Glade began her ascent of the narrow paths up the hillside. This select company seemed so strong and vigorous at the foot of the hill that it was inconceivable that harm could fall their way. As the small fur-covered figures receded into the distance, now dwarfed by the height of the hills, they seemed much more vulnerable.

Ivory held Ptarmigan round the shoulder and squeezed her hand for comfort, but the Chief's wife could see that it was Ivory who needed the most reassurance. At first the streak of tears warmed her chill blue-veined face, but they soon became a slowly cooling reminder of her loss. Ptarmigan and she stood at their post for far longer than the rest of the village as their eyes followed the distant furry dots as they mounted the winding path. Ivory could identify Glade by her thick silver musk-oxen fur, which contrasted with the bear- and wolf-skins worn by the hunters. Chief Cave Lion's leopard-skin mantle stood out best against the rubble-strewn moss of the hill. Soon even he couldn't be told apart from the rest of the company.

Then the distant figures reached the highest part of their ascent when one by one they disappeared over the top of the hill. An undistinguished wolf-skin was the last to disappear. And with this final sight of her lover now past, Ivory burst into

uncontrollable sobs and chokes while Ptarmigan attempted to comfort her.

“They will soon be back,” the chief’s wife reassured her.

Ivory was sure, confident, definitely certain, that Ptarmigan was right, but the wrench of separation was harder to bear than she had imagined possible. It was like, but different in kind, to the loss she felt when her mother died, but it wasn’t bereavement that haunted her but fearful apprehension.

It was by Ptarmigan’s side that Ivory was to sleep in Chief Cave Lion’s absence. With the Chief absent, only his most trusted lieutenants could guard Ptarmigan from the predatory attention of wild animals or wild men. The Chief instructed Ivory to stand as Ptarmigan’s final line of defence, even if the two women would need to live together as close as sisters.

Although Ptarmigan and Ivory did indeed sleep under the same furs—legs entangled and warm breath on each other’s cheek—there was no sexual exploration on the first night or so after Glade and Chief Cave Lion had departed. The comfort they gave each other was genuinely like that of two sisters.

In any case, their days were scarcely idle. The pursuit of food and the many other duties required for the tribe to survive ensured that everyone was tired when the sun descended behind the hills. Ivory was also preoccupied with the need to chant the sacred incantations and sing to the spirits. Although she mostly followed Glade’s instructions, she subtly adapted the rituals to express the esteem that the spirits really deserved. She also didn’t use those prayers and songs that had words Ivory didn’t understand. She believed it would be disrespectful to make offerings in a tongue whose meaning was lost to her.

Ptarmigan was attentive to the care of her children, but she wasn’t expected to

help in foraging for food or even to help in its preparation. In fact, she had neglected such duties for so long she probably wouldn't have made a very good job of them. When she could leave her children, Ptarmigan was always in Ivory's company. She watched the shaman's apprentice perform her duties and occasionally assisted in the care of the wounded and suffering.

Ptarmigan might sit beside a child who was hot with fever and rest the child's head on her lap while the mother anxiously watched Ivory prepare the herbs that Glade would prescribe for such a fever. She might grasp another woman's hand while Ivory wrapped a bandage of finely beaten leaves around a scar on the chest.

The women would talk together, but not as much as Ivory would with Glade. Ptarmigan preferred just to sit with Ivory and observe, rather than chat. And what conversation there was related to daily concerns rather than the growing and sickening dread that gripped Ivory as each day passed by and there was still no sign that Glade would return.

Chapter Twenty Two

The voyage north that Glade would make across the Great Sea wasn't one she'd planned and most definitely not one she would have chosen, although it was true that she and Demure had often sat together on the shore and looked over a sea that stretched towards the North rather than the West. And they'd often speculated whether this water stretched to the very end of the world or whether there might be land beyond.

"The further North we go," observed Glade, "the further we are from the Sun. And the further away the Sun, the cooler it is. If we travelled across the sea it would just get colder and colder."

"No one would want to live where it's colder than even here," said Demure, shivering under the deer-skin that covered her shoulders even though it was now Spring. "Perhaps the sea has no other shore. Perhaps it goes on forever."

"So where do the ice floes come from?"

Demure shook her head. "Perhaps it's so cold that the sea turns to ice," she ventured.

The lovers were now living together with a tribe of Raft People who tolerated the women's presence in their village for as long as they were willing to provide sexual services whenever requested. This was a tribe with a fairly relaxed attitude towards life. They were generally communal in all that they consumed, whether it was food, drink or sex. Like Glade's own tribe, it was a community of mutual sharing. There was no concept of private property, private life or even privacy.

This openness and generosity was possible because the tribe lived in a region of great bounty. There was fruit from the tree; flesh from the migrating herds of deer and

antelope; and, as a result of the tribe's expertise at fishing from rafts, no shortage of food from the sea.

Initially Demure found life amongst this tribe rather disconcerting. All her life she was accustomed to taking advantage of other people's weaknesses and here were people whose weaknesses she didn't know how to exploit. They had no understanding of status. They had no concept of ownership or privilege. Her attempts to gain advantage over other people were met with incomprehension. But eventually even she relaxed. If her talent at manipulation wasn't going to get her anywhere then perhaps it was better if she didn't even try.

Glade was more at home although she still missed the warmth of the South and the shelter of the Forest. She revelled in the license to fuck and the generosity of a people who had plenty to eat and plenty to spare. She became skilled at using the rafts the tribe employed to such advantage and passed on as much of her knowledge as she could to Demure for whom laziness was her chief obstacle to learning. Glade's lover was naturally intelligent, even if her aptitude was most often manifest as deviousness and cunning. Soon enough she also had sufficient skill at handling the rafts to make a useful contribution to food-gathering which in turn ensured that the lovers' presence could continue to be tolerated.

Glade soon discovered that rafting wasn't as simple as just pushing the raft onto the sea's surface. There was skill involved in making a raft behave. One could use sticks with flattened ends that could steer the raft in any direction. There was a variety of sticks to use. Some were employed to spear fish, some to paddle the raft and others to navigate shallow waters. It was also advisable to carry aboard a thin canvass of deer or antelope hide which, supported on a framework of sticks tied together by sinews, could

catch the breeze and manoeuvre the raft out to sea where there was a greater haul of fish.

There were many other skills associated with using a raft at which the Raft People were expert, such as how the raft was constructed and how fish were caught. This last employed the art of weaving together intricate nets from sinews and reeds which could be used to catch many fish at once. The Raft People were ingenious in many other ways. They came up with novel and sometimes surprising solutions to the problem of how to capture the fruit of the sea. Sometimes they followed flocks of sea-birds to where they congregated above a great harvest of small fish. Sometimes they left woven baskets on the shore to capture lobsters and crabs when the tide was high. There was always plenty of game and fruits to harvest on the days when the sea was too rough for even the hardest fisherman.

Glade and Demure became almost complacent. Perchance now, at last, they wouldn't one day need to set off again in pursuit of a new home when the goodwill of their hosts was exhausted. Perhaps the two women could simply settle together as a couple unusual more for their intimate closeness than for their sexual predilection.

Perhaps they could grow old together.

But, inevitably, this was not to be.

Ivory also had to adjust to unwelcome change. Although she missed Glade terribly, she was kept too occupied during the day to fall victim to depression. At night she was distracted by Ptarmigan's relatively innocuous fondling. Although she'd expected

Glade and the chief to be away for more than a couple of days, it was now a quarter the way through the moon's cycle and the expedition had still not returned. With most senior tribesmen accompanying Chief Cave Lion, Ivory felt distinctly vulnerable when she heard that the Mammoth Hunters were no longer alone in the valley.

"What shall we do?" Ptarmigan asked anxiously when this news was brought to them by Leopard, a young man whose voice had barely broken.

"We should chase the invaders away!" gruffly insisted Grey Wolf, the most senior hunter left behind.

Ivory wondered what Glade would say on this occasion. "How many of these strangers are there?" she asked.

"I saw only five or six," said Leopard. "I don't think there are more."

"Even so, few can be a danger," insisted Grey Wolf. "Perhaps we should kill them."

"That's not right," said Ivory with alarm. "Only if the strangers mean us harm should we kill them. If we were to kill them for other reasons, their spirits will curse us. It is imperative that we don't bring evil onto our tribe."

"So what do we do?" said Grey Wolf who huffily accepted the received wisdom of the shaman's apprentice. "We can't have two tribes living together in this valley. There's barely enough space for us."

"We should speak to them," said Ivory. She thought back to Glade's own way of reasoning. Was there some advantage that an act of kindness could bring to the tribe? "Maybe they can help us find a way out of this valley. After all, they may know this area better than we do."

Alas, Ivory's hopes were unfounded. The six strangers consisted of only one

adult man and the others were women and children. Like Ivory's tribe they were also lost and, judging by how gaunt they were, no more expert at finding food and sustenance. However, it was difficult to be sure of anything about them beyond their pathetic gratitude at not being killed by Ivory's more numerous kindred. They didn't speak a language that resembled hers. They looked distinctly alien. Their skin was darker than Ivory's but nowhere near as dark as Glade's. Their noses were flat and broad, their hair was light brown and curly, their ears were small, and they were relatively short. And about their shoulders they wore relatively thin ibex-skin furs.

Nevertheless, after the strangers prostrated themselves abjectly on the ground and begged tearfully for their safety in a language that combined clicks, growls and a phlegmy grunt, it was impossible for Ivory not to feel some responsibility for their welfare. Ptarmigan who was more used than anyone to being an outsider in the community instantly petitioned for the strangers to stay. Grey Wolf immediately offered a voice of caution.

"We have to look after our own first," he said bluntly. "We have no need for more mouths to feed. The chief wouldn't allow our meagre resources to be so casually shared."

"We should wait until my husband arrives and see what he says," said Ptarmigan with uncharacteristic firmness.

"As you wish," Grey Wolf conceded reluctantly.

Ivory sighed. She wasn't convinced that her generosity towards these harmless foreigners was such a good idea. She may have spared the tribe the wrath of unjustly slaughtered souls, but she had burdened them with more mouths to feed that could well prove to be a liability as resources became increasingly scarce.

At first, the Raft People had only one alien visitor to contend with. He was a swarthy, stocky man dressed in stitched-together rabbit skin, his genitals and upper thigh obscured by a short skirt, and he wore a headdress fashioned from the skull of a baboon onto which antelope horns were attached. It was difficult to interpret the expression on his face as it was heavily tattooed with an abstract swirling figure and his words, spoken in a language that even Glade didn't recognise, was more or less incomprehensible.

However, he seemed harmless. He stayed for a couple of days as a guest in the village where he fucked a few women and consented to being fucked by one of the men, though it wasn't apparent that this was his normal preference. He learned a few words of greeting and departed the village on relatively amenable terms. In fact, the Raft People were almost sad to see him go. He had an easy laugh and his cock was of good length and thickness.

Less than a moon later, he returned and this time he was in the company of several other men and an equal number of women. This time he wasn't so welcome. Although he and his companions were happy to share in the village's generosity, they didn't participate in the duty of providing the village with the food they so obviously enjoyed eating. The easy humour and laughter that had made the baboon man such pleasant company was less attractive when it came from a group of people who sat and joked together and made little attempt to communicate with their hosts.

The other men were of the same stocky, swarthy build as the baboon man and were mostly identifiable by the skulls they wore on their heads, such as quagga, hyena

and antelope. Their faces were also heavily tattooed. The women covered their heads with stitched-together rabbit-skins as was the rest of their dress, but this was arranged such that the bosom and crotch were displayed at the front, but the buttocks covered at the rear.

The men and women kept themselves apart from each other, although Glade noted that this sexual apartheid was not as extreme as that practised by Demure's tribe. All the same, there was a curious double standard whereby the men were at license to fuck the women and sometimes the men of the host village when the opportunity occurred, but no such license was allowed the women. In fact, they showed no public display of affection to anyone, including their own menfolk, and were aggressively distrustful of even the most innocent intimacy. The men watched the women jealously even though they passed hardly a word with them and were especially alert when their hosts approached the women. Glade was sure that the men and women did fuck together, but this was a practice they kept notably private.

The Raft People generally expressed their feelings and desires by subtle allusion and were very tolerant of each other's quirks. As a result, they were extraordinarily ill-equipped for the task of explaining to their guests that they had overstayed their welcome. Glade and Demure were women with much greater experience of the world than their fellow villagers and it was clear to them, Demure especially, that the baboon man and his compatriots didn't really care whether the villagers were any longer enamoured by their presence. Indeed, they appeared to wilfully misunderstand the Raft People's feeble attempts at protest.

This became more vocal when the Skull People started moving into the huts and shelters of their hosts. Naturally, the abodes they chose belonged to those women and

men who had been most open to fucking new exotic flesh, but who were now regretting their earlier intimacy. Glade hadn't been one of these women although she'd been tempted. Uncharacteristically, it had been Demure who advised her lover against her natural urges.

"I don't think this situation is going to be tolerated for much longer," said Demure, as the couple floated together on a raft and speared fish in the Great Sea. "Our hosts may be almost as free with their personal space and their affections as your tribe once were..."

"...before it was exterminated..." said Glade, who could never forgive the Knights for their crimes.

"Yes indeed," Demure agreed, as if she had nothing to do with it. "Our hosts may have levels of tolerance and understanding beyond almost all compare, but they will soon reach their limits. Enough will be enough. They may not have a tradition for making their feelings known, but they outnumber the invaders and will soon forcefully evict them."

"Invaders'?"

"Trespassers. Intruders. They're not here to share, they're here to take."

"I don't think the Skull People will leave willingly."

Demure made no reply and brusquely threw her spear into the water. She drew it back onto the raft by the length of coiled sinew and reed that secured it to her ankle. She'd caught a small fish that had dared to approach the water surface for one last time. Demure and Glade pounced on the thrashing fish that might otherwise wriggle back into the sea, perhaps into the jaws of a manatee or great auk, and swiftly sawed through the fish's throat. They then threw it into a woven basket in which were already heaped

four or five other fish.

“You’re right that the invaders won’t leave willingly,” Demure replied at last. “Therefore, we must be careful to keep our distance. Once one set of guests becomes unwelcome, it’s possible that other guests won’t be so willingly tolerated.”

Glade pondered Demure’s words and followed her lover’s advice and example when they returned to the village. She was careful to demonstrate just how generous she and Demure could be with their overflowing basket of fish, whilst at the same time ensuring that she sat amongst the Raft People at quite a distance from the men with skulls on their heads.

Demure’s calculations were based entirely on numbers. The Raft People’s village was unusually large. There were more than a hundred men, women and children who were all well-fed and well-sheltered thanks to the bounty of nature on this stretch of the Northern shore. Most villages Glade had ever seen were composed of rather less than a third of this number and sometimes of barely a dozen souls. But when the company of Skull People one day expanded from the seven or eight who’d originally arrived to more like thirty or so, Glade wasn’t so sure that Demure had chosen the stronger force to support.

It was obvious to Glade that the baboon man’s tribe was much more belligerent than the Raft People. Not only were the men dressed in more macho fashion with tattoos covering their faces and the skulls of various animals worn on their heads, but they were rarely seen without a weapon such as a flint-knife, a sharpened stick or a club studded with sharp stones. Even their carriage and manner of speaking was inherently more bellicose than their relatively mild and deferential hosts. Could the Raft People assert their will effectively on guests who made no pretence of according them respect?

Glade and Demure sat together with the unusually silent and restrained Raft People on one side of the huge communal fire on which two antelope and a shark were roasting. On the other side, the Skull People were joking and carousing with vulgar abandon. Or at least, the men were. Their women were huddled together, only eating what food was offered them, and nursed the children whose gender was clearly distinguishable at a very young age by the choice of dress.

The new guests wore even more elaborate skulls on their heads, including okapi, wart hog, wolf and even leopard. The man with the leopard skull had a vicious scar down his cheek and forehead that crossed over where an eye was missing. His tattooed face was further adorned by a small bone through his nose, whilst the splendid fur that covered his shoulders but parted ostentatiously at his crotch was stitched from several wildcats including cheetah, leopard and ocelot. Demure remarked to Glade, who wouldn't otherwise have noticed, that this man, as the most strikingly dressed, was probably the Skull People's chief.

Glade was soon rather less anxious about the presence of the leopard man, who was actually the least rowdy of his company, than she was by the attention of another of the new visitors. This one's head was crowned by the skull of a mountain goat, with splendid horns, and whose tattoos only just disguised a badly broken nose and a deep scar across his cheek. Although Glade had learnt a few words of the Skull People's language, she could glean less about the man's intentions from his words as from the affection he expressed towards her and even more so towards Demure.

"This is a man who likes the taste of the exotic," remarked Demure in her own tongue which almost dead language was still her main means of communication with her lover. "There's all this brown flesh, but it's the black he wants."

“You *are* very beautiful,” remarked Glade loyally, who believed this with increasing fervour over the passing years.

“It’s not beauty that attracts our stunt-nosed friend,” said Demure, as she slid an arm discreetly away from the mountain goat man’s grasp. “He doesn’t want to admire my skin. He wants to stick his prick inside my hairy black lips. And once he’s fucked me, he won’t care a fuck about my beauty a moment longer.”

The fire died down. Meat was torn off the roasted game. Blood dribbled down the chin and onto the chests of the ravenous Skull People. And amongst the laughter and raucousness that came from just one side of the smouldering fire, the guests were chewing at mushrooms and herbs whose properties were more obviously narcotic than nutritional. The Raft People were more eager than usual to conclude their nightly feast. They were happy to be relieved of the tension of sharing the fruit of their efforts with guests who showed only the most superficial signs of gratitude and whose company had become less than amicable.

Glade and Demure were very soon amongst only a small number of Raft People left at the feast and still the mountain goat man hadn’t left their company.

“We’re not going to shake him off,” complained Demure. Although the man held her possessively around the waist, she was careful not to betray the meaning of her words by maintaining a strangely bland tone in her voice.

“What are we going to do?” wondered Glade, who sat to one side and emulated her lover by keeping her voice similarly unstressed.

“Well, we’re not going to argue with the ugly cunt,” said Demure whose angry words contrasted with a voice that sounded light and cheerful. “Whatever the shit wants to do, we’re not going to be able to stop him. If he wants to fuck a black cunt from the

savannah or a brown cunt from the forest, we're going to have to let him."

"We'll just allow him do what he wants?"

"Exactly," said Demure.

She turned her head back to the mountain goat man and smiled almost encouragingly as he pawed her bosom which like the rest of her was uncovered. Neither she nor Glade were comfortable wearing clothes and only did so when it was especially cold. However, nudity on the southern coast of the Great Sea was only rarely associated with sexuality, so this didn't explain the man's obsession with Demure.

When Demure and Glade stood up to return to their shelter, the mountain goat man accompanied them. He continued to speak jocularly in his incomprehensible throaty language and was accompanied also by a woman in a rather plain rabbit-skin fur whose pendulous breasts fell free of the furs that covered her back and buttocks.

The shelter where Glade and Demure lived had over the year been improved greatly from the flimsy wood and deer-hide tent they'd originally built, but it was nothing like as well built as those of most Raft People. Nevertheless, they'd lived in the ramshackle construction of branches, leaves, baked mud, antelope skin, and stitching for so long that it was as much a home as they'd ever had. It had witnessed so much fucking, and not just between the two women, that the very soil was soaked in life-giving semen and vaginal juice.

However, this home resembled more a prison when Glade parted the skins that covered the entrance and the mountain goat man strode in with his woman several paces behind. As soon as they were inside, he groped at Demure's bosom while his woman looked on impassively.

"Fuck her," said Demure with a sweet smile to the mountain goat man as he

clumsily pawed her. “Fuck Glade. She wants you to fuck her. She thinks you’re a fucking stud. She thinks you’re a fucking man.”

These were the most amiable and sweetly spoken words that Demure had uttered all evening and although the man had no idea of the meaning of the individual words, the intent was completely apparent to him as Demure offered him a startled and confused Glade.

“What the fuck are you doing, you bastard?” Glade whispered, only just suppressing a tone of anger and resentment in her voice. “It’s *you* this prick wants to fuck.”

“Enjoy her,” said Demure, ignoring Glade’s words. “And after that,” she continued as she squeezed the mountain goat man’s penis, “you can fuck me. You can fuck me up the arse if you want to.”

Demure said other words in this vein as she cajoled the mountain goat man towards Glade’s bare flesh. She even assisted his predation by removing all encumbrances and by guiding his eager and anticipatory penis towards the thick hair that hid Glade’s labia. However, these weren’t words that Glade heard as she surrendered herself to the fate she was about to endure. How many times had she been raped? Too many. And once more was far from welcome. She almost instinctively surrendered herself to the inevitable, whilst resenting every second, as this slobbering, brutish man, now distinguishable more by his tattoos and scars than by his furs or headwear, forced his way into Glade’s utterly dry and unaccommodating vagina. Each thrust was an agony further worsened by the fact that it was an echo of earlier violations. The drip of slobber onto her cheek and the rough grip on her shoulders and waist only compounded her misery. And this was an ordeal that would end only when the mountain

goat man had spent his seed.

Perhaps this was what Glade's conniving lover had planned. Perhaps she wanted the man to exhaust his passion on her one-time slave and thereby be spared the indignity of rape. At moments like this, Glade remembered how much she had once hated Demure and let that sore loathing be a comfort in her current misery.

And then the mountain goat man abruptly stopped fucking Glade and slumped down on top of her. Had he ejaculated so soon? Was he so completely spent by his exertions as to collapse right on top of her? And why wouldn't the shit-faced bastard get off her?

The last question was partly answered when she realised that it wasn't the man's warm perspiration that was trickling onto her shoulders and cheeks, but something much darker and more viscous. Then the mountain goat man was hefted off her. Glade blinked up above in the dark shadows of the shelter, illuminated only by the half-light of the moon through the deer-hide of the shelter, to see the even darker figure of Demure who held a fishing spear in one hand and the mountain goat man's flint-knife in the other. Even in the dim shadows Glade could see that both were dripping with blood.

"The woman?" wondered Glade, whose wits were alert to the remaining threat.

"Don't worry," said Demure, whose white teeth were still visible in the gloom. "I didn't kill her. But her nose is as flat as her man's and she won't be able to nibble so easily ever again."

Glade couldn't tell in the dark how true this was, but the woman was weeping and groaning in the shadowy corner of the shelter. The only reason her cries weren't audible beyond the shelter was that her head was inside her man's furs that Demure had tied around her head before smashing her in the face with a stone.

“Why didn’t you kill her?” wondered Glade, who was surprised as much by her lover’s show of mercy as by her haste in saving them both from the mountain goat man’s further predation.

“I knew you wouldn’t approve,” said Demure with a chuckle that betrayed how much she’d enjoyed her moment of violence and brutality. “And anyway we’re not going to be around when she’s discovered in the morning.”

“Where are we going?”

“We’ll each take a raft and sail away before it gets light,” said Demure.

“That’s the only thing we can do,” agreed Glade. “The Skull People can’t sail. We’ll be safe.”

“But only if we tie this woman up,” said Demure as she produced some cord that was normally used to secure the logs and branches of a raft together. “Either that or we kill her...”

“We’ll tie her up,” said the more ethically inclined Glade, aware just how much Demure’s restraint in this case was less from sympathy for the helpless Skull Woman than an acknowledgment of Glade’s quite different practices.

As the two woman tied the struggling woman in cords that normally held together thick lengths of timber rather than blood-stained human limbs, their conversation was on the details of their perilous escape and how they could take with them as many of their possessions they could carry to the safety of the rafts without attracting unwelcome attention.

Chapter Twenty Three

Clouds obscured the stars and moon when Glade and Demure emerged from their shelter carrying as many of their belongings as they could in deer-hide sacks, but more than the dark what mostly helped secure the lovers' escape as they crept away from the Raft People's village towards the Great Sea was that the rest of the village was far more preoccupied with other matters than the fate of the two women. Other villagers were suffering the same humiliation and possibly rape that Glade and Demure had suffered.

The screams were terrifying.

"There may be others who'll be trying to escape," Glade remarked.

"Where to?" wondered Demure. "Nobody in the village knows of anywhere else but here. Where else could they run to?"

The quickest route to the deep water inlet that acted as harbour for the villagers' rafts was across the fine sands of the beach, but the couple decided against allowing themselves to be so visible across such a distance and instead took a more circuitous route over some grassy sand hillocks and through a tangle of woodland. Demure reasoned that it was best for two women who were clearly on the run to attract as little attention as possible. The couple could see shadowy figures on the sandy beach and hear the distant sound of mournful sobs. Glade tried to see what was happening, but Demure didn't want to be delayed for even a moment.

"If we launch out to sea on the rafts we'll be safe," she said, tugging Glade's arm. "And if you want to see what's going on we can do so from a safe distance."

As they approached the inlet, Glade could hear another extraordinary gasping noise amongst the animal snorts and cries of the night. As she suspected, they were

passing another person who'd fled the village but the young girl was hardly aware of the two women's presence. She was stumbling aimlessly forward, as naked as Glade and Demure, with streaks of blood lining her inner thighs and choking with irrepressible sobs. Glade's initial instinct was to offer assistance, but Demure insisted that they should continue on regardless.

"Do you want us all to get caught and raped?" she hissed.

"I've already been raped," Glade reminded her lover.

"Come on!" said Demure urgently.

The rafts were moored by ropes made from grasses and sinews that were tethered to stumps of wood that were either naturally situated by the waterside or had been pegged into the ground. The raft that belonged to Glade and Demure was secured to a thick upended log and it was this rope that Glade untied. As always, Demure was no help whatsoever and Glade had to remove the rope and push the raft onto the water herself. But when she jumped aboard with her deer-hide sack of tools and memorabilia (but no clothes as neither women regarded them as essential), she was surprised to find that her lover hadn't joined her.

"Demure!" Glade hissed. "Where are you?"

"Here," said Demure from the shore where she was securing another raft for herself and not one that belonged to her. It was Glade who was usually careless of property rights. After all, ownership wasn't a concept she'd ever been aware of before she came to live amongst Demure's people. But it seemed somehow especially wrong that Demure should claim for herself the best-made and most sturdy raft when she, of all people, had a very clear idea of what was hers and what belonged to someone else.

"What are you doing?" Glade asked as Demure pushed the raft that was already

carrying her possessions into the water.

“What do you think I’m doing?”

“It’s not right.”

“Do you really think the skull-head fuckers are going to give a shit about which raft belonged to which villager?” said Demure. “We need as much as we can get. We have no idea how long we’re going to be out at sea.”

“Not long I hope,” said Glade as she steered her raft towards Demure’s as both rafts bobbed out of the natural harbour into the open sea.

“But at least we’re surrounded by the sea’s bounty,” said Demure, who now had to raise her voice to be heard over the lapping waves. She held up her fishing spears and flint knife. “And we’ve got the means to catch some of it.”

The matter of food and how to find it was also paramount to Ivory while she waited for Glade’s return in the shadow of the steep Mountain Valley hills, so she didn’t welcome the arrival of several more people into the valley. They were from the same tribe as the first few who’d wandered in. Although she and Ptarmigan welcomed these new people when they arrived, Ivory wasn’t now so sure that Grey Wolf’s more robust response mightn’t, after all, have been better.

However, she weighed up the options in her mind as she lay under a comforting fur blanket with Ptarmigan’s arms around her. How should restive spirits be appeased if it ever became necessary to evict the new arrivals? If they were killed, their spirits could haunt Ivory’s tribe for generations and bring evil upon her descendents. Even if

they were just evicted, this would anger the spirits of the Mountain Valley. But if they stayed, this might also put her tribe's survival at risk.

The strangers weren't at all hostile. The River People, as she got to call them, were a humble tribe and did their best to be useful to the Mammoth Hunters in their preparation for more snow and the greater chill to come. Ivory wasn't a great linguist like Glade and she learnt very few words of the River People's peculiar language, but she conversed as best she could with two of the women whose names sounded like the strangled cry of a mammoth. She gathered from them that a catastrophe had happened to their tribe. Judging from the women's mimes, it appeared to have involved rushing water and many falling boulders. There were also hyenas, lions and evil spirits. Just like Ivory's tribe, the River People had struggled to find a place to stay and were rightly fearful of the approaching Winter. And, as they stressed so often, they were grateful for the compassion Ivory's tribe had shown them and wanted to help as much as they could.

"I still say they should be evicted," said Grey Wolf in a hastily arranged assembly of the remaining huntsmen to which only Ivory and Ptarmigan were the only women privileged to attend. Ivory saw this as a significant improvement over his earlier view that they should be killed.

"How do we do that?" asked one of the older huntsmen, Cave Bear.

"It shouldn't be difficult," said Grey Wolf. "They are weak and passive. They'll just leave if we push them in the right direction."

"The women and children are helping the village to gather food and cook," said Ptarmigan. "The few men, despite their frailty, have helped in the hunt and one of them threw his spear at a horse. That was food for the entire village."

"And tasty it was too," agreed Cave Bear. "Do you believe then, Wife of Our

Chief, that these strangers have proven their worth and should stay?”

“Food is scarce and will become scarcer still when fresh snow falls,” Grey Wolf objected.

“It is difficult to make a decision with the Chief and shaman absent,” remarked Snow Hare, another older huntsman who was possibly in the last few years of his hunting life.

“I have consulted with the spirits,” said Ivory, who’d spent many hours deliberating with Ptarmigan and meditating on potent mushrooms. “What they say is that we must treat these people with kindness. They have shown only kindness towards us and the spirits will be angry if we repay them ill.”

“Is that all the spirits have said?” wondered Falcon, who had a trace of scepticism in his voice. Ivory understood his reservations. After all, she had been the shaman’s assistant for only a few months and her fellow villagers were bound to doubt her ability at communicating with spirits.

“The spirits never say what they mean by just words,” said Ivory. “They govern the weather, the snow and the cold. While the strangers have been here, the winter chills have abated. We await the return of our chief and the spirits are waiting too. We must do nothing to anger them.”

“This talk of spirits is all very well,” said Grey Wolf, “but we must eat. We have too little food and too many mouths.”

Ptarmigan spoke up, her oddly accented voice querulous and nervous. “I miss my husband. While he is gone, we are as a partridge without a head that runs around without purpose. We need to find out what has happened to my husband and the brave hunters that accompanied him.”

“Perhaps some of the fittest of us should follow the Chief’s trail before it becomes too cold,” said Cave Bear. “Then we can find where he is and bring him back if harm has befallen him.”

“If some of us leave the valley to rescue the Chief,” said Falcon, “then there will be more food to share amongst those left and the strangers rather than being a burden may well become an asset.”

“I am a hunter before all else,” said Grey Wolf. “This interminable sitting around waiting for the Chief to return makes me restless. I would rather hunt for the Chief and my brother who is also with him than sit here with women and waste my time in mere discussion.”

“Do the spirits look favourably on such an expedition?” wondered an anxious Snow Hare.

“That isn’t a question I’ve addressed the spirits,” Ivory admitted, “but it is auspicious that the wind is fair and that not one boulder or rock of great size has rolled down the cliff face. I believe that the spirits will be compassionate if we should venture on such an expedition.”

“But these are spirits of the Mountain Valley,” Snow Hare objected. “They aren’t the spirits of our tribe. Why should they care about our welfare?”

“As you know,” said Ivory carefully as she grasped Ptarmigan’s hand for support, “the spirits of our tribe have accompanied us from the northern savannah. They are here in the Mountain Valley and have spoken with the spirits that lived here before. If the spirits of the Mountain Valley didn’t want us to be here or had wished us evil then they would have cursed us, as did the spirits curse the strangers in our midst.”

“And are these strangers still cursed?” wondered Cave Bear.

This was a deep theological question that left Ivory flummoxed, but Ptarmigan spoke on her behalf. “The strangers have paid the price and many of their families have died as a result. They have travelled far and found this Mountain Valley where we now stay. The spirits have rewarded them for their endeavours as they have rewarded us. The spirits that they have brought with them have commingled with ours and with those of the Mountain Valley. It would be foolish to disrupt this harmony.”

Grey Wolf frowned as he tried to make sense of Ptarmigan’s words, but as one of the Chief’s most loyal huntsmen he couldn’t quarrel with the Chief’s wife. He gripped his flint-tipped spear. “So, when the new dawn rises yet another mission will set off over the hills. And I wish to lead this expedition.”

“I can see no objection to that,” remarked Cave Bear who looked for guidance at Ptarmigan who nodded her assent.

Glade’s flight from the lands south of the Great Sea that she would never again see was driven by nothing other than the whims of the wind, the tide and the sea. Glade and Demure had innocently imagined that the only difference between sailing far out to sea and close to land was the proximity of the shore. And indeed for a while the two women were able to steer their rafts relatively close to each other—near enough to hear each other over the lapping waves—but as the hours passed and land receded behind them and no shore appeared ahead, the waves changed in character and it was all either woman could do to stand on the raft without toppling into the sea. At the same time, their rafts drifted steadily apart however frantically Glade tried to row back towards her

lover. Soon her priorities were not so much concerned with rowing the raft but rather more to prevent her possessions sliding off and falling into the sea, so she tied them securely to the logs and branches from which the raft was mostly assembled

At some stage in her frantic efforts to keep herself and all she had from capsizing into the waves that crashed onto the surface of her raft, Glade somehow lost sight of the raft where Demure had also been manically securing herself. She looked towards the horizon. In one direction she could see the now strikingly friendly shore from where she'd come as a distantly orange and brown strip stretching from East to West. In all other directions, there was nothing but empty sea that stretched towards only the horizon where she assumed the world ended and into which the Sun sank each night.

At last, she managed to catch a glimpse of Demure's raft. It was nothing more than a small dot that bobbed up and down on waves that were taller than the masthead that her lover had raised on the boat and to which she'd tied herself and her deer-hide sack. Up it bobbed. Down it bobbed. And heading further and further north and away from the distant strip of land that for all Glade knew was all the world there ever was that wasn't water.

Glade's raftmanship, like all her practical skills, were rather better than Demure's. She was sure that left to herself her lover would soon topple over the side of the raft and be eaten by a shark or an orca. That wasn't a fate she wanted her lover to suffer, so she secured both feet to the logs, picked up the flattened branch that acted as a paddle and propelled the raft as fast as she could towards the ever-diminishing dot on the horizon. But try as she would, however fast and furiously she paddled, the raft bobbing up and down ahead of her was getting further and further away.

Glade didn't know when she caught her last glimpse of her lover or at least of

her raft. She continued to pursue it long after her last positive sighting and the many imagined ones after that. But eventually her strength failed.

She was tired and weary.

At that point she collapsed on the raft in a bundle of misery. She knew that what seemed inconceivable only that morning had happened. She would probably never see her lover alive again.

Despite Glade's continued absence, Ivory was actually coping rather well. This was because of the demands made on her as the shaman's apprentice—a role she at last felt she was performing well—and also the love expressed by Ptarmigan who'd become almost as passionate a lover as Glade. She wasn't nearly as accomplished, of course. The older lover was still far more experienced and capable. But Ptarmigan's love for Ivory was totally unfeigned and had fewer complications. Although Ivory was still Glade's lover and Ptarmigan still the Chief's wife, the knowledge that at this very moment Chief Cave Lion and Glade were probably fucking somewhere high up in the hills somewhat lessened the sense of guilt either had for cheating on their partners.

The villagers may have been more vulnerable to predators and marauders after the departure of Grey Wolf and most of the remaining hunters, but there were also fewer mouths to feed. The River People weren't as well equipped for the pursuit of big game as Grey Wolf and his fellow hunters. Indeed, they regarded large game such as mammoth and woolly rhinoceros with fear rather than as potential food, but they knew how to find fruits, roots and vegetables and how to capture birds and insects that the

Mammoth Hunters didn't know could be so appetising.

This extra knowledge became vital when the wind turned and a fresh coat of thick snow fell on the valley. At first it was beautiful and the children welcomed it as a new playground. The long nights became less dark now they were illuminated by the snow's whiteness and it was easier to trace the path of hare and deer through the valley, until fresh snowfall covered the tracks.

Snow is always associated with the cold, although cold is not always associated with snow. It had been bitterly cold for several days before the snow arrived. The stream winding through the valley was frozen and every morning ice-spirits left a sparkling white glitter on the trees. Birds dropped frozen from the trees like gifts for the evening repast. The chill wind that cut through the valley sent icicle-sharp gusts through the seams of Ivory's furs. In conditions like this, all she could do was pull her furs close to her bosom and cuddle that much more intimately against her lover's flesh.

The River People were less able to cope with the cold. Deer-hide and goat-skin could never match the rhinoceros, sheep or musk oxen fur worn by the Mammoth Hunters to keep their skin warm against the chill blasts. The newcomers' hard-wearing shoes, made from horse or aurochs hide and lined with grasses and fur, weren't the best protection against the knee-deep snow.

Ivory would like to have helped the newcomers prepare better against the lethal cold, but the demands made on her as the shaman kept her far too busy. Thankfully, there were others who felt pity for the shivering wretches and taught them the skills to catch, skin, cut and stitch the winter furs they needed. Ivory was kept active partly because Glade was no longer around, but also because of the ailments associated with the cold, the weariness following the long trek south and the continued absence of loved

ones. There was a plague of evil spirits that was manifest in uncontrollable shivering that Ivory remedied by advising the sufferers to huddle warm under thick layers of musk oxen fur. There was the feverish sweating that could often lead to death that Glade had said should be treated by rubbing snow or cold water over the patients' naked body. Whether hot or cold, the wicked spirits usually attacked the throat and then the nose until the good spirits expelled the evil in the form of a viscous yellow mucus. There were wounds to bandage with deer-hide and tightly-bound leaves that Glade had explained were necessary to keep the evil spirits' breath away from the wounds, whether they were deep or shallow. She'd told Ivory stories of where dirt had entered a small scratch that later became infected by dark sores and even wept the same foul fluids that came from the throat or nose. The simple protection of a bandage, changed every few days, allowed the wounds to heal until all that remained was a scar.

In addition to her duty to keep the villagers healthy in body, Ivory also had to administer prayer and potions to keep the villagers equally healthy in mind. On Ptarmigan's suggestion, she instituted the practice of daily prayer and song each evening before and after they'd eaten their main repast. There were some who questioned Ivory's insistence on such a custom, but she explained that this would placate the spirits of the Mountain Valley and banish the evil spirits that were frustrating the Chief in his search for fertile land.

"How can this chanting and dancing help?" asked Falcon who though fit and healthy was too young and inexperienced to have accompanied the hunters on their reconnaissance mission. "The Dark Shaman never found it necessary."

"Yes," objected another sceptical voice. This was Cave Hyena: a boy a few years younger than Falcon. "There was never so much chanting. She would dance. She

would sing songs that were beautiful but expressed in magic words we didn't understand. She would tell stories. Sometimes, she would sing stories. These were tales of great adventures and endeavour. There was not so much beseeching the good spirits and blaming the bad."

"We are in a difficult situation," said Ptarmigan sternly. "The Chief is gone and the winter snows are threatening. We must show due respect to the spirits."

Nevertheless, Ivory knew that Cave Hyena and Falcon had a point, even though it implied less than proper reverence for the ancestors and the spirits of the Mountain Valley. Glade had advised Ivory that laughter and glee were as good as, if not better than, mere respect in supplicating the spirits. She told Ivory that if the spirits were entertained by her performances then they would be less likely to allow harm to befall the tribe. But Ivory was of a more serious nature than Glade and didn't know as many bawdy jokes or filthy rhymes.

"What shall we do?" she asked Ptarmigan, as they cuddled together at night in their shelter, noses hidden under the furs from the icy cold outside. "I can't entertain the tribe as well as Glade could do. I'm not like her."

"In the village where I lived before I married Chief Cave Lion," said Ptarmigan, "the shaman was a man of great age and antiquity. He was severe and strict. He also couldn't tell many jokes and stories, but every night we were entertained around the flames of the fire."

"How was that?"

"The woman you call Glade is a clever and gifted shaman," said Ptarmigan slowly and carefully, aware as she was of Ivory's love. "There are few as wise or as entertaining or as skilled as she. That is why she is a shaman when so few other women

are. You are only the second female shaman I have ever heard of. She has come from a distant land where the tribes have brown skin. She speaks many different tongues and knows many different things. She is such a good shaman that she dominates the tribe's evening entertainment. She sings beautiful songs. She tells stories and poems that mesmerise and entertain. She can make people weep, laugh, sigh and yearn. Few shamans can do that. In my village, the stories and the songs came not from the shaman but from the other villagers. Each villager took turns to sing a song or tell a tale.”

Ivory could see the wisdom of Ptarmigan's words. So the following day when she and the Chief's wife visited the sick and wounded of the village and spoke to those who were gathering what food they could in the thick snow, they spread the word that from now on the prayers and chants to the spirits, necessary as they were, should be interspersed by members of the village telling a story, recounting a joke or singing a song.

That night, despite the initial nervousness and the polite applause that greeted the yearning song of sorrow that Ptarmigan sang after the first prayer to the spirits, the atmosphere lightened as one after another the villagers contributed to the evening's entertainment. This wasn't just by word and song alone. There was a drumming session from Falcon and Cave Hyena on some hollowed logs that accompanied a hunting song they'd learnt from the Reindeer Herders. There was a story about a lost mouse and a greedy wild cat that one of the women remembered from her childhood. One of the River People juggled with three and even four snowballs that he managed to keep aloft to everyone's astonishment.

Interspersed though it was by prayer and chant that became steadily briefer as the night continued, the entertainment caused much laughter, jollity, tears and applause

however much it fell short of the high standards Glade had set. When it was over the villagers were in good humour and both Ptarmigan and Ivory judged that the spirits' wrath was assuaged.

And so a new routine was set in the village for the next few days as they huddled together in their shelters surrounded by the snowy acres. They ventured out only to gather food, sometimes by unearthing it from under the deep snow or by grabbing it from the branches of trees they'd clambered up. When the day was closing and the Sun began to sink behind the Mountain Valley walls, the villagers piled high the branches and logs that made the fire roar with fresh vigour and roasted whatever deer, hare, goat, bird or squirrel that had been caught or trapped, however meagre the day's catch might be, mixed with boiled or baked vegetables, nuts or roots. After and during the feast, the Mountain Valley echoed with cheerful song and music-making, solemn chants or prayer, sorrowful songs and laments, or raucous laughter from jokes that seemed somehow just as funny even when recounted with rather less of the comic timing or outrageousness than Glade could manage.

How could the spirits not reward Ptarmigan and Ivory now? the shaman's apprentice wondered. The couple had worked hard. They cared for Chief Cave Lion's children, addressed the villagers' spiritual and health needs, and kept everyone in good humour. Ivory was proud of her achievements and occasionally wished that Glade was there to appreciate what she had accomplished.

But she also feared whether this might also sunder apart the love she and Ptarmigan now had for each other.

But inevitably, the long wait came to an end.

It was Falcon who first saw the Chief's return. He raced back from the wood

where he'd been preparing traps to tell the rest of the village. Figures were descending the valley-side and leading the procession was definitely Chief Cave Lion and behind him the shaman.

Amidst great cheering and applause, Glade and the Chief trudged through the snow towards the settlement. Behind them was a small body of men which included some, but not all the hunters who'd earlier ascended the valley slopes. Both Grey Wolf and Cave Bear were in the company.

All the hunters and even Glade were fatigued. Their furs were torn and patched. Glade's bare bosom kept sliding free of a gash in her furs that had been crudely stitched together in obvious haste. Chief Cave Lion had one arm in a bandage that Glade had improvised from deer-hide.

With the company of Mammoth Hunters was another stranger. He was tall, slender and wore thick furs that were quite simply the best tailored and best stitched furs that Ivory had ever seen. These furs were snug against his skin and made him look even more slender as he wasn't weighed down by thick loose clothing. He carried a flint-tipped spear of unsurpassed sophistication and carried a belt around his shoulder from which hung various small deer-hide bags, a bow and a sheath of arrows. He had high cheeks, a prominent chin and very pale, slightly freckled skin.

"Good news!" announced Chief Cave Lion as soon as he was close enough to be heard. "We've found a place in the hills where we can stay. There is a great bounty of game and a stream that runs so fast it never freezes. We're saved!"

Ivory smiled with delight and joined everyone else in congratulating the Chief and the hunters on their victorious return. But although the Chief's face was bursting with pride and happiness, the same couldn't be said for Glade as she stood by his side

weighed down by the bag of provisions she carried.

Indeed, Glade betrayed very little enthusiasm at all.

And the stranger in the well-stitched furs showed even less.

Chapter Twenty Four

Glade couldn't recall a time when she'd ever felt more despair than when she was finally certain that she'd never be able sail back to her lover across the choppy waters of the billowing sea. Was there any point in even being alive without Demure?

It was only after many hours of weeping and cursing the spirits of her now extinct tribe that she at last returned her attention to the mundane but no less urgent task of staying alive. She was still adrift on a raft that was drifting aimlessly on waves that extended endlessly in all directions and where only the firmament was there to guide her way. There were two things she needed to do. First, she needed to fetch food from the unfamiliar waters. Second, she had to make sure that neither she nor her possessions slipped off the raft into the encircling sea, which she did by tying her ankles by rope to the raft's slatted logs and branches. She similarly secured the deer-hide sack in which she stored her fishing tools and sentimental souvenirs.

The task of finding food became no less difficult as each day passed and was succeeded by another. And then, having survived on the raw carcasses of the small fish she'd caught in her net (the only fishing tool she had of any actual use in these rough waters), that day was followed by yet another.

And there was still no sign of a shore or a beach or anywhere else towards which she should steer the raft.

Glade became ever more feeble and fatigued from having to survive on a small catch of fish and no fresh water. The days stretched ahead with nothing for her to do but scan the horizon for the elusive sign of land. She would dip her net again and again into the sea to catch fish that being raw and salty hardly at all assuaged her hunger and

not at all her thirst. She tied herself to the raft at night to avoid being capsized and this made what little sleep she had fitful and uncomfortable.

Glade's woes worsened when the sea turned dark and forbidding under clouds that made day as gloomy as night and night dark and forbidding. Chill drops of water splattered on her naked skin that made her regret that she hadn't grabbed a fur to wear before she and Demure ran for the shore. When night came and the rain fell more steadily, Glade pulled tight the ropes that secured herself and her precious belongings to the security of the raft. She lay on one side away from the wind so that the hair that flowed over her shoulders and her left arm was soaked by water from the sky and her right arm and the rest of her hair was dampened by the sea-water that splashed through the slits between the raft's struts.

She squeezed her rain-drenched eyes together and prayed more than she ever had since she was a child for salvation from the woodland spirits in which she had once so fervently believed. All about her the raft swayed violently from side to side, up and down, back and forth, jerking her about and testing the tightness of her knots. She was so drained by fear, anxiety, hunger and cold that she soon lost all consciousness. Neither the fury of the open sea nor even the violence of the wind, rain and thunder could arouse her.

Glade survived, of course, as Ivory knew. And survived moreover in the Northern lands.

It was through her conversations with her older lover that Ivory possessed in her mind

a more complete map of the world than anyone else born in her tribe. Somewhere to the south of the mountains where she and her tribe now lived was a stretch of water of greater extent than any lake. Further south still this body of water encompassed a land that was as warm, even hot, as the North was cold. This was a land in which pagans dwelt who wore no clothes and whose skin was dark as in the North it was pale. This was a land where even elephants and rhinoceroses weren't attired in thick fur.

Ivory understood that there were other still greater mysteries in the world and at the moment she was enchanted by reports of the great bounty in the hills above the Mountain Valley.

"There is *so* much more grazing land above the cliff edge," said Chief Cave Lion who was flanked on either side by his hunters and accompanied by the blithely uncomprehending stranger in well-stitched furs. "There is an abundance of horse, sheep, deer, aurochs and bison to hunt. There will be plenty of game during the snowy months. We shall shelter in the many caves in the hills, safe and secure against the evils of the winter demons."

It sounded very enticing, especially for hunters frustrated by the scarcity of sizeable game in the Mountain Valley. Large beasts, like mammoth, rhinoceros or even horse, would never venture into a relatively narrow wooded canyon of the kind Ivory and Ptarmigan had made their home. Yet, Ivory was wary. Although Chief Cave Lion was effusive and his huntsmen agreed fervently with his every word and vied with one another to show enthusiasm, she could see that this fervour wasn't shared by Glade. She was also distrustful of Ochre, the well-dressed stranger, whose eyes darted from side to side as he inspected what to him must have seemed a very ragged band of travellers. What did he think of the Mammoth Hunters?

Ivory knelt beside Glade in the shadows of the fire while her other lover, Ptarmigan, sat by her husband behind the flames. The meat that roasted on the flickering light of the fire was nothing more filling than hare, partridge and a very small deer. As she waited for the meat to roast, Ivory carefully scrutinised the returning heroes.

Chief Cave Lion had been in some kind of a fight or quarrel though he didn't allude even in passing whether it had been with an animal or a human. In addition to his broken arm, a freshly acquired scar trailed from his cheek to just over his left eye.

Glade was unusually quiet and the darkness of her skin hid from most eyes just how dusty and dirty she was, but Ivory's vision was more sharply focused. She was covered in bruises: some just slightly blue and others rather more lurid.

There was a clear divide between those hunters who'd been in the original expedition and those who'd only later sought them out. Those in the latter expedition, like Grey Wolf and Cave Bear, were still fresh and alert. When they ascended the hillside, they'd followed a trail which to the eyes of an experienced hunter was no more difficult than following a long thread of rope. After no more than three days, they encountered Chief Cave Lion and his entourage as they were returning home. Grey Wolf excitedly recounted his great joy on discovering that his chief was safe and sound. And there was even greater celebration when he was told the good news about the Great Hunting Grounds the chief had found.

What had not yet been explained was why those in the original party including Chief Cave Lion appeared to have come off so much the worst from a fight. Or indeed why several were absent. The suggestion that the missing warriors had strode ahead of everyone else to survey the new territory was enough to reassure their wives and children.

Ivory could see that the tall stranger, Ochre, hadn't been in a fight or quarrel. He was very trim. Not only were his furs expertly stitched, his beard was short and didn't bush out like the beards of every other man Ivory had seen before. His hair was tied back in neat plaits secured by bands of unnaturally rich red cloth. His shoes were so crafted that they had a distinct sole of thick and durable leather. The tribe to which this man belonged to was evidently in many ways more advanced than the Mammoth Hunters. For the first time in her life, Ivory became aware that there might be tribes whose craft and artistry were of superior quality to that of her tribe.

Glade had encountered many different tribes on her voyages, but even she had never before encountered people as strange as those who found her body washed up on a sandy beach of the Great Sea's northern shore.

She was still securely strapped to the raft and gripping tight the deer-hide sack that had been her only source of comfort as she was tossed to and fro by the unrelenting waves. The raft was easily visible to any hungry predator daring enough to cross the rain-soaked sand. And when Glade felt a nose sniff against the bare skin of her thigh and buttocks, her initial fear was that it belonged to a leopard or even a lion.

What she saw gathered around her through her aching eyes was a company of two men and three women. At first Glade was pleased. And then she became apprehensive. She knew only too well from her earliest exposure to people beyond the forest that it wasn't safe to assume that a strange tribe was friendly. And as she watched these people animatedly sign to each other and articulate in a language that was

unusually throaty and nasal, she gradually became aware that these were probably the strangest people she had ever seen.

What initially astonished her was how pale their skin was. She'd seen many shades of skin colour from Demure's jet-black to shades slightly less brown than her own, but she'd never before seen skin that was almost totally free of pigment apart from peculiar flecks of red scattered about the shoulders and the face. These people were as naked as she was, so she could see that this paleness extended from their beetling forehead to the tips of their toes. Fine red hair covered their body. The long hair on their heads was thick and a rich russet red. It grew almost to the waist in thick tangled strands threaded with small bones and shells.

Also strange and unfamiliar was the cragginess of these people's features. Their noses were unusually long. Heavy brows sheltered their eyes from the sun but also rendered their faces dark and mysterious. Their jaws were thick but even under the men's thick red beards there was almost no chin at all. They had strong arms and huge hands. And Glade had never seen people with such powerful barrelled chests that suggested a strength normally possessed only by large apes. The women were shorter and less stocky than the men with no beards and pendulous sagging breasts.

What was also sure was that these were people, whether male or female, that Glade was never likely to find sexually attractive.

She at first wondered whether these people were human. Were they perhaps demons? They had some of the character of an ape with their forbidding brows and receding chins, but a look at their sturdy human feet and the intelligent curiosity of their eyes dispelled such thoughts. They were definitely people.

The five Red Haired People carefully inspected Glade. They were just as

bemused by her physical appearance as she was of theirs. They stroked her bare skin and were particularly appreciative of its dark colour which they contrasted with the paleness of their own. They ran their fingers through Glade's relatively fine brown hair and let the strands drop from the tips of their large stubby fingers. And all the while they conversed with one another in their extraordinary language.

Glade knew that the Red Haired People couldn't understand a word she said. She had travelled far and wide and no one knew a word of her language beyond her tribe. However, she had to demonstrate to these strange people that she was more than just a mere plaything.

"Where am I?" she asked.

One of the women who had been pawing Glade's bosom smiled at her with a grin broader than it was surely possible for any lips to stretch shadowed by a nose thicker, broader and longer than a nose should be. And then she uttered words that were not in the same language she'd used before but were still meaningless to Glade.

She shook her head. "I don't understand," she said, knowing that these words were also incomprehensible.

The effort of leaning her head forward off the raft was exhausting. Glade was overcome by the soreness of her arms and legs after the battering she'd endured on the stormy sea.

"Please help me," she said as plaintively as she could in the hope that the meaning of her words might be understood.

And then she fainted.

Glade had recounted many tales to Ivory of the strange people she'd encountered in the Southern and the Northern lands. She'd met tall people. Short

people. Some with dark hair. Some with blond hair. Some with white skin and some with black. But the Red Haired People were the most bizarre of all.

It was the first time that Ivory had spent the night in her shelter since Glade had left and now they were snuggled together under fur while Ptarmigan was reunited with her husband in the marital bed. If Glade suspected that Ivory now enjoyed a more intimate relationship with the Chief's wife she made no mention, just as Ivory discreetly made no reference to her belief that Glade and Chief Cave Lion had been intimate while they'd been roaming across the mountains. What Ivory needed to know from her older lover was about the tribe to which Ochre belonged.

“He belongs to the tribe of Cave Painters who live in the mountains,” said Glade. “I'd met people from their tribe many years ago before I became a shaman.”

“Were they the same Cave Dwellers you lived with when you were a wife and mother?” Ivory asked.

“It's true that my husband's tribe lived in caves,” said Glade. “There are many tribes in the Northern lands who live in or by caves. My husband's tribe know about the stars, about herbs and how to make stone tools of great sophistication. They worship similar spirits to the Cave Painters, but their language is different and they are very differently attired. If you met Flint you would never mistake him for one of Ochre's tribe. The Cave Painters are far more accustomed to the presence of tribes other than their own. And the Cave Dwellers' caves are as far to the South and West of here as your tribe's Summer hunting grounds are to the North.”

“But you speak the stranger’s language and you know about his culture?”

“I wasn’t accompanied by armed hunters when I last met the Cave Painters. The circumstances were very different. These Cave Painters didn’t live anywhere near here and their dialect was as different as yours is from the Reindeer Herders. I was as surprised as anyone to discover that the Cave Painters had a settlement in these mountain ranges. But, yes, I do know the tribe and their language. They are a sophisticated people. They know the subtleties of the seasons. They hunt with skill and cunning. They live around caves which in the Summer months keep them cool and in the Winter keep them warm. And they don’t migrate when the first flakes of snow fall.”

“And are these Cave Painters much like those you met so many years ago?”

“They’re almost identical, but recall the different circumstances. Before, I was vulnerable and no threat. As long as I let them fuck me when they wanted and was no burden on their village, my presence was tolerated by most and welcomed by some. However, I’m afraid the Chief and his huntsmen didn’t make such a favourable impression when they first encountered the Cave Painters.”

“They didn’t?”

“Not at all. In fact, if I’d not been able to speak their language they would have killed us all.”

“Killed you?”

“Well, they disposed of three of the Mammoth Hunters with ruthless efficiency, so I don’t think they would have spared the rest of us.”

There was no hostility shown by the small band of Red Haired People who'd discovered Glade on the beach. When a day or so later, she regained full consciousness after a sleep interspersed by fitful spasms of wakefulness she could barely remember, she was laid down in the shade of an elk-hide that had been pulled taut over her and her naked body was shrouded in a woolly rhinoceros skin.

One of the Red Haired Women noticed that Glade was awake and pulled open a disconcertingly wide grin while she spoke in her throaty nasal language. The woman was delighted when Glade, as was her practice whenever she came across yet another new language, repeated the woman's words with as fair a copy of the strange nasal sounds as she could. However, the stream of bizarre sounds the woman followed with was too rapid and too difficult to pronounce for Glade to respond in any meaningful way.

Glade didn't learn very much of the Red Haired People's language in the month of her recovery. It wasn't simply an oral language. It was accompanied by a very complex interaction of signs and gestures. There was a subtlety to the interplay between gesticulations and spoken words that appeared to encompass concepts of conditionality, duty and edibility.

The entire group of Red Haired People was composed of no more than just two men and three women along with three children. That was all. Glade had never encountered a tribe that lived in such a small community before. She supposed they might be more vulnerable to predators, but Glade soon discovered that they had a shrewd and comprehensive knowledge of the natural world that came to amaze her.

The two men and the three women made love with each other in a peculiar fivesome, but none of the men or women betrayed even a glimmer of lust for Glade.

Their attitude towards her was more like that towards a quite clever pet. This was a comfort in some ways, but it wasn't what Glade was accustomed to.

The small clan had an extraordinarily intimate knowledge of a northern landscape that seemed increasingly alien to Glade the better she got to know it. Not only were the Red Haired People unusual, so too was the fruit that grew on the trees and the beasts that ran about in the dense forest. The animals were recognisable in some ways, but were often hairier, bigger and less intimidated by her. There were rhinoceroses and elephants with wool-covered skins. There were aurochs and elk rather than eland and giraffe. The wolves, bears and lions, even the leopards, cheetahs and hyenas, were all larger, furrier and stockier than those in the Southern lands.

Glade's recovery took longer than she thought it should. She didn't know how many days she'd floated by raft across the Great Sea, but she'd been starved and dehydrated. Despite her hunger, it was several days until she could swallow meat again. The Red Haired People could cook their meat but often ate it so raw that blood dripped down the chin. The clan consumed a lot of meat. Even though there were so few of them, they had no difficulty in hunting down and killing animals much larger than themselves.

In most tribes, a hunting party in pursuit of an animal as large as a horse or rhinoceros would consist of at least five hunters and usually many more. Even the chase of deer or antelope was typically a team effort. Amongst these people, just a single man was able to bag at least an elk or a megaloceros. Even a rhinoceros or an aurochs could fall victim to a single man possessed of a spear, a set of stone missiles and considerable sympathetic insight.

These hunters were astonishingly strong: much more so than hunters from any

other tribe Glade had ever met. The rocks they piled up around their settlement to fend off predators were far too heavy for Glade to lift, yet the Red Haired People could toss them about with just one hand.

Glade speculated whether the Red Haired People even needed spears or stones to kill their prey. She witnessed one of the men kill a young aurochs that had wandered too close to their tiny settlement. After luring the animal to come forward by a peculiar pantomime of gestures, he jumped onto the beast's back, twisted its neck by its long sharp horns and effectively killed it in his bare hands. When the aurochs choked its last, the man undertook a peculiar ritual of reverence whereby he sat beside the beast and tenderly stroked its twitching haunches.

These people were capable of both brute violence and extraordinary kindness, with barely a heartbeat between the two. They might catch a hare and tenderly set it free. Or they might simply snap its neck with a sudden jerk of their huge hands.

Glade had no idea what these people's spiritual views, but she could see that they were held both deeply and profoundly. She didn't know whether they worshipped the spirits of the forest or the spirits of their ancestors. Did they worship deities much more diverse as did Demure's tribe? There was no physical representation of what they worshipped. Perhaps it was something immanent, omnipresent and mystical. But whatever it was, they expressed their spiritual faith by meditation and contemplation.

Initially what Glade thought was most characteristic of her saviours was their pale skin, but later she discovered that virtually everyone in the North had a similarly anaemic complexion. What was truly distinct about the Red Haired People was their spiritual calm. And it was the associated virtues of patience, forbearance and contemplation that Glade remembered so fondly in these people but practiced so poorly

herself that Chief Cave Lion would have benefited from when he and his hunters first stumbled across the Cave Painters.

Had he done so then subsequent events might well have gone rather better.

Chapter Twenty Five

When Chief Cave Lion and his party reached the top of the ridge above the Mountain Valley after their first ascent, they could now look across a wide vista of valleys and hills peppered with bushes and thickets. There were patches of snow that had fallen earlier in the season but hadn't properly settled. Horse and antelope galloped over the coarse-leafed savannah. It was a glorious sight for hunters who'd seen so little game for so long, but as Glade reminded Ivory as they huddled beneath the furs, the expedition hadn't set off merely to admire the view.

There were ample traces of men and women who'd previously trod along the animal paths that crisscrossed the uplands. To a huntsman like the Chief who so often pursued animals as light of foot as antelope and deer, it wasn't at all difficult to find evidence of where they'd been, where they were going and what they'd been doing. However, as the hunters followed the trails they soon discovered some unsettling signs. The people they were trailing were nimble travellers who gathered in groups that never numbered less than ten and, judging from the incisions made on branches, rocks and tree trunks, possessed a set of stone tools of undeniably superior quality. This was a tribe of professional hunters that might even outclass the Mammoth Hunters. Glade was soon able to identify evidence that these hunters most likely belonged to the tribe of Cave Painters she'd known so well many years before.

Chief Cave Lion had determined that the purpose of the expedition was to find land where he and his people could winter while thick snow made it impossible to hunt in the north. Glade reminded Ivory that this was the expected duty of the chief of any village. Chief Cave Lion had been elected to provide for the village's needs and he,

more than anyone else, was mindful of the expectations invested in him. The very moment he failed to execute his duty would be when his prestige would be irretrievably lost. However, the mission had now become much more complicated. He had found good hunting grounds but they were already claimed by another tribe of great skill and expertise. What should he do? Could they just settle on the land where they now were?

“That would be the wisest policy, my lord,” advised Wolverine speaking for the huntsmen. “It is our duty to provide for our tribe. The tribe must eat. There is an abundance of horse and aurochs, deer and goat, boar and hare. We should take possession of the first good cave or sheltered grove near a source of fresh water that we find. And then we should return to fetch the other villagers. It is what we came up here to do. It is what we should do.”

The other warriors agreed, but the Chief and the shaman were more cautious.

“I’d already conferred with the Chief,” Glade told Ivory as they huddled together. “I told him that I was anxious that the signs indicated that we were in the territory of the Cave Painters and I told him what I knew about the tribe.”

“And what did you tell him?” asked Ivory. “What did you know that made you wary?”

Glade sighed and then shivered as a blast of cold air whistled through the threaded seams of the shelter. It was obvious that Ivory had neglected to properly maintain the shelter’s fabric now that her every night was spent in Ptarmigan’s company.

“When I first arrived in the northern lands, I discovered that many tribes are exceptionally sophisticated. Perhaps those tribes that thrive in the harsh climate are the ones that are the most ingenious. Of all the tribes, the cleverest and most sophisticated

are the Cave Painters who live in these mountains. Their language and culture spreads for many days' walk in all directions. Like the Mammoth Hunters, their tribe is not presided over by one ruler. The tribe is spread far and wide in many villages and communities. I first met the Cave Painters south of the mountains towards the Great Sea. I didn't know then that the Cave Painters also lived so far to the north. On my previous Winter migrations with your tribe, we'd encountered very few other tribes and most were more like the poor wretches you permitted to shelter in the Mountain Valley while we were away. The Cave Painters' tribe is another matter."

"Are they evil demons?" wondered Ivory.

"They aren't demons," said Glade. "They are people just like you and me. And they aren't evil. But they possess a culture, a religion and a set of technical skills far in advance of your tribe. They mostly live near and about caves, because the spirits they worship live there. The same caves are also where they exhibit statues and paintings that venerate the spirits and record their history. Homes made of mud and clay, fur and stones, ivory and tree-branches: none of these last forever. The Cave Painters live in and around caves because they are eternal and where they can preserve their culture forever."

"And how do they do this?"

"The most important artefacts of their tribe are hidden in the caves' innermost chambers," said Glade. "At the cave entrances the tribe display statues they've fashioned from earth and mud, figurines made from sticks and fur, and paintings on the rock face of horse, mammoth and rhinoceros pursued by hunters. None of these artworks last for very long. They decay to nothing within a human lifetime. Inside the caves where only shamans and the most notable Cave Painters may enter apart from

especially auspicious days, there are paintings and statues of grandeur and true craft that will endure until the caves collapse and the mountains tumble.”

“Have you seen any of these paintings?”

“As a shaman and one of foreign aspect with skin so dark and features so alien, I was so privileged,” said Glade. “They are deep, deep inside the caves, through passages so narrow that it is difficult to crawl and far beyond where the sunlight has ever fallen, sometimes in caverns where icicles of rock fall from the roof and rise from the ground, past subterranean ponds where swim pallid fish without eyes and ashen spiders the size of a man’s palm: far from where a person might wander by chance. There are chambers that are as warm in Winter as they are in Summer in which are beautiful life-like paintings of animals and hunters and statues of the Mother Goddess of the Cave Painters...”

“Mother Goddess?”

“They have a name for the goddess, but she isn’t a spirit as you understand it,” said Glade. “She is a spirit of birth and rebirth. She permeates the seasons. She is what ensures that the sun rises each day; that Winter gives way to Summer; that crops grow; and that babies are born. If she is a spirit of anything she is the spirit of fecundity...”

“This is just pagan superstition,” said Ivory dismissively.

“Whatever,” Glade conceded. “The Mother Goddess is worshipped by the Cave Painters of the mountains and is revered with a passion truly difficult to express. The Cave Painters identify themselves not as cave dwellers as we would but as worshippers of the Mother Goddess. It is as if your tribe thought of itself not as the Mammoth Hunters of the steppes but as worshippers of the permafrost.”

“That is just blasphemy,” Ivory argued. “The spirits exist to serve our tribe and

keep us safe from harm.”

Glade didn't offer any alternative view, but Ivory already knew that her older lover no more respected the spirits of her tribe than she any longer did the spirits of her ancestral forest. Perhaps she had more faith in this Mother Goddess?

“The Cave Painters are a tribe whose needs you disregard at peril,” said Glade. “I told the Chief this and impressed upon him what we were up against. The Cave Painters' mastery of the spear is such that they can kill birds in flight. Their skill at stone-knapping is such that they have stone needles with small holes through which a thread can be inserted. These are people with mastery of medicine, who are skilled at digging wells, who have tamed wild animals and plants, and who could easily bring evil on our tribe.”

“In which case, they should be treated as foes not friends.”

“And thereby cause the death of us all. The spirits of your tribe won't protect you against a well-shot arrow tipped with poison or a spear with a flint tip so sharp that it can pierce even a rhinoceros hide.”

“What did you counsel the chief?”

“I advised him to parley with the Cave Painters. And he persuaded the rest of our sceptical party that this was the most prudent course to take. It mightn't be the most pleasing, but it was the one most likely to succeed. As I reminded the chief, if we antagonised the Cave Painters there was a Mountain Valley full of defenceless women and children they could massacre.”

Ivory gasped. “They would do that?”

“Probably not,” said Glade. “Why waste time and energy on migrants who're going to leave in the Spring anyway and who don't impinge on their hunting grounds?”

But I needed to impress on the company the scale of the risk incurred by getting on the wrong side of the Cave Painters. Of course, the people most at risk were us.”

Chief Cave Lion wasn't the expedition's most physically fit or capable hunter, but he insisted on taking the lead as the trail wound tirelessly up and over steep hillsides and across plains. It was apparent that the Cave Painters were adept hill climbers. There was evidence that some of them vaulted up the hills with the agility of a goat. The higher the trail ascended the hills the colder it got. On occasion, the Chief and his hunters had to trudge through thick snow. As the day drew to a close, the company settled down beneath a cedar tree's dark forbidding shadows and pulled their furs tightly up to their chins while the snow fell gently over them.

The Chief again led the way the following day. He trudged onwards with a heavy step and was getting visibly fatigued. It was only respect for their Chief that persuaded the other hunters to persist on the trail however much they would rather take advantage of the abundant game around them. Glade feared that Wolverine and Lynx were disregarding etiquette when she saw them separate from the rest of the company to scout ahead at a pace the Chief couldn't match. When the two hunters still hadn't returned by nightfall and the company hadn't caught up with them, Glade was justifiably anxious.

Chief Cave Lion and his hunters nestled down under the shadow of an overhang that sheltered them from the huge flakes of snow that was now threatening to settle around them. Some hunters expressed concern that the trail they were following would soon be obscured by snow and that they might never catch up with Wolverine and Lynx.

When morning came, Glade was awoken from heavy dreamless sleep by a cacophony of angry curses from those hunters who were already awake. She roughly

shook awake Chief Cave Lion with whom she'd been sharing her furs and body during the night. His bleary eyes opened and before he could lash out at Glade for disturbing him so impudently she announced: "Something bad has happened!"

And indeed it had. Just beyond the shelter were two recently decapitated heads from which still dripped blood that gathered in a rich red patch on the snowy ground. These heads had, of course, only recently been held aloft on the shoulders of the two impetuous hunters.

"What does this mean?" asked the Chief as he brushed tears of sorrow and rage from below his eyes with the back of his hand.

"It's a warning," said Glade.

"A warning?"

"A warning not to go onward."

"What the fuck else are we supposed to do?"

"Stay where we are," suggested Glade.

"And get killed?"

"We may be safe as long as we don't do anything that antagonises the Cave Painters."

"Like what?"

"Like hunting game such as horse or deer."

"You think that's what Wolverine and Lynx did?"

"They *are* hunters. That's what hunters do."

"And why must we stay here?"

"We've been following this trail to meet and parley with the Cave Painters. Instead they have found us first. We must wait here and plead our case when the Cave

Painters deign to speak to us.”

“That is not fucking right! The bastards have killed our best warriors. That is a declaration of war. We should fight.”

“We fight, we die. If we talk, we may survive.”

The Chief was not so easily persuaded. He knelt by his hunters’ scalps and wept while around him the other hunters did much the same. Glade did what was expected of her, which was to sing songs that praised the hunters’ valour and prowess while burning roots whose scent was especially odorous and then scattering the ashes over the dead men’s remains.

Then, as was the custom in Ivory’s tribe, the hunters stood vigil over what little remained of Wolverine and Lynx while they reminisced on the many good times they’d shared together. In this way the memory of the dead men was preserved and it was hoped that the spirits would recognise their value and accept them as their own.

“What do we do now?” Chief Cave Lion asked Glade as he crouched by her in the shelter of the rock while she comforted him by stroking his penis.

“We must be seen to take heed of the Cave Painters’ warning,” she said. “They haven’t killed us all, but if they believe we are a threat to them then that may be what they’ll decide to do.”

“Your advice reveals cowardice rather than prudence,” snorted the Chief. “When a proud people are threatened they should stand firm whatever the cost. Otherwise the disgrace is too great.”

“Recall why we are here,” said Glade, jerking the Chief’s penis more vigorously. “We are here to find hunting grounds for our tribe. We may die anyway if we don’t succeed. If we must show obeisance to the Cave Painters for just one winter

then that is surely a price worth paying.”

It wasn't much time later that the Cave Painters at last appeared. And when they did they were all attired much like Ochre. Their furs were well tailored and they carried equally impressive weapons. There were nearly three Cave Painters for each man in the Mammoth Hunters' expedition.

Nothing was said at first. Glade, the Chief and the six remaining hunters stood or sat where they were and scanned the Cave Painters who encircled them. It was tense and no one knew what to say.

Glade squeezed the Chief's hand. “We should bow to them and throw down our spears,” she said softly. “Then they will know that we come in peace.”

Glade sighed as she recounted this episode to Ivory. “If only he had,” she said. “But Elk had different ideas. He was Wolverine's brother, as you know, and the two were always very close.”

Elk took his spear and threw it towards the Cave Painter nearest him. “You cunts!” he bellowed. “You *bastards!*”

The Cave Painter easily dodged the spear, but Elk was not so lucky. After a sudden frenzy of activity, Elk was slumped on the ground. He'd been stabbed in the chest by a spear, his neck was broken and his face flattened by a heavy rock.

“You can't do that!” shouted the Chief as he dashed forward, but he didn't get very far before he was also pushed to the ground, a flint knife was sliced across his face, and his now broken arm bent under the foot of one of the Cave Painters, while two others pinned him to the ground and dismissively tossed his weapons aside.

The other Cave Painters surrounded Glade and the remaining Mammoth Hunters. They were brandishing their spears and their faces were illuminated with

expressions of excitement rather than hatred and certainly not of fear. They knew they had the upper hand. All they needed was the excuse to despatch the rest of the company.

“What did you do?” Ivory asked excitedly. “Did you and the other hunters grab your weapons and slaughter the pagan savages who had killed such brave men?”

“Not at all,” said Glade. “I could see all was lost. We would all be killed in no time at all. So, I pleaded with them for our lives.”

Glade calmly stood forward and lowered her hood so that the Cave Painters could see her brown skin and foreign features. This had the affect of stopping the Cave Painters in their tracks. This was the first time any of them had seen anyone, male or female, with skin so naturally dark. She then pulled the furs off her shoulders, so that her skin was bared to the falling snow flakes, and spoke to them in the Cave Painters’ tongue.

“It’s a language I can speak quite well,” Glade told Ivory. “I learnt it when I lived south of the High Mountains. It is the most widely spoken of all languages; although these Cave Painters have a very thick dialect.”

Glade slowly disrobed to the waist so that her full bosom was displayed and also the duskiness of her skin. When she was sure she had the attention of all the Cave Painters she spoke in the loud commanding voice she employed for the village when she prayed, sang songs, or recounted myths and legends.

“You misunderstand my husband’s intentions,” she said, indicating the Chief who was groaning from the pain of his injuries and in no mood to disagree with her. “We have come here as supplicants to plead mercy from the Mother Goddess whose wisdom and kindness we have heard so much about. All we wish is to be allowed a small patch of land on which to hunt and gather vegetables that does not impinge on

yours. My husband is a wise and gentle man, but is easily angered when his tribesmen are harmed. But this anger isn't directed towards the Cave Painters or the Mother Goddess. It is set against the fates that have allowed such misunderstanding and caused such harm to our people. Please spare his life."

"Spare him?" replied one of the Cave Painters in a rough dialect. "He was about to attack us, just as the two hunters whose heads we removed had attacked us. No man can assault a tribesman of the Mother Goddess and live another day."

"As I say, you misunderstand his intentions," said Glade. "We have come with our few possessions to plead help from you. So desirous of your pleasure is my husband that he offers my body, the body of the wife he loves so much, to all and any of your village. Please accept my flesh for your pleasuring and spare my husband. And then please take us to your shaman and chief so we can parley."

"Is your body all that your tribe can offer?" remarked the same Cave Painter with a sneer. "You are old and we have our own wives and lovers."

"It is all we have," said Glade. "And even this little we are willing to give to you. It is our way."

"It most certainly isn't!" snorted Ivory, who was affronted by the very suggestion. "We are a proud tribe. We don't marry and then allow our wives to be traded as a commodity. Why did you allow them to dishonour you?"

"Dishonour me?" laughed Glade. "You forget where I come from and the extent of my sexual desire. In any case, if I hadn't offered my body voluntarily it would have been used and abused anyway."

The other hunters had no idea of what Glade was saying but they could see that her words had held back the Cave Painters from slaughtering them as they had already

so easily killed three of the tribe's finest warriors. Glade addressed them after giving a reassuring nod towards the Cave Painter who'd spoken to her.

"Lay down your spears and flints," she commanded. "I have spoken to the tribe upon whose territory we have strayed and they will spare our lives if we demonstrate that we will do them no harm. They will then find us land on which we can hunt and gather. But if we show the least aggression, they will slay us."

"How can we hunt without our spears?" asked Red Fox, one of the older hunters.

"How can you hunt without your heads?" countered Glade. "Place your weapons down slowly and in full sight of the Cave Painters."

When the hunters had done so, Glade addressed the Cave Painters who surrounded them. "It is my husband's wish that as many of you should fuck me now as should so wish. It is a sign of our tribe's willingness to cooperate with you."

The Cave Painters were visibly excited by the offer and had forgotten that they could so easily just have killed the trespassers and raped Glade anyway. The Cave Painter who'd spoken to her nodded his head and addressed the others. Although Glade was the only one who could understand what he was saying, the tone of it was clearly conciliatory. She smiled reassuringly at the hunters and attended the Chief's wounds as a wife would. She told him about what she had parleyed with the Cave Painters.

"Is it a good thing to do?" asked Chief Cave Lion whose interests in the rightness of her actions were rather secondary to the pain he was suffering.

"If it saves our lives and the lives of those in the Mountain Valley waiting for us to return," Glade said, "then it is a good thing."

The serial fucking Glade endured was almost a formal ritual. Indeed, no more than ten of the Cave Painters actually participated. Glade knew, as none of the hunters

did, that amongst the Cave Painters the serial taking of one or more women was a common rite in the seasonal festivals. Consequently, they were well-disciplined and not especially excitable. She disrobed in an open space where her only protection from the icy weather and the sprinkle of snowflakes were the warmth of the Cave Painters' sweaty bodies and the furs they continued to wear. Glade lay down on her furs and her legs were splayed open and welcoming. The men fucked her one by one. They were not all able to ejaculate but they were eager to pretend they had done so. Glade good-naturedly complied with the pretence by faking her cries of orgasm.

The first to fuck her was the Cave Painter who'd been their spokesman and was well respected by the others. He was efficient and mechanical in his love-making. This was clearly intended as an example to the others who followed suit. The Cave Painters watched the proceedings with solemn faces as they might a ritual fucking while Chief Cave Lion and his hunters looked on with disgust and weary resignation.

After the fucking, Glade was allowed to put back on her furs and robes which had been ripped by the rocks and stones that covered the ground. The Cave Painters then gathered together the spears, flints and other weapons that the Mammoth Hunters had lain down.

"We will march ahead of the Cave Painters," Glade told the hunters after a brief discussion with their spokesman. "It is less than a day's walk and we should arrive before dark if we do not dawdle. When we arrive, we shall parley with the Cave Painters' chief and he shall decide our fate."

"The fate of our bravest hunters was left to the whim of monsters that had already killed three of them and wounded our chief?" commented Ivory who was aghast at the indignity when Glade recounted this. "That is not right. A warrior should *never*

surrender.”

“There was no choice.”

“And you let all those men fuck you one after the other!” Ivory gasped in dismay. “How could you?”

“It was all I could do,” said Glade. “Believe me, my sweet young apprentice, this wasn’t the first time in my life I’ve been fucked by many men one after the other. And this time was by no means the worst.”

“What did the Chief think?”

“Why should he think anything?” wondered Glade. “He would quite happily have been one of the men who fucked me. Just as would have any of the hunters in our company if they’d had the opportunity.”

“It’s disgusting!”

“Why?” wondered Glade. “As you know so well, I’m a good woman to fuck. Why shouldn’t a man want to fuck me?”

Chapter Twenty Six

Glade was the only one of the captive Mammoth Hunters who knew what to expect. It was much more startling for the other expedition members when at last, after trudging for most of the day through the fresh snow across a long flat plain, their captors brought them to the Cave Painters' settlement by the mountainside. This comprised of the mouths to several caves scattered about the base of the limestone hills around which were gathered dozens of Cave Painters all attired in their superior quality furs and all far too intent on their own business to pay much attention to their new guests. What made Chief Cave Lion gasp in amazement and his hunters ask forgiveness from the ancestral spirits were the mud and straw effigies that guarded the path to the caves and the lurid paintings on bare rock on either side of the entrance to each cave.

"Is it real?" the Chief asked in anxiety. He shook a tremulous hand towards a life-size model of a mammoth whose fur was made from reeds and grass and which sported real tusks on either side of a straw trunk.

"These people are magicians!" exclaimed Pine Marten with wonder at the painted murals of hunters pursuing horse and elk.

"Now you see why they're called Cave Painters by the southern tribes," said Glade. She was pleased to see familiar signs of Cave Painter culture and was sure now that the villagers would conform to the moral codes and practice of the tribe.

The Cave Painters greeted Glade and her fellow captives more with indifference than anything resembling friendliness, although there was mild curiosity at their crudely stitched furs. Their hunting tools were laid down on the ground and examined with poorly disguised derision.

The Chief and his warriors were taken aside to a patch of ground that was cleared of snow well away from the cave entrances while Glade, as the only one who spoke the Cave Painters' language, was treated with significantly more respect. She saw nothing more of her fellows until their eventual departure and all she knew about their confinement was what they later told her. It wasn't that they were treated badly as such. The Cave Painters were understandably wary of these crudely dressed Mammoth hunters. Their furs were stripped off to ensure that they weren't hiding any weapons. Two woolly rhinoceros furs were thrown towards the now naked warriors and it was under this that they had to huddle together through the cold days and nights. They were thrown scraps of meat not much better than fed to the ragged wolves tethered to a post set not far apart from them. A single Cave Painter with a whip crafted from aurochs hide and a flint-tipped spear was posted to guard the Mammoth Hunters, but he wasn't especially worried that they might escape. What could seven naked huntsmen do if they fled through the falling snow and icy wind away from the only protection they had from the unforgiving elements?

It was Glade who had to do all the negotiation, while Chief Cave Lion and his men were totally ignored. Although she was relatively privileged, she was initially left to wait alone on a cold hard boulder just beside a straw and earthen statue of a wild horse. Nobody came to speak to her and she didn't know how long she'd have to wait. She pulled her now ripped furs tightly across her bosom and observed the Cave Painters with much the same intense curiosity as they did her. This was not just because of the darkness of her skin, but also because of her willingness to offer her body to the village men. Naturally, this wouldn't make her very popular with the village women.

Her current predicament reminded Glade of her first encounter many years before with another company of Cave Dwellers. This was the time when she first arrived at the caves where her future husband Flint lived.

This was several days after she'd left the Red Haired family. She expressed her gratitude to her hosts when she departed as best she could in the few words she'd learnt while living with them. They were touched by her stumbling efforts, but her clumsy hand gestures still amused them. She knew they didn't really want her to stay with them for much longer as she was a drain on their resources, but they'd taught her how to forage in the woods and she was now far better able to manage on her own.

Glade strode along the beach for the following few days armed with a sharpened stick and some hastily knapped flint tools. Following her experience of itinerant life with Demure, she was well prepared for the daily struggle to find food and shelter, but she still wasn't accustomed to the practice of covering her naked flesh. This was a particular failing at night when she was totally defenceless against the gusts of chill wind. She eventually resorted to covering her naked flesh under the fur of a dead sea-otter she found on the shore. Although the meat was probably no longer safe to eat, it was a large enough beast for it to be worth skinning and then to shawl its fur over her shoulders.

Despite her valiant efforts, the Cave Dwellers still didn't consider her either adequately or decently clothed when they emerged from the shadows to challenge her as she approached their village. Almost all their body was totally covered in fur apart from the legs, arms and faces. What most offended them was the fact that her genitals

and bosom were displayed. They gestured to her while they shaded their eyes from the unseemly sight that she should cover both with her hands. This custom puzzled Glade, but she'd seen so many strange customs in her travels in the southern lands that she assumed there would be similarly odd ones in the north.

It was Glade's nudity rather than her skin colour that the Cave Dwellers were first aware of. When she was judged to be sufficiently modest the men and women clustered around her and their considerable fascination was now focused on the colour of her skin, the proportion of her features and the darkness of her hair. Like all the tribes Glade was ever to meet in the northern lands, the Cave Dwellers' skin was generally pale but still less so than the skin of the Mammoth Hunters. The Cave Dwellers also saw that their dark-skinned visitor was tired and hungry and without demur decided to offer her shelter. Glade didn't know at the time whether the Cave Dwellers were kind to her merely because she was a solitary woman and therefore no threat, but she later discovered that such generosity and kindness was characteristic of the tribe. Like the Raft People, this was a tribe that lived in relative plenty and had never experienced conflict with other tribes. Although Glade was an outsider who couldn't speak their language, they recognised her as a woman in need and their immediate response was to help her in any way they could.

It was amongst the Cave Dwellers that Glade settled down and continued to live for the next four or five years. She very soon became fluent in their language. She married the village shaman, Flint, who showed especial kindness towards her. He was the father of her two boys who they named Granite and Sandstone in the Cave Dwellers' tongue.

These years of married life in the shadows of the caves were by far the happiest

days of Glade's adult life. She had a husband who loved and cared for her. She made many friends in the village. She was respected by the villagers as a woman who worked hard to become part of the community. She was also accorded respect for having chosen to marry the shaman and this was principally because he wasn't the sort of man most women would choose to marry.

Although Flint possessed many good qualities, chiefly relating to his role as shaman, he could not be said to have an attractive appearance or a pleasing aspect. His legs and arms were short and stumpy, so although he was of ordinary height from his neck to his groin when he stood up he was as short as a prepubescent child. His head was similarly deformed. He was blind in one eye which as a result was grey and dull although his other sparkled with life.

No one could deny Flint's excellence as a shaman. He knew every word of every incantation and myth. He sang the sacred songs with dignity and clarity. He was skilled at healing the diseased and injured with herbs and poultices. He revered the Cave Dwellers' spirits that resided in the earth, the caves and in the mountains. He was tireless and ardent in his duties. He was an inspiration to his fellow villagers who valued his understanding of the motion of the stars; his knowledge of the migration of birds and animals; his skill at predicting how the weather would change; his ingenuity in applying technical solutions to the practical problems that beset the village every day; and his aptitude at craft, music and prayer were beyond all compare.

But he still wasn't a man that any woman would choose to marry.

That is, until Glade arrived.

And she genuinely loved Flint. Of course, Glade had already lost the real love of her life: the woman she last saw floating adrift on a raft on the turbulent sea. She'd

fucked enough men and women in her life to know that physical pleasure wasn't necessarily contingent on physical beauty and that the quality of a man or woman couldn't be measured by looks alone. Although her two sons possessed a strange admixture of the features of her tribe and Flint's their bodies were no more stunted or deformed than those of other children.

It was when Glade better understood the Cave Dwellers' language that she became aware just how many differences there were between Flint's tribe and any other she'd come across before. Most exceptional, of course, was their attitude towards sex and nakedness. This tribe resolutely disapproved of the public display of anything that suggested sexuality. This included even bare breasts and such relatively innocent behaviour as holding hands or kissing. Sex was deemed to be an activity best hidden from sight. Although the villagers clearly practiced sex, as was evident from the presence of babies and children, it was kept as discreet as possible.

The Cave Dwellers' culture was also one that in other ways encouraged and even expected bold investigation into the unknown as long as it didn't conflict with their deep faith in the wisdom of the spirits. They studied the motion of the stars and identified at least two stars whose orbits across the heavens were as variable as the Moon's. They studied minerals and discovered ingenious ways to fashion rocks into tools of astonishing beauty and superb functionality. They even attached a flint axe to a shaft to make a frighteningly efficient tool for cutting down trees and branches. They studied the magical properties of plants and animals to derive new medicines, new food recipes and other new uses that continued to amaze Glade.

Faith in the spirits was critically important to the Cave Dwellers' culture and this was most especially so for Flint. He had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the myths

and legends of his tribe. He told a tale of the world's creation that involved the growth and retreat of the glaciers that were only a few days walk away in the mountains. Flint taught Glade much about the customs of the shaman that was both comprehensive and astounding.

It was Glade's first introduction to shamanism as it was practiced in the northern lands. Tribes in the southern lands also had shamans, but they were not normally held in the same great reverence as those of the northern lands. In the southern lands, they were the custodians of the tribe's wisdom from one generation to the next and they understood the mystical significance of the sacred rituals and celebrations. The shaman had a pivotal role for the communities in the northern lands where the difference between seasons was so much more marked. Glade reasoned that this was because of life's greater precariousness in the crippling cold.

Glade had seen snow and ice before, but it had been nothing more than a curiosity and a nuisance. Here in the northern lands, the snow settled in the cold Winter months and persisted for entire cycles of the Moon. The cold was so intense and deadly that Glade was now very grateful for the warmth provided by the furs the Cave Dwellers wore. They kept her modest if uncomfortably warm in the Summer, but in the Winter they saved her life from the chill that froze her very breath. In his capacity as shaman, Flint convened a festival in the very depths of every winter when the night was at its longest. As he explained to Glade this always came after the end of the twelfth complete lunar cycle since the last winter solstice. The Cave Dwellers would chant non-stop in this festival until the rays of the midday sun shone onto a sacred point marked in the depths of one of the caves on which the sun never shone except on that day.

After this ceremony, the days became steadily longer and the midday sun shone

at ever higher elevations in the cave's dark recesses.

This ritual especially impressed Glade and she made a point of diligently learning from Flint the wisdom passed through the generations by the Cave Dwellers' shamans. Although Flint attributed everything virtuous in his tribe to the spirits, Glade's scepticism in his faith became steadily greater. Every tribe she'd ever come across since she left the forests of her childhood had a novel explanation for how the world came to be and these always involved supernatural beings of one kind or another. Since the spirits of her tribe must surely have passed away with the fortunes of her people, she could now no longer truly believe in anything. Nevertheless, Glade resisted adopting Demure's view that all faiths were false and that self-interest was the only immutable truth in the world. That seemed to deny something very real in humanity, but at the same time she didn't believe that all these competing belief systems could *all* be true. So, at the same time as becoming better practiced in and more knowledgeable of the Cave Dwellers' religion the less she believed in its literal truth.

Despite her scepticism, Glade retained her respect for the diverse faiths of the many tribes she encountered, including that of the Cave Painters. It wasn't that she actually believed, for instance, that the Mother Goddess had given birth to the world and all humanity through her womb. Who, after all, had been the inseminator of this great goddess? But she understood that faith united a tribe around a common set of values and the stronger the belief, the more stable and prosperous the tribe. She was no more hypocritical when she praised the Mother Goddess than when she offered incantations

and scented herbs to the spirits of the Mammoth Hunters.

Although the Cave Painters treated Glade with respect, her petition on behalf of the Mammoth Hunters was scarcely treated with urgency. She was allowed to rest on her furs inside the entrance of a cave and was granted rather better meat from the nightly feasts than was her Chief who slept outside the cave in the freezing cold. It was the Cave Painters' shaman who took the keenest interest in Glade. He was an ancient man with hollowed cheeks and an admirable thirst for knowledge. He asked her practical questions regarding herbs and remedies but it wasn't him who had the authority to decide her case.

Glade and the chief would probably have had to wait until Spring for a decision if it wasn't for the burden they imposed on the village of being fed and guarded. It was of really no concern to the village's chief whether they lived or died. Furthermore, as Glade soon discovered, they weren't the only supplicants for winter pasture that the Cave Painters' chief had to deal with.

"There was another group who'd lost their way in the hills and needed territory in which to hunt," Glade told Ivory as they snuggled together under their heavy furs in the shrill wind that penetrated every corner of their shelter. "These people spoke the language of the Cave Painters and were, moreover, true believers in the Mother Goddess. Unsurprisingly, their case was given priority over ours."

"That is just wrong," said Ivory indignantly. "It should be the degree of one's need that determines charity, not the closeness one's culture is to another."

"Very admirable," said Glade who found Ivory's idealism and moral certainty rather amusing. "But that isn't the way of the Cave Painters. These other supplicants were treated with much greater courtesy. They were allowed to accompany the Cave

Painters around the great fires that burned each night and could feast on the same food. They came from a different tribe, but the cultural superiority of the Cave Painters is so great that many other tribes have adopted their faith and abandoned whatever beliefs they might have held before.”

“That is also wrong,” said Ivory. “The spirits aren’t to be ignored just when it is convenient. This Mother Goddess is just a demon.”

“Don’t tell that to a Cave Painter,” said Glade with a smile. “However, it was obvious to me that whatever hunting land the Cave Painters felt inclined to allocate the better territory would first be allocated to this tribe and whatever land was left over was unlikely to be especially good.”

Glade knew that there was little choice in the matter. The Mammoth Hunters needed to find winter hunting fields. The valley where Ivory was waiting couldn’t sustain for long a village accustomed to hunting large game like aurochs, rhinoceros and mammoth. What they needed were the more extensive plains that spread across the hills and valleys where the Cave Painters lived.

Glade chatted with the other supplicants and discovered that their reason for being there were much the same as hers. They had migrated from the northern hills where they lived during the summer which was a settlement of caves much like that occupied by the Cave Painters. The path they usually followed to their traditional winter hunting grounds had also been blocked by landslides and they needed fresh territory in which to hunt. On their journey, they’d met people from other tribes, some like their own and some that more closely resembled the Mammoth Hunters, whose winter migration had been similarly frustrated. There had been a great shaking of the earth during the Summer that had caused hills to collapse and rivers to flow along different

valleys.

These supplicants had the good fortune to know of the Cave Painters who lived in the mountains and of their abundance of game. They came prepared with gifts of fossil shells that the Cave Painters treasured above everything else and thereby earned their respect. Glade knew about these fossils. They included shells the shape of great woodlice, of spirals, of blackened toenails and even huge bones. She regretted that she'd not thought ahead and brought something to offer the Cave Painters that they might value rather more than her body.

The days passed by and Glade's petition was still ignored. The situation was becoming increasingly urgent. Glade knew she would have to be much more insistent when she saw the earlier supplicants depart for their allocated pastures escorted by a Cave Painter.

"Who should I fuck to ensure that the needs of my husband and my village are addressed?" she asked the Cave Painters' shaman when he next came by.

"Who should you fuck?" echoed the shaman who was probably too elderly to fuck her himself.

"My husband has offered my body to your tribe as a reward for your chief's kindness in providing us with land," explained Glade.

"I see," said the shaman with a sad expression. "There's probably no one who really wants to fuck you. You are an old woman and the bravest warriors already have wives."

"I was fucked by your warriors when we encountered them in the hills."

"So, you were," said the shaman. "But that was a ritual fucking to mark your acceptance."

“Is there no one at all I can fuck to help further my village’s cause?”

“You *are* old,” said the shaman again.

“I am also very experienced and greatly talented.”

“Perhaps the chief’s sons will benefit from your tuition,” suggested the shaman.

“I believe they would.”

Ivory was shocked by Glade’s account. “You bartered your body for the sexual satisfaction of children?” she remarked incredulously.

Glade nodded. “It was only for the good of your tribe,” she said.

However inept and clumsy the chief’s three young sons were, they were duly initiated into the realm of the experienced and Glade achieved what she wanted. The chief didn’t deign to speak to her, of course. Foreigners such as Glade who belonged to a tribe so wilfully ignorant of the Cave Painters’ culture weren’t worthy of such condescension. It was the shaman who passed on the chief’s decision.

“The lord of our village, may he be forever worthy, has decreed that your people be allowed to hunt in the plains of the Great Tongue Glacier,” he told her.

“Are these good hunting grounds?” Glade asked the shaman warily.

“The lord is wise and generous,” he answered carefully. “He cares deeply for the people in the village who hunt and gather in the hills and valleys of the mountain. The best hunting grounds are naturally reserved for those who pay him allegiance.”

“Are the hunting grounds that have been allocated to my husband those where no Cave Painter would choose to hunt?”

“This is land in which you are free to hunt without incurring the wrath of our chief,” said the shaman. “You have the lord’s word that as long as you don’t trespass onto land reserved for our tribe, you are free to hunt, slaughter, skin and eat all the

bison, rhinoceros, deer and aurochs that roam in that territory. That is his solemn word and the best you can ever hope for.”

Glade was then introduced to Ochre, the warrior assigned to accompany Glade and the Mammoth Hunters down the hill slopes and back to the valley. Glade knew as soon as she met him that he would much rather stay in the village than help the rustic northerners and it was only because he knew how accommodating Glade would be to his sexual needs that he agreed to accompany them.

“So, Ochre has also been fucking you?” asked an affronted Ivory.

“Naturally,” said Glade.

“And in plain sight of the Chief and the other warriors?”

“Of course,” said Glade. “If he hadn’t, then he might have decided to abandon us and allow us to be slaughtered by his tribe for not settling in the land allocated to us.”

Glade had to handle all communication between Ochre and Chief Cave Lion. She explained what had been decided and that Ochre would accompany them to the Mountain Valley where Ptarmigan and the others were awaiting their return. Then when they were gathered together, he would lead them to the plains of the Great Tongue Glacier. She also outlined her agreement to provide sexual services to Ochre. The warriors were naturally indignant, but it was apparent that Chief Cave Lion was relieved merely to still be alive.

“It is a small price,” he said with resignation. “We must be grateful that the chief of the Cave Painters has seen the worth of our cause and has been so generous.”

The march back was long and hard, but was greatly relieved when after only two days they encountered the second expedition led by Grey Wolf and Cave Bear. The

snow had settled so deep that every step forward was an effort, especially for Chief Cave Lion who was badly wounded and whose arm was now permanently twisted. The little relief afforded from the snow and icy wind were diversions that lengthened the journey by the need to traipse through woods and cling to the shelter of cliff faces.

Ochre knew the lands intimately. He found the best places for the Mammoth Hunters to rest at night, such as small crevices in the hillside or deep within especially dense areas of woodland. He helped his rustic charges catch game, but he was very particular as to which animals they were permitted to hunt. It was the Cave Painters' custom to hunt each animal only in certain seasons and of these animals to only kill the old or the lame or the non-breeding males. Such principles of animal husbandry were novel to the Mammoth Hunters and they chafed at this in irritation, but Glade was familiar with such traditions and understood how over the generations it ensured that there was always enough food from one year to the next.

Chief Cave Lion had begun his trudge back in low spirits as if he was thoroughly defeated. He was also distressed by the sight of Ochre's nightly lovemaking with Glade that the Cave Painter took evident delight in making as obvious as he could despite the icy cold and the difficult sleeping conditions. However, as the return journey approached ever closer to the valley, and especially after meeting up again with Grey Wolf and his comrades, the chief's spirits rose even as the discomfort of walking in his weakened state increased. He gave the impression to the second expedition that it was he who'd persuaded the chief of the Cave Painters to offer them the rights to hunt on land of great value and worth. This caused palpable disquiet amongst the warriors with whom he'd huddled naked for so many days under the cover of the woolly rhinoceros furs.

“Are these hunting lands any good?” Ivory asked.

“What do you think?” countered Glade.

Ivory considered this, but she was doubtful.

“Can we trust Ochre?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Glade. “He’s simply carrying out his chief’s wishes. He doesn’t want to disappoint his chief.”

“And the hunting lands?”

“As the shaman said, they are lands where our tribe will be able to hunt freely and with no fear of being killed by the Cave Painters’ warriors.”

“Will there be enough game to feed all the mouths in our village?” asked Ivory.

Glade sighed. “I’ve asked Ochre this question, but he is very evasive. He knows where they are and he will escort our tribe there, but he hasn’t given an opinion as to whether they are sufficient to keep us alive through the winter.”

“And what do you think?”

“I think there will be game and hunting lands in the plains of the Great Tongue Glacier. I think that the Cave Painters will have been scrupulously honest in that regard. But I seriously doubt whether there is enough to sustain the whole village.”

Chapter Twenty Seven

Ivory was consumed by the flames of jealousy.

All through the night her moist vagina was repeatedly stimulated by Glade's fingers. She shuddered many times over with the warm pleasure her older lover had orchestrated and it was into Glade's arms she collapsed, but the object of her jealousy wasn't the shaman. It was Ptarmigan who at that moment was in the chief's company and no doubt also in the throes of passion. Now that Chief Cave Lion had returned his wife would from henceforth sleep by his side only and her love for Ivory would become just a memory.

When Glade at last collapsed into exhausted slumber, a restless Ivory stared into the dark shadows and reviewed her situation. She recognised now how happy she'd been during the time Glade and Chief Cave Lion were absent. She'd enjoyed the regular evening camaraderie with the other villagers around the blazing fires. She'd risen well to the challenge of being the village shaman and Ptarmigan had done well as the Chief's deputy. And now what did the rest of her life have to offer? Would she and Ptarmigan once again be compelled to share the Chief's semen together? Would Glade continue to share her body with whomsoever she fancied? Was this the best she could ever expect in her life?

When Ivory's fitful sleep was broken by the milky suggestion of daylight from the morning sun, she became aware that Glade had already arisen and was no longer by her side. Ivory slipped out from under the blanket of furs that shielded her from the icy cold and grasped her clothes tightly to her bosom as she ventured out into the open air. Snow was coming down thick and fast. The bushes, shrubs and rocks that had been

peeking through the shallow snow the day before were now hidden beneath a deep white coat.

Where was Glade?

Ivory stomped through the snow as she sought her lover and soon spotted the shaman in the well-constructed shelter the Cave Painter had erected in the shadow of a cedar. She was lying peacefully beside Ochre whose arm was slumped over her shoulder.

Despite her pain of rejection, Ivory knew better than to make her presence known so she strode over to the shelter where she and Ptarmigan had slept every night when the Chief and his warriors were exploring the hillsides above the Mountain Valley. Chief Cave Lion was sharpening flint blades by a small fire while Ptarmigan was caring for her children. A pang of resentment stabbed into Ivory's chest. It was obvious that the Chief's wife had made love with her husband during the night. Could she bear to look her lover in the face?

"Good morning," Ptarmigan said sweetly before Ivory could take the opportunity to slip away unnoticed. "Did you sleep well?"

"Not at all," Ivory admitted. "All night I was thinking about you and the Chief."

"The Chief is my husband," said Ptarmigan.

"Did you make love together?"

"He tried to," Ptarmigan confessed. "He wasn't very successful. My husband is very ill."

"And yet he wants to march us up the hills to the new hunting grounds."

"What choice have we got?" said Ptarmigan. "My husband says that there will be an abundance of game, nuts and berries. We are privileged to be granted such lands

and honoured by the presence of the Cave Painters' ambassador. My husband sees only good fortune ahead."

"The shaman isn't so enthusiastic."

"Really?"

"She doesn't believe that the hunting grounds allocated to us by the Cave Painters will be enough to sustain the village."

"How can she say that in total contradiction to my husband who is as much her chief as he is yours and of all the villagers?"

"She can speak the Cave Painters' language," said Ivory. "The Chief can't. It was Glade who negotiated with the Cave Painters. Not the Chief."

"Oh."

The snow fell unceasingly through the rest of the day. From now on, the trek through thick freshly fallen snow to the new hunting grounds could only be arduous. Ochre was the only one who knew the route and he displayed no enthusiasm to head out in such conditions. However, as Grey Wolf reminded the Chief, it was necessary to make haste before the worst of Winter set in.

"It will be much more difficult to establish our camp when the snow hardens and the flowing water freezes," Grey Wolf said. "We must hurry. Too much time has been wasted."

"Wasted?" Chief Cave Lion wondered accusingly. "Who's been wasting time?"

Grey Wolf was flummoxed by the riposte. It was unusual for the Chief to be so

sensitive. As usual, it was Glade who rescued the situation. “Your good friend, the great warrior Grey Wolf, is right to advise haste, my lord. There is several days trek to the plains of the Great Tongue Glacier. Any delay will be costly. If we tarry, we risk greater misfortune than if we stride forth.”

“Can we all climb the hillside in this snowstorm?” the Chief asked as he gazed up at what could be seen of the hills.

Ivory guessed the Chief’s main concern was his own physical ability, but also that he didn’t want to admit to any weakness.

“The snowstorm will soon subside,” said Grey Wolf. “Then we can set off. We are all ready, my lord. As soon as you say, we shall leave.”

“The Chief is right to be cautious, Grey Wolf,” said Glade diplomatically. “The trek will be arduous and long. There are many in the village who won’t survive the journey.”

“Such as?”

“There are some who are ill and injured. There are babies, young children and their mothers. There are women who are pregnant.”

“Pregnant? Who’s pregnant in the village?”

“I am,” said Ptarmigan suddenly and unexpectedly.

“You are?” asked the Chief who seemed as astonished as anyone by this news.

“Yes, my lord,” said his wife. “I meant to tell you but I forgot to do so in my great joy at seeing you again. I am pregnant. I may be too weak to accompany you on the trek.”

“You can’t stay here,” said Grey Wolf indignantly. “The Chief’s wife should stay always by her husband’s side.”

“The question is not the duty of the Chief’s wife, but the welfare of the Chief’s unborn child,” remarked Glade. “We know that the Mountain Valley doesn’t provide enough game and sustenance for the whole village and for this reason we need to trek to the new hunting grounds. However, the valley is sufficient to sustain half the village. It would be a safe refuge for those who are ill, injured or pregnant and who may not survive the ordeal of several days’ slog through thick snow and freezing wind. We risk taking up the hill those who are least able not to their salvation but to their grave.”

“Should my wife stay behind?” wondered the Chief.

“It is advisable, my lord,” said Glade.

“She can’t survive by herself.”

“She would be attended by the injured, the ill and the children. There will also be the River People who shan’t be accompanying us anyway.”

“The pregnant, the ill and the wounded all need the ministrations of a shaman,” objected the Chief. “You more than anyone must accompany us on our trek.”

This confession of weakness regarding the need for a mere woman perceptibly shocked those who heard, but no one dared comment.

“You are right as you always are, my lord, to be mindful of the spiritual and material wellbeing of the tribe,” said Glade. “You are right to be anxious that when I come with you to the plains with the Cave Painters’ Ambassador that those left behind in the Mountain Valley will suffer. However, you need have no such fear. My apprentice has proven her worth in the days when we were parleying with the Cave Painters in the mountains. She can deputise for me in my absence during the long winter months.”

“She can?” asked the Chief who hadn’t considered this option before.

“I have heard nothing but good report of the care she took in our absence of the tribe’s spiritual welfare, my lord,” said Glade. “She treated the ill. She placated the spirits that protect us all. She will be able to care for your pregnant wife and even act as midwife when she gives birth to what I predict will be a son you shall be proud of.”

“You propose that one in three of the village remain behind in this valley whilst the rest of us march onwards into the mountains?”

“It is what I recommend, my lord,” said Glade. “It is not advice I give lightly. A village should stay together and a wife should stay with her husband, but these are perilous times. It is better that the village survives as two parties than that one party should perish in the bitter winter snows.”

Ivory said nothing during the debate. As the shaman’s apprentice, it wasn’t appropriate for her to do so. Glade was only permitted to speak because she was the shaman and also because she was the only person able to communicate with the Cave Painters on whose mercy the village’s survival now so humiliatingly depended. Ptarmigan had been allowed to speak because of her privileged position as the Chief’s wife, although this wasn’t a privilege she’d ever taken advantage of before. However, Ivory could see that it was Glade who was really directing the debate and that Chief Cave Lion was uncharacteristically feeble. The Chief could state no opinion that Glade couldn’t overrule. Neither could any of the warriors who’d accompanied the Chief on his initial expedition. Grey Wolf was the only man with a more robust opinion and he was clearly irked at being so consistently ruled against.

“I didn’t know you were pregnant,” said an indignant Ivory when she was later able to snatch a hurried word or two with Ptarmigan.

“I’m not,” said her lover with a conspiratorial smile.

Ivory shook her head in disbelief. “Then why did you say you were?”

“I spoke to the shaman,” Ptarmigan replied. “I was troubled by what you said about the wisdom of the village settling in the hunting grounds allocated by the Cave Painters. She said that her reservations were very real and that she seriously questioned whether the village could survive at all. She told me that she thought that perhaps one in three villagers would die within the cycle of a single moon and that most of those would die on the journey. She said that the hunting grounds mightn’t be adequate for even one half of the village. She said that she didn’t trust the Cave Painters to give land to our village that could adequately sustain us.”

“That’s rather more than she said to me,” said Ivory. “At least not in so many words. So the shaman suggested that you should claim to be pregnant?”

“Yes,” said Ptarmigan. “It was her idea. She said that a mother needs to be with her children and that my children should remain in the valley.”

“Well, it’s not advice the shaman’s ever taken seriously for herself,” said Ivory who recalled with bitterness that Glade had abandoned her children when she left her husband.

“Sorry?”

Ivory bit her tongue. “I believe that the shaman’s advice is sound,” she said. “That’s why the Chief has agreed to it so readily. It is better that the village break into two for it to survive. If neither the distant hunting grounds nor the Mountain Valley are able to support us all separately, then the best decision must be that one large village becomes two smaller ones.”

“And that you and I can stay together,” added Ptarmigan who again flashed her conspiratorial smile.

Ivory was torn how to respond. “Yes,” she said. “We shall stay together, but only until your husband and the shaman to whom we are both attached return again in the Spring and we trek back to our ancestral home in the north.”

“It is a temporary solution,” said Ptarmigan who was less able than Ivory to disguise the emotion in her voice. “But if we can spend every night together during the winter moons then it is a solution I very much welcome.”

It was Ochre who made the decision as to when the Chief and the greater proportion of the village should set out for the hunting grounds. He was eager to depart mostly, Glade told Ivory, because he wanted to return to the comfort and security of his home in the caves. Nevertheless, through Glade, Ochre advised caution. The snowstorm would pass in the following day or so and that was when they should set off.

In the meantime, the Mammoth Hunters had the opportunity to decide who should stay and who should go. It was already decided that the Chief, the shaman and all the hunters should leave, just as it was decided that those to remain behind should include Ivory, Ptarmigan and those too weak to risk the journey. This comprised the younger children, the ill and those nursing wounds. For the rest the decision was determined by allegiance. The hunters’ wives whose children were old enough chose to accompany their husbands up the mountains. Those men of lesser hunting skills whose wives or children had to remain behind also chose to stay. At the end of this process, there were about a dozen Mammoth Hunters who chose to remain behind. The majority chose to leave. This was a secret relief for Ivory who had serious doubts about

the Mountain Valley's ability to feed many more mouths.

While the tribe waited for the snowstorm to subside, they retreated to their shelters, pulled their furs around them and huddled together. The two busiest people in the village were Glade and Ivory whose medical skills were needed more than ever. The bitter cold made toes and fingers dangerously numb, but although the toes of some villagers were an unpleasant blue colour Glade made the decision that they weren't so frostbit as to require amputation. This was a relief to Ivory because this was the surgical operation she dreaded more than any other. Those most afflicted by the cold were the same warriors who'd accompanied the Chief up the hillside but such hardy men would hide any evidence of frostbite until it became gangrenous. As wounds were dressed, medicines distributed and prayers sung, a warm feeling returned to Ivory for Glade, her first lover. This was almost like the days before the winter migration.

However, when Glade was dragged away to administer to Ochre's sexual needs Ivory was abruptly reminded of how very different the relationship between them was now. And when Glade returned with the news that the Chief requested Ivory and her to come to his shelter at nightfall, she cursed the snowstorm for delaying Glade's departure.

Glade and Ivory trudged through the fresh deep snow to Chief Cave Lion's shelter when the sun finally dipped below the mountains and it was too dark to minister to the needy. Their steps forward were hindered by the sleet that pasted a mask of freezing ice on what small part of their faces was exposed to the elements. Ivory knew what the Chief wanted and she wished there was some way it could be otherwise.

Chief Cave Lion was weary and tired. His broken arm was bound in deer hide and supported by strong vines. He was not the man he used to be, but he was determined

to have one last night with both Ptarmigan and Ivory, while Glade performed the duty of keeping his penis as erect as she could.

It was a tricky exercise for many reasons. The Chief's struggle to maintain an erection was just one reason. It was dark. It was cold. And the three women and the Chief were snuggled up together beneath a heavy pile of rhinoceros and mammoth furs that allowed them to be naked but made free motion especially awkward. Indeed, the most passionate love made under the furs was between Ivory and Ptarmigan that the Chief hardly noticed, but which Ivory was sure would make Glade pause for thought.

It was a long, a sweaty and, for the Chief, a not wholly satisfying night of love. It was also very bewildering for Ivory. It was easy to tell when it was Chief Cave Lion who was licking, cuddling, nibbling and even fucking her or Ptarmigan. It was more difficult to know which of Ptarmigan or Glade was nibbling at her clitoris or whose fist was in her vagina. And she could see that Ptarmigan made love with the Chief (her husband after all) and Glade at least as much as she did. This foursome of Sapphic love was both erotic and disturbing. How could she be jealous when Ptarmigan was being fucked by the Chief and her clitoris licked by Glade and when it was difficult to know whose affection she was also enjoying?

When morning arrived, Ivory knew that this night of love with Glade and the Chief would be her last. The sun was shining, the snowstorm had abated, and the ground was covered with thick snow that hadn't yet compacted. It was bitterly cold. It was the coldest it had been since last Winter when she'd marched south with her mother to the clan's traditional winter hunting grounds. Her breath didn't blow like smoke: rather it tinkled and sparkled in the clear cold air. Ivory's nose and lips were so cold that they were already blistering. The Chief's beard kept his face warmer in the cold than a

woman's naked face would ever be, but it was speckled with ice where his breath froze to the bristles.

However, the sky was now clear of even a single cloud.

"These are the perfect conditions for you to leave," Ivory said sadly to Glade.

"It is," agreed Glade who gripped her apprentice's hand tightly.

"This is it," said Ivory. "You'll be gone for the whole Winter."

"Don't fret," said Glade. "I shall return."

Ivory who a moment ago was almost rejoicing that Glade and Chief Cave Lion were leaving so that she could have Ptarmigan all to herself gazed into the shaman's sad eyes and broke into tears. Glade drew Ivory to her bosom and clung to her as close as she could through the thickness of their furs.

"I hope so," Ivory sobbed. "I hope so!"

Ivory was inconsolable as Glade joined the congregating company of Mammoth Hunters who'd chosen to follow Ochre to their new hunting grounds. Ptarmigan might want to console her but her duties were with her husband and children. Ivory perched on a boulder from which she had shovelled off the snow with a fallen branch and sobbed while all around her there was the flurry of activity as everyone was getting ready.

Chief Cave Lion regarded her with a weak smile. Perhaps he thought that it was because he was leaving that Ivory was so upset. Glade almost certainly concluded that it was her apprentice's love of her that had made her weep so much. Ivory didn't understand why she was so sad. That Glade was leaving was certainly one reason why she couldn't restrain her tears. Ivory knew that despite her older lover's constant infidelities, she loved Glade more than she imagined possible. The love was so deeply ingrained that it couldn't be diminished by even her love for Ptarmigan. But Ivory's

chief foreboding was that this might well be the last time she would ever see her lover. Glade had described her potential plight so vividly that Ivory was acutely apprehensive.

Most of the village was dismantled. Possessions were thrown into sacks and bags. Farewells were said and prayers made to the spirits, which Ochre observed with a wry sceptical smile. Then, led by the Cave Painter, the Chief and the shaman, most of the village's population hoisted up their bags or threw them onto their backs. After a final farewell the expedition turned its face away from the Mountain Valley to begin its trek onwards and upwards along the trail upon which rested so many hopes and prayers.

Ivory remained on the same rock for most of the morning and continued to weep. When the last farewell was made and Glade, in particular, turned away, she burst into irrepressible sobs that left her drained and wasted. Ptarmigan sat beside the shaman's apprentice and laid her hooded face on her shoulder. She patted Ivory while her lover sat transfixed at the sight of Glade ascending the sloping hills for the second time in just over a moon cycle.

It was another few days until Ivory recovered sufficiently from her grief to seriously return to her duties as a shaman. She was perfunctory and distant as she performed the familiar rituals. Neither her heart nor her soul was in true communion with the spirits. This didn't go unnoticed by Ptarmigan or any of the other remaining villagers. Some comforted Ivory by expressing their hopes and prayers that her mistress would return in the spring and advised her to trust in the goodness of the spirits. Other villagers confided to Ptarmigan their doubts whether the apprentice was really up to shouldering

her responsibilities.

“I know, I know,” said Ivory when Ptarmigan passed these opinions to her lover as they snuggled together under the furs in what was still designated as the Chief’s shelter. “I don’t understand why I feel so miserable. It’s as if a hole has opened up inside me and that I’m falling into it. Sometimes I see the world as if it was in a vision or a dream. And whenever my thoughts wander to anything that reminds me of Glade, like this...” She showed the mammoth figurine in ivory that Glade had once given her. “...then I begin to weep again.”

“It isn’t just you, my dearest,” said Ptarmigan. “Everyone in the village is missing a parent, a friend or, in my case, a husband. But Winter will pass and in the Spring the Chief and his entourage will return. And they will bring back with them the bounty of a good Winter’s hunting.”

“I hope so,” sniffed Ivory sceptically.

“I hate to see you in such distress,” continued Ptarmigan, “but I need you to be a comfort to me as well. My children are missing their father and they lament his departure as much as you do the shaman’s. I can’t comfort my children without more support from you.”

“Is that true?” said Ivory becoming aware of her responsibilities.

“The entire village needs you to soothe them,” said Ptarmigan, “including the River People who we must now regard as members of our Mountain Valley village. The shaman’s role is to heal and to entertain, but also to inspire hope. Without hope, we shall surely all despair. And if we despair, it may be us in the Mountain Valley rather than those of us in the distant hunting grounds that will be the more wretched come the Summer. So much depends on you.”

Ivory pondered this.

“We need to pray together as one village,” she said at last. “We must pray, sing, dance and tell stories around the fire. And we should encourage our guests the River People to entertain the village in our nightly soirées as if they were native born Mammoth Hunters.”

“It is very cold but it is also clear,” said Ptarmigan as she angled her head to look through the seam of the shelter into the night sky. “There will be no snow for a day or so. Tomorrow we should gather the village together. And we should do this every day when it doesn’t snow and the storms abate until my husband and the shaman return.”

“Will this really help?” wondered Ivory who was nevertheless energised by her lover’s resolve.

“It is said in the village where I was born that a happy people are a healthy people; that a joyful soul is a lucky soul. We must endeavour to keep the villagers healthy and joyful. It is our duty to do so.”

Chapter Twenty Eight

As the moon cycled through the winter season, especially on those days when snowstorms kept the villagers shivering inside their shelters and unable to venture out into the deadly cold, Ivory often returned to her memories of Glade. The shaman's apprentice remembered her not only as a lover, but also as the woman revealed to her by the stories she'd told her of her life. What puzzled Ivory most was why Glade had chosen to abandon her husband and two children. Ivory couldn't imagine that she could ever do anything so heartless. This was especially so since Glade had told her how happy she'd been living amongst the Cave Dwellers. How could Glade have been so stupid? And to do so for the love of such an evil bitch?

The village where Glade and Flint lived was one of many such settlements scattered about the region where the tribe lived. Most settlements were situated further north in the flanks of the mountain range that Glade could see covered in white in the far distance on a clear day. She now understood that this whiteness was the same coating of snow that settled on the ground through the winter, but snow that persisted on the mountain peaks during even the hottest days of Summer.

The Cave Dwellers' villages kept in close contact with each other and especially so during the Summer feast days when the men would woo eligible women from other villages. These were joyful occasions on which many a marriage was arranged. They were also much more restrained than similar festivities Glade had witnessed in other tribes. There was no public display of lovemaking. The dancing was formal and restrained. The suitors were normally accompanied by their family. Nevertheless, the whole affair had to be conducted in haste because any wedding that resulted from the

courtship would have to take place before the visiting suitors returned home.

Glade frequently accompanied Flint to these other villages together with the suitors and their families. Flint needed to be escorted on a stretcher carried by two strong men because his legs were so short that he couldn't otherwise expect to keep up with everyone. His presence was required if there was any likelihood of a wedding. It was customary for a shaman to preside over the matrimonial ceremony.

Glade and Flint attracted much curious attention wherever they went. The villagers were astonished by Flint's short stature and Glade's brown skin. Although they believed that the shaman and his wife had been cursed at birth they also believed that it was the duty of every Cave Dweller to express sympathy towards those less fortunate than themselves.

It was during one such excursion to another village that Glade heard about another woman who also had unusually dark skin.

"Her skin is much darker than even yours," said the shaman of this other village. "It is as black as the shadow the sun casts upon the snow."

"Where does she live?" asked Glade. She wondered with both hope and fear whether this black woman could be Demure, her southern lover.

"Several days north," said the shaman. "She lives in the mountain caves. I met her once only briefly. Although she is growing old she is still unmarried. She presented herself as eligible for marriage, but of course no one would wish to marry someone whose skin is so dark and sinister."

"No, indeed," said Glade who'd also experienced such prejudice. "Was she born in the mountains?"

"No," said the shaman. "I was told that she was discovered on the sea shore.

She was saved from almost certain death by the kindness of the mountain Cave Dwellers.”

It was just a matter of time until Glade’s suspicions were confirmed, but she was initially sceptical. She didn’t forget her conversation with the shaman, but she knew that there were many black-skinned people in the southern lands (and, for all she knew, in the north) and this dark woman might not necessarily be Demure. And even if she was, Glade had to consider the love of her husband, her duty to her two sons, and the respect she owed to the village.

But all this responsibility was, of course, soon to be forgotten.

Glade wasn’t as surprised as she thought she would be when she was told that a strange woman had appeared in the village. This was when she was returning home from the woods with the other village-women where they’d been foraging for herbs, roots and mushrooms.

It was unusual enough that the strange woman was unaccompanied. Although she dressed as a Cave Dweller, she was otherwise just as alien as Glade or the Red Haired People, with which the Cave Dwellers had a cordial association. Her skin was dark. Her lips were thick and broad. She spoke the Cave Dwellers’ language with a very peculiar dialect.

The strange woman was, of course, Demure.

Glade was more shocked than surprised. Demure had changed a great deal. It was true that the few years of separation had changed Glade also. Her breasts were fuller. Her thighs and buttocks were thicker. Lines creased her once smooth face. But Demure had changed much more. It wasn’t just age that had changed her. A deep scar was cruelly gashed across her left cheek and forehead. Her left eye was dull, grey and

sightless. She was limping on the same side. Her right arm was twisted and viciously scarred.

But when Demure smiled at the shaman's wife she radiated a look of love that was rare enough even in the days when they slept and made love together every night and often through the day. Glade choked and burst into tears. Even though it was not the Cave Dwellers' custom, she ran into her former lover's arms and pulled Demure to her bosom. Tears streamed uncontrollably down her cheeks. Her words were spluttered out through strangled sobs.

The other Cave Dwellers were bewildered and scandalised by Glade's behaviour. The two women spoke to each other in a language that no villager had ever have heard before.

"I heard that you were living in the south," said Demure who had discovered this by the same chain of communication by which Glade had heard about her black lover's presence. "As soon as I knew you were here, I followed the shore south to your village."

"And you came alone?"

"The villagers were pleased to see me go," said Demure. "They were never hostile, but I was unhappy and lonely. I was wanted by no man except for a few moments of discreet fucking. No one ever trusted me. But it is you I love. It is you I have always loved. And in the many years we've been apart I now know for sure just how deeply and passionately I love you."

"Who is this woman?" Flint asked when Glade took Demure back to the small cave where she and her husband lived. He looked at her with wary suspicion, mostly because of the immodesty of two women holding one another's hands.

“She is my friend from the southern lands,” said Glade who had told Flint an expurgated and sanitised version of her travels in the southern lands. “She’s the one who drifted away from me on the great sea.”

“And she isn’t dead?” said Flint, who made a brave attempt to display a more usual welcoming face. “This is good news indeed. She is welcome to stay for as long as she likes.”

This wasn’t a generosity of spirit, however, that could last for long. Even on the first night that Demure stayed with them, he confessed to his wife as they lay together that he wasn’t sure he trusted the black-skinned woman. She had a way about her which didn’t engender trust. She wasn’t open in her conversation. She was unusually careful with her words and her questions were too probing. Flint was also deeply uncomfortable with the degree of physical intimacy the two women expressed towards each other.

“That is the custom in the southern lands,” explained Glade.

“It is a bad custom,” said Flint. “I hope she doesn’t stay in our cave for long. We must build her a shelter so she can sleep elsewhere.”

There were many ways that Demure had changed since Glade had last seen her. It wasn’t just the years of living with the Cave Dwellers that had taught her a degree of humility and consideration for others that had been totally absent in the proud woman Glade had known before. She was still a woman who was an uneasy fit with the modest and incorruptible Cave Dwellers. Glade could well imagine the degree of Demure’s effort to moderate her natural instincts during the years she’d lived among them.

Demure was more in love with her than Glade thought possible for such a self-centred woman. She wasn’t sure whether Demure just loved the idea and memory of her long-time lover rather than the older woman Glade was now, but Demure’s

confused, unfocused but intense passion very much matched Glade's own. It was love for Glade that had sustained Demure for all these years. It was love that persuaded her to leave the security of her village for the long, risky trek south to Glade's settlement.

Although Demure was never really accepted by the Cave Dwellers, she was tolerated by them and allowed to share in the village's repast as long as she contributed towards it. That last duty was the most humbling experience of her life so far. Never before had she had to shoulder so much responsibility in collecting food, preparing meals and working for the welfare of the village where she lived. Previously, there had always been someone, most often Glade, to help her do the necessary tasks for which her life in the savannah had so poorly prepared her.

It was a leopard that had inflicted on Demure the wounds that now disfigured her. She was savaged just after she'd made landfall by raft, naked and hungry, on the pebbly beach of the northern coast. The attack happened after she staggered towards the forest from the shore where her raft had carried her. She was too exhausted to find somewhere completely safe. She was shivering in the chill wind and solely focused on the need to find somewhere to rest. It is, of course, when most distracted by weariness and cold that a person is most vulnerable. And so it was with Demure. It was almost as soon as she'd slumped down on a patch of grass by the forest edge that without warning a leopard pounced on her and grabbed her arm between its jaws.

Demure had always been a resourceful woman. Her immediate instinct was to fight back and this she did with a sharp flint-tipped spear that the Raft People used to

hunt tuna and dolphin. She thrust it swiftly upwards with her free hand and felt the familiar resistance of living flesh as it stabbed into the leopard's flank. The animal's response was a startled growl. It immediately scurried back into the forest from whence it had come with the flint-tip still embedded in its neck. Nevertheless, considerable damage had been done in that brief violent encounter. Demure collapsed on her side under the forest's shadows while blood seeped out from across the left side of her body where the leopard had bitten and scratched her. She had only just landed on the shore and already she was at mortal risk of slow death.

Demure would almost certainly have died had she not been discovered by chance a day or so later. Her saviours were women from a Cave Dwellers' village in the nearby caves in the mountainside. They were scavenging along the shore for flotsam that the village could eat or otherwise employ. As was the case when Glade first encountered the Cave Dwellers, the women were initially more shocked by Demure's nakedness than by the sight of the wounds she had suffered. Demure was in no position to care what they thought. She'd lost a great deal of blood. She could no longer see through her left eye. Only a persistent stabbing pain prevented her from sinking into eternal oblivion. All the while she clasped a flint knife as her only means of protecting herself from any other predators, but her grip was so tight that as much blood dripped from her palm as it did from the wounds inflicted by the leopard.

It was several days until Demure was fully conscious of her situation. After this, she was cared for by the village shaman who instructed her in the traditions of the Cave Dwellers. She had to accept that she would have to remain fully clothed irrespective of how warm it was. She began the slow and essential steps towards learning yet another new language and adapting to a new set of customs. It was soon obvious that this wasn't

a tribe where Demure was likely to flourish. Modesty, moral probity and a strict observance to tradition were attributes of to the Cave Dwellers that were impervious to Demure's skills in scheming and taking advantage of people's weaknesses.

But, as Demure told Glade, she was a changed woman. All she wanted now was to be reunited with her lover.

Demure's arrival on the northern shores was more than a year after the time Glade had arrived and been adopted by the Red Haired People. This wasn't because she'd been drifting by raft for that much longer, but because she'd originally made landfall somewhere else entirely. Her passage to the pebbly shore was rather shorter than that which washed Glade ashore. In fact, the shore from which she'd sailed was much nearer and could be seen on a clear day across the blue waters of the Great Sea.

When the two lovers' rafts drifted apart on the restless waves, the two women's immediate fortunes were much the same. Like Glade, several days passed by in which Demure increasingly lost faith in her ability to survive. She rediscovered a faith in the gods of her tribe, but they served her no better than the spirits of Glade's forest when the dark storms rained down on her. As she drifted over the waves, Demure only survived because, like Glade, she'd tied herself to the slats of the raft. And Demure likewise eventually drifted onto a sandy beach after many days of being aimlessly buffeted about by the elements.

Unlike Glade however, Demure's salvation wasn't facilitated by human intervention. There was nobody to help her. She had to untie herself from the raft when

she was able. She pulled it away from the waves that battered the sand so that she wouldn't be dragged out again by the receding tide. She then collapsed weak and helpless on the sand, but glad to be alive. And she stayed so for all the day, into the night and through the following day. If a leopard or other predator had wandered about this sandy beach then she would never have survived.

It was only later when Demure recovered sufficiently to wander beyond the shore that she discovered that she had no need to worry about predators. In fact, there was no large game at all. There were no giraffes, elephants or lions. Dense forest spilled to the edge of the sand. There were many birds and small animals in the trees. Demure's eyes were well trained to spot the tell-tale trail of large animals that had passed through the woodland and there was nothing to be seen at all.

Demure was reluctant to leave the coast as she would then lose her point of reference, so she decided to walk along the sandy beach until she stumbled across a human settlement. She knew from experience that villages were most often within sight of the sea. She pushed her raft out of sight so that she could use it again if the natives were hostile and she needed it to get away. Then she strode along the sand breaking her journey only to forage for fruit and other victuals in the nearby forest and to spear fish in the clear blue water of the sea. She walked for a whole day and found nothing. She rested in the shelter of a rock where she roasted the vegetables and fish. She walked through the following day and the next. And still she encountered no villages and found no evidence of any. As she wandered she noticed that the sun which once rose on her left side was now rising on her right. At first she assumed it was because the shoreline jutted out to sea and that she would soon walk into a bay that would curve round and adjust her orientation.

Then one afternoon she was astonished to see that the beach along which she was walking was the very one on which she had arrived. The raft was where she had hidden it. The small clearing in the woods which had been her home for the first few days was exactly as it had been several days before. The land where she had been carried to across the Great Sea was surrounded on all sides by water. This concept puzzled Demure. She had never been aware before of the concept of an island.

Demure wandered to every part of the island in the seasons to come. There were routes across the island alongside the flowing streams to the hills at the interior. In all her travels she came across no sign that anyone had ever lived there. The largest animals she came across were some small hippopotami wallowing in a small inland lake. There were no other animals of considerable size. There were mice, rabbits, dwarf crocodiles, small birds, and many tortoises and turtles. There were animals to capture and eat, but no big game and no people. Demure was able to feast well on the animals, because they were oddly unafraid of her. She could walk right up to a large goose whose wings were too small for it to fly and catch it in her bare hands. She could twist its neck while the bird more bewildered than frightened contemplated its death in a seemingly philosophical manner.

At first, Demure thought she was in paradise. There were no predators and there was plenty to eat. She explored more and more of the island each day throughout the Summer and Autumn months. The Winter months, however, were no less cold than in the southern lands and Demure was obliged to piece together a crude covering from the fur she skinned off the small animals she trapped. Unfortunately Demure wasn't particularly good at stitching together the separate furs and what she wrapped round her shoulders and under which she shivered at night frequently fell apart at the seams. At

night, she slept as well as she could under a blanket of fallen leaves and ferns while the snow fell down and she was painfully aware that she had nobody else's warm flesh to embrace.

Loneliness was what most troubled Demure. She missed her lover. During the long lonely hours, she contemplated her years together with Glade. She recalled how they supported one another on their directionless roving across the southern lands. She treasured the memory of their moments of passionate love, their deep speculations and their entertaining chats, the songs and chants they taught each other, and even the acrimonious arguments that Demure could now see were ones in which she was almost always the guilty rather than the aggrieved party.

Her thoughts focused also on the long distant shore that she could see across the Great Sea on a clear day. Although she didn't know it, the island wasn't very far from the tribal lands of the Cave Dwellers. All she needed was to sail on her raft on a day when the winds blew towards the shore and the sea was becalmed. Within a day or so she would drift to the shore where in the absence of anyone to tell her otherwise she increasingly came to believe that Glade would be waiting for her.

It was on one such perfect day that Demure pushed herself out on her raft and set off across the Great Sea. She badly underestimated the distance and difficulty of crossing the sea and was soon regretting her foolishness. However, she took enough food with her to survive and she did have some rudimentary skill at steering the raft. The extent of the shore ahead of her steadily grew larger and larger as the Sun set, the Moon filled the sky and then the Sun rose again. The shores eventually stretched so far in either direction that her main concern was more the difficulty of navigating past the rocks that were in her way than whether she would find land.

The raft drifted onto a pebbly beach. She was hungry and tired, but not as much so as she'd been when she drifted on the Great Sea a year earlier. The only plan she had was to find Glade, her lover, and this mission now seemed rather more difficult now she was ashore. But as Glade was to discover Demure's search almost came to an abrupt end before it had even begun.

Glade was more moved by Demure's account of her love than she'd ever been before. She wept tears of genuine sympathy as she unclothed Demure when they had the privacy and saw the extent of her wounds. The worst was the blindness in Demure's left eye from which foul pus occasionally oozed.

Demure's limp resulted from a later accident that happened when she was gathering fruit and vegetables in the forest. Her loss of sight made her prone to fall over or walk into a tree or bush. On this occasion, she caught her foot in a cleft in the rocks as she clambered up the hillside where she and other women would daily forage. Her fibula was only slightly broken and the village shaman had the knowledge to treat the break with a splint made from the femur of a deer, but the wound never fully healed.

It was inevitable that, after not many days, temptation got the better of Glade and the two women once again made love together.

This was very foolish and imprudent in a Cave Dwellers' village. This was even more reckless given that Glade was the shaman's wife and therefore expected to behave even more responsibly than the other woman. She was also the mother of two children. The Cave Dwellers had shown her nothing but kindness and she threw away all the accumulated good will to enjoy the flesh of another woman. And worse: to a woman no longer as beautiful or desirable as she had once been.

But Glade's passion well exceeded the bounds of prudence, common sense,

decency or even material self-interest. She loved Demure and, as her lover made so very apparent to her, Demure loved her. They snatched any and every opportunity to make love together in the woods or in the darkest shadows of the caves. Their lips and tongues tangled together. Their nails cut deep into the skin of each other's back. A passionate flow of juice dripped from their vaginas. Their crotches were raw and red from tribadic friction. Glade was drunk on heedless passion and reckless desire.

And of course it all soon came to an end.

Glade and Demure were discovered together making love by three women who'd been gathering mushrooms in the woods. They were troubled by a disconcerting commotion of gasps and moans. They speculated that they would have to minister to a villager who'd been attacked by a wild animal or who was victim to an accident. They didn't expect to see the naked flesh of two women: both dark but one much darker than the other. They were utterly appalled and scampered off before Glade could stop them and try to somehow buy their silence.

The awful truth was out.

The only mystery was that Glade and Demure had managed to conduct their indiscretions for so long. Many villagers came forward with accounts of what they'd seen that had aroused their suspicions. The times the two lovers were more intimate together than two friends from even the heathen southern lands should ever be. The times they were seen walking together hand in hand over the grassy meadows. And the number of times when Glade was nowhere to be found and Demure was also missing.

The Cave Dwellers had no choice in the matter. Glade and Demure had committed an unforgivable sin. Flint couldn't be expected to live any longer with a wife who had so dishonoured him with, of all transgressions, another woman. The two boys

would be forever damaged if they remained in the care of a woman who'd forsaken her marital duties for mere carnal desire. The whole village was shamed by this heinous transgression. The two harlots would have to be expelled from the village. And not just from the one village but from any village settled by the Cave Dwellers' tribe.

It wouldn't do for Glade to plead that in many villages in the southern lands behaviour like theirs, even within the institution of marriage, was often not merely condoned but expected. Such further evidence of corruption and perversion would only worsen their case. The villagers would simply conclude that the very act of extending compassion to women from the southern lands had merely let an evil cancer spread within their midst.

Glade and Demure silently hung their heads low while the village chief and his advisors berated them. Flint, the shaman, was inconsolable. He could barely speak through his bitter tears. Glade could see from the expression on his face that he still couldn't believe that his married life was to end so soon. Glade was sure that if the discovery of her infidelity hadn't been declared so publicly in front of the entire village then despite his anger Flint would also have been inclined to forgive her for the sake of the children and her continued companionship.

Glade kept her face as expressionless as she could throughout the ordeal. With Demure by her side this was in a sense no more than a return to the state she and her lover had known before they'd sailed across the Great Sea. She and Demure may be older now (although clearly no wiser), but this wasn't an unfamiliar situation at all. She had no doubt that the lovers had the resourcefulness and wit to survive in the northern lands as they had in the south. The predators may be different, the winter unspeakably harsh and the tribes spoke different languages and worshipped different spirits, but

essentially the situation wasn't much different.

Demure was, of course, the more inscrutable of the two women while they were being reprimanded. This was a blessing for both of them as it was she who was most blamed and one most spat on by the villagers. She didn't flinch even though her dark skin dripped with saliva and words had been shouted at her from right beside her cheek. The answers she gave in her heavily accented version of the Cave Dwellers' language couldn't satisfy the anger of the chief or any of the other villagers, but at least they didn't antagonise them further.

And then the two women were banished.

Again.

This was a pattern in Glade's life which could only be blamed on her lover. Demure was a blight on Glade's life. But she was also her nearest and dearest love from the southern savannah, along the southern shores, across the Great Desert, over the Great Sea and now amongst the northern lands of mountains, snow and dark coniferous forest.

The two women were given enough time to gather their possessions under the baleful and reproachful eyes of the villagers who Glade not long before considered her family and friends. Then, with only curses to accompany them, the two women trudged northwards along the paths beaten down between the beach and the forest to a new and far less secure life.

Chapter Twenty Nine

The following nights and days were hard. They were cold, bitterly so, and not everyone was going to survive the winter months. Ivory was tested as she'd never been tested before. She could never have managed without the love of Ptarmigan who insisted on accompanying her lover on every visit to a villager who was ill, injured or about to give birth. This was well appreciated, especially by those who'd become villagers on account of having accidentally stumbled into the Mountain Valley. The River People had now learnt enough of the Mammoth Hunters' tongue to explain that they were known as such in their language because they lived along the banks of a great river.

Traditionally a Mammoth Hunter Chief, and especially his wife, wasn't normally as intimately involved in the daily concerns of the tribe as was Ptarmigan. Although this was a degree of pastoral care beyond what anyone expected, in a village beset by the trials of the miserable winter months and now dominated by women, children and the unfit Ptarmigan's attention was very much welcomed. This was especially so on those occasions when despite Ivory's best efforts the villagers had to mourn yet another death. Ivory was particularly distressed when two children expired within a day of each other. The population of the already sparsely populated village was being steadily reduced and its survival was now at risk. Then there were two deaths at the same time less than half a moon later, when Ivory was tending to the delivery of a new child and Ptarmigan was comforting the mother. The child could not breach the womb and the loss of blood was so great that the mother also died. Not only was this a double tragedy, but the village now had the responsibility of caring for two now motherless children.

Ptarmigan and Ivory worked hard to sustain the village's morale through dark days such as these when everyone was in mourning and feared for their survival. There were days when it was impossible to hunt or forage in the frozen earth, when the spirits of the mountains brought fresh coatings of deep snow and it was too dangerous to venture out. Rations could only spread so far and every soul in the village was hungry and weak. There were days when bears and lions roamed within sight of the villagers so desperate for fresh meat that it took a coordinated effort to chase the predators away. There were days when although the sun shone and no fresh snow had fallen, it was so cold that the villagers shivered no matter how many furs they piled on, urine turned to ice almost before it reached the ground, and fingers and toes threatened to turn blue: thereby risking the need for amputation. These were the days when the villagers most needed to be actively engaged in hunting and foraging. And in this activity, as much as any other, Ptarmigan and Ivory were as engaged as everyone else.

The River People's knowledge became ever more valuable as they revealed sources for food that the Mammoth Hunters had never known before. There were nuts hidden in trees; nests of lemming and other small animals hidden underground; bee hives hidden in the cavities of caves or high up the tall trees; truffles and exotic mushrooms that could be dug from under tree roots; and there were techniques for hunting the hibernating fish and frogs that the Mammoth Hunters learned from the River People just as they also shared the knowledge of their own culture.

Ivory ensured that it was only during the worst storms that the village didn't gather together around the communal fire to share the daily feast and also nourish the soul with songs, prayers and stories. When the repertoire of traditional entertainment was exhausted then new songs and stories were invented or existing ones further

embellished. In this as well, the River People made an invaluable contribution especially as their understanding of and verbal dexterity in the Mammoth Hunters' language improved.

It was the River People also that made it easier for Ptarmigan and Ivory to announce their love for one another to the rest of the village. This became especially important when Spring had arrived and the Chief, the shaman and the other villagers still hadn't returned from the hunting grounds in the mountains. No one dared to voice what the Mammoth Hunters feared which was that Chief Cave Lion and his companions had perished and that all that was left of the former village were those who now shared the Mountain Valley with the River People. But there was a real problem that needed to be resolved. If the Chief wasn't going to return, then who should shoulder his responsibilities and duties? Could the village entrust their welfare on the Chief's wife, who could easily now be the Chief's widow? It could surely not be right that such responsibility should be shouldered by someone blighted with such a great loss. The whole community could collapse unless there was a way of conferring legitimacy on Ptarmigan's authority. It was the River People that proposed the solution. In their culture, a widow could inherit the responsibility and duty if it had been granted to her by her husband and that she had a partner, though normally a man, to assist her.

So it was that Ivory decided to tell the village that she was prepared to assume the duty of being Ptarmigan's husband should the Chief never return and that the spirits had sanctioned such an unconventional role. It was a difficult concept to expound to the village, but Ivory persevered nonetheless. As she explained, a shaman was already known to be a special type of person. After all, a precedent had already been set. The absent shaman was distinctly different with her dark skin and alien features. It was also

known, although not much approved, that Chief Cave Lion regularly made love with both his wife and the shaman's apprentice. In practice, the union between the two women already had the Chief's blessing.

Ivory explained to the villagers during the evening festivities that she had always enjoyed sexual relations with women and was therefore spiritually a man. The fact that she also enjoyed having sex with men, specifically the Chief and the Reindeer Herders, was proof that she was biologically a woman. The spirits had a special mission for her and she was duty-bound to follow their calling. She took Ptarmigan in her arms and confirmed her love for the Chief's wife by kissing her on the lips. The villagers cheered and none of them questioned whether Ptarmigan by virtue of being the other half of this same sex relationship shouldn't also be considered spiritually a man.

A wedding was arranged, but it was explained that this was only a wedding of convenience. When Chief Cave Lion returned, Ptarmigan would return to her filial duties. When the shaman returned, Ivory would once again serve as her apprentice. But until this joyous day the village needed to be united around a chief and the chief's wife, and in the interim these roles would be occupied by Ptarmigan and Ivory. This was the wish of the spirits of the Mammoth Hunters in collaboration with the spirits of the River People. The River People had a very relaxed attitude towards women taking on the senior role of chief and had no notion that same sex relationships were anything but natural. Consequently, they were rather more enthusiastic about the arrangement than the Mammoth Hunters. But it was understood that these were extraordinary times. The village needed the traditional structures of leadership and decision-making. Furthermore, normal customs would be resumed when the rest of the Mammoth Hunters returned from the distant Winter hunting grounds.

The challenge that confronted Glade and Demure after being exiled from the Cave Dwellers' society was to return to living together as they'd last done when they were younger and lived in a much warmer part of the world. It wouldn't be easy for them. The two women were several years older now and Demure at least somewhat less attractive. They also had to deal with the inevitable prejudice against women whose skin was significantly darker than that of anyone else they encountered.

It was very difficult to begin with. They were shunned by the tribes they encountered who sometimes chased them away in the belief that they were demons. The language they spoke was understood by progressively fewer people as they followed the shore first north and then east away from the lands of the Cave Dwellers. Although each tribe had its own distinct language, there was another language that was widely spoken and understood and this was the language of the Cave Painters. Glade's skill at learning new languages was again sorely tested, but she was soon able to exchange words in the Cave Painters' language in addition to languages less widely spoken like that of the Shell People, the Aurochs Riders, the Lion Skin People and even the distantly known tribe of the far north that hunted mammoth and woolly rhinoceros.

The two women survived by virtue of their knowledge of living off the land, but there were still many days when they had little to eat. When the intense icy wind blew, their shelters shook during the night from the cruel gusts and sometimes collapsed on top of them. The women begged from the people they passed. When that didn't work they exchanged sexual favours for food and furs. This wasn't as lucrative as it might

have been several years earlier. Glade was the younger woman and, unlike Demure, she had no disfiguring scars, so hers was the more valued body in such exchanges. This was no consolation to Demure who resented the fact that Glade could so easily earn a fuck while she was often left with at best the final jerks of ejaculation from men who'd already enjoyed Glade's body.

It was by chance, however, that Glade discovered that there was a better way in which the couple could gain acceptance and receive the food and provisions they needed so much. When she'd become sufficiently fluent in the languages of the northern lands, she was able to chat with villagers and told them of her status as a shaman's wife when she lived with the Cave Dwellers.

"Can you help my mother?" asked one of the men who'd just been fucking her while they were in an Aurochs Rider village. "She is ill and our shaman says that she will die within the cycle of the moon."

Glade agreed, although Demure was more hesitant. She didn't believe it was right to offer services for no further reward, but Glade was overwhelmed by compassion for the unhealthy woman. She had a huge swelling on her leg near the ankle which Glade could see was swollen with pus. It was a similar symptom to another ailment she'd seen Flint deal with and was generally caused when a person had waded out into stagnant muddy water. Glade lanced the swelling with a specially sharpened flint knife which she heated up for a long time over a fire. She then applied a warm fruit over the wound which she tied to the leg with a binding of straw and sinew. She also gave the woman some special herbs that lessened her pain during the painful surgery. A wound like this would normally take a day or so to heal, but what was most important, as she explained to the woman's son, was that the wound should be kept clean and the poultice

re-applied when it disintegrated.

What astonished Glade, and also Demure, was not that the woman's wounds did indeed heal after a day or so, but that this remedy which was common knowledge amongst the Cave Dwellers was unknown to the Aurochs Riders. The village shaman was especially impressed when she explained that she'd learnt her skills amongst the Cave Dwellers in the south. He expressed more respect towards Glade than she'd received since she and Demure were first exiled.

"There are two tribes of great wisdom and sophistication," the shaman said. "They are both tribes that live in caves. The Cave Painters excel in the arts, but the Cave Dwellers excel more in craft and medicine. Our tribe excels in bravery and cunning in the capture and hunt of the aurochs, but we have much to learn from the tribes of the caves."

Glade was invited to stay with the shaman and his husband in the oxen-hide shelter they'd erected in the branches of the oak trees where most of the Aurochs Riders lived. It was a precarious shelter but secure enough to hold Demure as well under the furs where Glade was permitted to sleep. Demure was less than delighted by the arrangement even though it was the most luxury she'd enjoyed since living amongst the Cave Dwellers. This was mostly because she was aware that she was now very much the junior partner in her relationship with Glade. She was tolerated at best by the shaman who confided in Glade his belief that it was a demons' curse that had turned Demure's skin so dark. And although she could enjoy Glade's flesh she wasn't able to savour that of the shaman and his husband whose lovemaking was intense, noisy and very physical and from which Demure was totally excluded.

This interlude came to an end when the Aurochs Riders dismantled their shelters

to pursue their trail of the aurochs through the forests and the village chief made clear that he believed that the shaman had learnt enough from the accursed dark skinned harlots. He had very little time for women and especially those he suspected of distracting his Aurochs Riders from their manly pursuits.

Even so, although Glade and Demure had lost a home they had discovered a vocation.

For the next few years, the two exotic women became familiar figures along the migration routes, the river ways, the sea shores and the mammoth trails of the land south of the high snow-covered mountains and north of the Great Sea. They were not only famed for their unusual appearance, but also for the services they provided for the price of food, provisions and furs. They traded flints, shiny stones, carved ivory and exotic furs to the various tribes. They provided sexual services for those prepared to relish exotic flesh. But what raised them above the few other itinerants who also made such a precarious living was their shamanic talents that rumour had it came not only from the almost mythical Cave Dwellers but from distant lands beyond the furthest horizon of the Great Sea.

The rumours were, of course, true. Glade and Demure contrived an amalgamation of their shared knowledge from the cultures they'd lived amongst and in which they'd been brought up. What both Glade and Demure now also shared was the distinction of being the last survivors of tribes that were now almost certainly extinct. Glade appreciated the value of the practical medical skills she'd learnt from Flint and whose source gave kudos and authority to the remedies. She also discovered the value of the songs she'd learnt from different tribes; the tunes she could play on hollowed logs or whistle through dead reeds; the stories she'd learnt in one language and could

recount (with some creativity) to another language; the knowledge about the passing of the seasons and the movement of the stars; and even such mundane knowledge as the different ways to stitch and style furs. This copious knowledge and wisdom was much sought after in the northern lands and Glade and Demure gained respect and even acceptance that they'd never known together until then.

It was obvious that Demure was uncomfortable in her lesser role with the lover who'd once been her slave. She no longer possessed the physical beauty or even physical strength that had once set her apart from everyone else. Nonetheless, Demure was too clear-sighted to pretend that her contribution to their successful partnership was more significant than it actually was. It wasn't Demure who had the unnatural fluency in all the languages she encountered. It wasn't Demure who had the shamanic knowledge and cultural borrowings that had become the couple's most valuable commodity. It wasn't Demure who the men wanted to fuck. She became almost resigned to accepting Glade's seniority in their relationship. She barely ever argued with or even contradicted her. And in this way she was somehow diminished. Much of her fire had been extinguished.

Glade quite liked this change in their relative status. Demure's newfound dependency on her younger lover made her much easier to handle. She no longer burst out in the fits of anger that were formerly so much a part of her character. Her affection for Glade was almost clinging. She hardly ever cheated on Glade, not that her younger lover really minded, and even made a virtue of this newfound fidelity that Glade neither wanted nor was able to reciprocate.

Ivory's relationship with Ptarmigan never had the fiery qualities of that between the shaman and her black lover. Their love more resembled that of two cooing doves. The villagers remarked of the apparent harmony and parity of their love that it was almost as if there were two people in one person. Ivory's passion towards Ptarmigan was less fiery than that she'd enjoyed with Glade, but the reliable stability somehow appealed to her rather more than the heat and fury she'd first associated with love and sex.

Ptarmigan's children appreciated the greater attention they got from what to them was like having two mothers. But they also missed the Chief.

"Where is my father?" the eldest daughter asked one day.

"He is in the distant hunting grounds in the mountains," said her mother. "He will return before Summer."

"I don't believe you," said the daughter peevishly. "It's a lie. Like the lie of you bearing a younger brother. That didn't happen. And I don't believe that my father will return either."

This was a view that was becoming increasingly prevalent in the village. There were so many wives waiting for their husbands and children their fathers. The lengthening days and the unaccustomed relative warmth of Summer in the south weren't compensation enough for these yawning losses. The village had stayed together, but could it survive another Winter? And how long should the villagers continue to wait?

There was great excitement one afternoon in the late days of Spring when figures were seen in the distance slowly wending their way down the hillside on the same path that Chief Cave Lion and his retinue had last been seen climbing upwards.

The initial disappointment was that there were so few figures. There were only a handful of them. The disappointment deepened as the villagers stood waiting at the bottom of the hill to greet the new arrivals having abandoned the duties of hunting and foraging. It was obvious that these strangers belonged not to the tribe of Mammoth Hunters but to that of the Cave Painters. Their physical stature and style of dress more resembled that of Ochre than any Mammoth Hunter.

“What should we do?” Ivory asked her lover with uncertainty.

“We should greet these people and invite them to stay with us for the night,” said Ptarmigan. “Our village has benefited greatly from having been welcoming and hospitable. The River People helped us survive the Winter. The knowledge and wisdom of the Cave Painters will also be invaluable.”

There was the problem of what language to speak, however welcoming Ivory and the other villagers were. The Cave Painters naturally expected the Mountain Valley people to speak their language and their incredulity was palpable when they realised that not one word they uttered could be understood. Nevertheless, the show of discarded flint knives, outstretched hands and the invitation to the nightly feast was understood well enough. The Cave Painters were relieved that these strange people were as far from being hostile as it was possible to be.

There were three young men, four women and two children. They dressed with the same superior stitching and attention to detail as did Ochre, but they didn't share his overbearing hauteur. They were naturally talkative but this characteristic was wasted in the company of people who couldn't speak their language. Two of the four women were in a state of advanced pregnancy.

Ivory and Ptarmigan worked together to make sure that the Cave Painters knew

that they could stay with them in the Mountain Valley for as long as they liked. It wasn't ideal, of course. There was already a preponderance of women and children over men who could hunt and guard the village from unwanted intruders, but the village needed more people and it especially needed those who knew the lie of the land.

The Cave Painters were naturally cautious. Ivory understood that this was because the Mountain Valley and its current settlers didn't initially offer a very tempting long-term choice. The Mammoth Hunters were much less skilled in their tool-making skills, not to mention the other crafts in which the Cave Painters clearly excelled. They didn't speak the Cave Painters' language. They were vulnerable insofar as there were so few men. And the Mountain Valley wasn't the best hunting land to attract a hunter. But Ivory had great hopes on her ability together with Ptarmigan to captivate the new people with their charm.

The Cave Painters' caution visibly faded during the evening feast where there was so much participation and so much laughter, where spirits were so high and there was so much good song. Ivory felt sure that if the village were to survive it might soon be known not as the tribe of the Mammoth Hunters, given that no mammoth would wander down such a narrow valley, or even the Mountain Valley people, but perhaps as the Night Entertainers. Ptarmigan even persuaded the Cave Painters to make their own contribution to the entertainment. One pregnant woman, who wasn't a partner of any of the men, stood up and sang a plaintive song whose lyrics only the Cave Painters understood but whose sentiments had everyone weeping.

It took a great while and much persistence and patience from both Ivory and Ptarmigan, but eventually they learnt enough of the Cave Painters' language to participate in meaningful discourse with them. The amount of time the couple expended

on the strangers generated resentment amongst some villagers. They were accused of putting the interests of other tribes above that of the Mammoth Hunters, but Ptarmigan tried to explain why it was necessary to woo the Cave Painters and above all to learn their language and their customs.

“When the Chief, my husband, parleyed with the Cave Painters,” she explained, “he did so with great courage and naturally with great success. The chief of the Cave Painters deemed him worthy enough to send his highest ambassador to the valley and escort the Chief and the fittest of our village to the distant hunting grounds. All the same, how much more fruitful would his bargaining have been had he known more about the people with whom he parleyed? How much more bountiful would the hunting grounds be that were bestowed on us?”

She explained, furthermore, that the Mountain Valley was situated in territories chiefly occupied by Cave Painters. It was advisable for the duration of their stay that the tribe find as much about their neighbours and their language as they could. And should there be an occasion in the future when the tribe would need to negotiate with the Cave Painters then they would similarly return in kind the hospitality shown by the village. This plea to self-interest had great sway amongst the village, although at the same time there was a growing affection towards the Cave Painters who were already showing their gratitude towards the village for their generosity and good spirit.

It was only after several cycles of the moon that Ptarmigan and Ivory had a good command of the Cave Painters' language. By this time, the best of Summer had passed and the valley was at its most bountiful as the autumn fruits fell from the trees and young animals were at their most adventurous and foolish and therefore easiest to hunt.

Through their many conversations with the Cave Painters, Ivory and Ptarmigan

discovered why they happened to wander into the Mountain Valley. The caves where they'd lived had collapsed on a day on which the ground shook and great avalanches occurred throughout all the mountains. It was the same day that must have caused the Mammoth Hunters' migratory paths to be blocked by landslides and debris. Most of the people in their village were killed by the cataclysm. Their chief died. The shaman also. The best and noblest hunters all perished. Those who survived attempted to eke a living with fewer numbers and inadequate shelter. Unfortunately, every passing day brought more deaths for those whose injuries only hastened their death. Eventually, when the village was reduced to only a dozen people, the survivors decided to trek over the mountains to find new caves and new hunting grounds. The winter snow and the freezing cold brought more death and despair, so that the small company now sheltering in the Mountain Valley was all that was left of the Cave Painters' village. They were by no means the brightest or the best of the village. They were merely those that the demons of the earth hadn't showered upon with rocks and boulders or crushed in its jaws. On that fateful day the Mother Goddess had abandoned her children to her wayward cousins who enjoyed nothing more than to bring chaos and confusion to the world.

Ivory tested the limits of her new linguistic skills by asking the Cave Painters about the whereabouts of Chief Cave Lion and his entourage.

"I have heard of these people," said Murex who, as the oldest of the three men, was the natural spokesman. "They were escorted to the plains of the Great Tongue Glacier which is a poor hunting ground. The plain is surrounded on all sides by glaciers and high cliffsides where only vultures and hyenas roam. There are some goats and sheep, but few mammoth, rhinoceros and aurochs. This is somewhere our tribe has

never chosen to settle for good reason. The plain is open and barren. The caves in the cliffs are small and often home to cave bears especially in Winter. If people from your tribe have been sent there then it is unlikely that many will have survived a single winter.”

“Do you know whether they did survive?” asked Ivory more persistently as she recalled her love for Glade. “Were they accompanied by a dark woman who was the village shaman?”

“I’ve heard about the dark woman,” said Umber who was the pregnant woman whose singing had so captivated the village. “I think everyone in the mountains has heard about the dark woman. She was famous for the way she tempted men with her body and persuaded them to participate in festive fucking even though the festival was yet many moons away.”

It was obvious that Umber disapproved of Glade, but Ivory persisted.

“Have you heard whether she’s lived or died?” she asked. “She was the shaman who taught me all I know.”

“You Mammoth Hunters are strange people,” laughed Vermillion, the youngest of the men. “Your chiefs and shaman are all women. And not just any women but ones tinted with a hue unlike anyone else in these lands. I didn’t know she was a shaman. I believed that she was a prostitute.”

“A *prostitute*?” wondered Ptarmigan who’d never heard the word before.

“A woman who exchanges sexual favours for food,” explained Umber. “That’s what I believed she was. I don’t think anyone knows what happened to her. We left our caves before the end of winter and I think if she’d met again with any village in the mountains such is her reputation that we’d have heard about her.”

“Do you think she’s dead?” asked Ivory.

“I can see that you’re fond of this prostitute shaman,” said Umber. “I don’t wish to say anything that could cause you grief. But the truth is that the plains of the Great Tongue Glacier can’t sustain a village of more than a dozen souls. Unless your friend was lucky and has escaped from the plains she’d have suffered from there being too many hungry mouths and too little to eat. And if she escaped, it’s likely that given her reputation news of her survival would have spread to the very last cave in the mountains.”

Chapter Thirty

Glade believed that she'd arrived at the point in her life where events had directed her. The trials she'd endured from the time her tribe was reduced to slavery; her travels across the southern and northern lands; her marriage to Flint; and, of course, the ever-present shadow of Demure: all of this was destined to culminate where she was now. The pinnacle of her life was to be a peripatetic shaman in the company of her black lover in the white glacial foothills of the Great Mountains.

What could be more perfect? And now of the two women, it was Glade who was the dominant partner. She and Demure were fated to stay together forever until they died in one another's arms in the encroaching snow that crept so slowly down the flat bottomed valleys. This was surely how it was meant to be.

But, alas, this was not how it would be.

In her role as shaman, Glade had the duty to care and succour many different and diverse people. Demure accompanied her wherever she went. Her chief duties were to chant, sing and occasionally dance, which she did with rather less natural fluidity than Glade. But like her lover, Demure was constantly and intimately exposed to the ill and diseased. Many illnesses made their presence known by perspiration and delirium. Some had much stranger and often rather disgusting symptoms. These included vomiting, diarrhoea, huge pustules, foul swellings, great blood-filled gashes and even limbs that were chewed away by an invisible force that began its predation at such extremities as the toes, the fingers and the nose. Often, the illnesses were easily treated. A boil was lanced. A poultice on a pus-filled wound. Herbs and spices to anaesthetise the patient. In some cases, despite Glade's best efforts and after all the treatment and

care, the only end was death. The cause of death might be the bite of a wild beast or the sharp edge of a flint weapon. There was always a toll from pure accident. But the worst of all were the epidemics which spread like the concentric rings of water in a pond into which a stone was thrown. First one victim. And then another. And within a few days or even a half cycle of the moon, many more people would suffer from the same illness. Most survived or did so in a weakened state. Some died. These were mostly the old, the young and the pregnant. In such epidemics, it was the shaman who most often had to confront disease, death and distress.

Flint had been a wise shaman. One example of his advice which Glade always remembered was that she should wash and clean any part of her body that might come in contact with a patient both before and after providing treatment and care. In those cases where the invalid coughed or spat blood she would cover her mouth and nose with a thin deer-hide mask that she would later wash. Cleanliness was a necessary part of the ritual of healing and was sometimes the most awkward. Clean water wasn't always readily available. But Glade believed that such attention to cleanliness was why neither Flint nor Glade ever contracted any of the illnesses she treated.

Demure was not so lucky.

It had been easy to dismiss the symptoms when she first showed signs of sickness. With the cold, the damp and the piercing wind, who wouldn't feel unwell on occasion? Then Demure collapsed onto the bare earth where the two lovers were walking, on a path beaten by horse and aurochs across grasslands beside a bush and a trickling stream. Glade knew exactly what to do. She dragged her lover across the grass to a copse where she lay Demure down on a bed of moss and ferns beneath as many furs as she could pile on top of her.

When the contagion tightened its grip Demure was pasted in a cold dank sweat; foul scabby pustules covered her skin; and she coughed up dark green mucus. Her last few days were ones of unceasing pain during which Glade sat constantly by her side and tried to persuade her to eat and drink. She would periodically yell or curse, but mostly she had only the energy to mumble, moan or simply wince. Her body was racked by spasms of agony and the phlegm she coughed up was soon stained with blood. Sometimes she lost consciousness, but the pain would return her to consciousness. And then she would stare around her in confusion and evident distress. Bit by bit, all hope of recovery vanished.

Life faded away from Demure. By now, she probably welcomed its departure but Glade was devastated. She had hoped, against the evidence accumulated during her years as a shaman, that just this time, for once, the spirits would look kindly on the afflicted. But this was not to be. One moment the same temporal space was occupied both by Demure's body and by Demure the woman Glade had loved more than anyone else in her life. The next moment the body was nothing more than an empty shell. Death came unannounced. Her halting breath halted altogether. The eyes that flashed before with agitated hopelessness became dull and characterless. The incessant rhythm of her heart ceased to beat.

All that was left for Glade to do was to bury the body. There were tribes she'd encountered who believed this was a necessary ritual to pacify the spirits. Others preferred to burn the body and some even deliberately left the body on an exposed hill to be scavenged by wild beasts or vultures. Glade had no religious preference, but she would rather that the animals that ate her lover would do so underground and not where Glade might suffer the anguish of seeing a jackal or a hyena run away with Demure's

limbs or vital organs.

And once the body was buried, all Glade could do now was weep.

And weep she did. For day after day. And she did so under the shadow of the tree where she'd cared for her dying lover for so long. The tears were sometimes soft and salty. They were more often accompanied by chokes and stabbing pains of regret. Glade's eyes were swollen, her mouth was raw and salty, and a dark shadow followed her gaze wherever it roamed.

Much as Ivory loved Ptarmigan, her love was still split between the woman she was with and the woman who might still be alive high up in the distant mountains. But as the seasons went by and Autumn once more gave way to Winter, it seemed increasingly likely that the newly settled Cave Painters were right to be pessimistic. Glade would never return. Were vultures and hyenas at that moment gnawing at her bones in the plains near the Great Tongue Glacier? The horrifying image haunted Ivory. She'd much rather imagine Glade shivering in the icy wind up in the mountains. She preferred to envision her alive and struggling back, perhaps alone, across the snowy wastes to return to the arms of the woman who, despite everything, was still in love with her.

"We have to move from the valley," advised Murex the Cave Painter in the Autumn. "The valley doesn't have enough game and forage to sustain the village for another year."

"We must wait for my husband to return," said Ptarmigan. "It is my duty."

"It is also your duty to protect and guide the village," said Murex. "Your

husband will not return. He and the other Mammoth Hunters are dead. They cannot have survived in the lands where they settled. There are other valleys where we can settle. There are other plains, rivers, forests and caves.”

“When is the best time for us to seek out such places?” asked Ivory.

“Not now,” said Murex glancing up at the sky from which a few isolated snowflakes were falling. “In Winter we should hoard what food we have and stay put. But come Spring, we should venture on.”

“The Cave Painter speaks the truth,” said Otter, one of the River People. “We have nearly exhausted what little bounty the Mountain Valley offers.”

“Shouldn’t we return to our traditional Summer hunting grounds in the north?” asked Quail, a woman from Ivory’s tribe of Mammoth Hunters.

Ivory and Ptarmigan looked at each other. It was a subject they’d already discussed. Only half the village was now composed of people from their tribe. Most of the men were River People and Cave Painters, and they were good hunters. Those who were not Mammoth Hunters were unlikely to elect to abandon the security of the mountain valleys and rivers of the south for the mammoth steppes in the north. There were quite different hunting skills required to fell a mammoth or indeed the other large animals common in the northern plains such as rhinoceros, bison and musk ox.

“We shall discuss it at the evening feast,” said Ptarmigan. “It is a matter for the entire village to decide. But the shaman and I believe that the advice given by Murex and Otter is sound. There is more game and forage in the southern lands. The winters are less cold. We should accept our fate. If my husband and our fellow Mammoth Hunters haven’t returned by Spring we should leave the Mountain Valley and settle wherever the village so decides.”

Ptarmigan didn't really believe that her husband would return. In fact, she told Ivory privately that she'd be happier if he didn't. The Chief was an old man. His predation on other women, including Ivory, disgusted her. She was the Chief's wife not his sex toy. Nonetheless, Ivory nursed her faith in the beneficence of the spirits. Every day she gazed up the hillside in the hope that Glade would return. She visualised her struggling down the slope by herself to announce that the great survivor had once again come through against all odds and all expectations. She had crossed deserts, seas and forests. Surely she could also survive a passage through the mountains.

However, as the Winter drew in and the hills became covered in snow, there was still no sign of any figure, alone or otherwise, descending the slopes. Instead there was a repeat of the bleak conditions of the previous winter. The snow settled. The wind blew with icy ferocity. The cold penetrated through the thickest furs. But this year, with the better land lore provided by the Cave Painters, the villagers ate better and were better able to fend off the worst that the winter demons could throw at them.

It was a morning in early Spring when news finally arrived of the fate of Chief Cave Lion, Glade and the others.

The snow had mostly melted, but patches of white persevered in the shadows where the sun didn't directly shine. Ivory scanned the hillside as she did every day no longer really expecting to see anything, but then she saw just over half a dozen figures stagger down the hill. Even from this distance she could identify the heavy furs covering these figures as being of the traditional style worn by the Mammoth Hunters.

There were no actual hunters in the company, whether of mammoth or any other animal. There were four women, two adolescent boys and two younger girls. Two of the women were pregnant. One of the boys had a gaping hole where his left eye would once have been and the imprint of tooth marks and claws on his chest. The company was wretched, starving and frail. Their progress was slow even now when they were so close to the village. But their arrival was acclaimed by cheers, tears and ululation.

“Where are the others?” asked Ptarmigan once the company had been welcomed and the wailing and weeping became subdued.

“Dead,” said Red Squirrel, the oldest woman.

“Are you sure?” asked Ivory.

“The ones we didn’t bury were the ones eaten by lions and vultures,” said Lemming, another woman.

“Every one of them? Including the Chief and the shaman?”

“We buried both of them. The only animals that will eat them are worms and moles,” said Red Squirrel.

The company were tired, hungry and cold and Ivory took care of them. She needed to tend their wounds and treat their fever, but most of all find out what had happened. The account emerged in fits and starts, but it confirmed all of Ivory’s fears.

There had already been several casualties before Chief Cave Lion and the other Mammoth Hunters even arrived at the plain of the Great Tongue Glacier. The journey across the mountains took many days. It was across valleys, over hills, alongside streams and through a mountain pass beside a perilous drop—down which had fallen Grey Wolf—and through snow in which the travellers sunk to their knees and which claimed the lives of two of the younger children. The villagers were already fatigued

before they arrived at their destination, including the Chief. He limped badly and had caught a fever which couldn't be treated because there was no time to stop.

It was obvious that despite the Chief's fine words the hunting grounds weren't very special at all. The animals that passed through didn't stay for long and few of these were the large game that the Mammoth Hunters were primed to hunt. There were patches of woodland in which the women could forage but these nestled only on the steep slopes of the hills and were difficult to clamber through. The hunting grounds were bad enough, but worse were the stipulations that the Cave Painter imposed on their use.

No breeding animal was to be killed if it was larger than a deer. Only old and frail animals could be hunted. Horses were sacred and could only be killed on special days by Cave Painters. The Mammoth Hunters should never stray beyond the bounds of the encircling cliffs and the empty expanse of rough rocky ground ahead. No trees were to be cut down unless they were old or diseased. Rivers and streams must not be dammed and the flowing water diverted. If a representative of Ochre's village should come to inspect the Mammoth Hunters' use of the lands loaned to them, there must be no let to the pursuance of their duty. After every rule and regulation was spelt out, Ochre, the Cave Painter's ambassador, punctuated his account with a fierce guttural expression associated with a finger pulled across his neck which Glade chose to translate to the Mammoth Hunters, who otherwise wouldn't have understood a word, as meaning that there would be unfortunate consequences.

Ochre departed after he'd dined with the Mammoth Hunters on the meagre rations they'd gathered on the journey, which was through lands much more bountiful and promising than the plains of the Great Tongue Glacier. He indulged for the last time

in sex with Glade which he did openly and in front of the children. Even those villagers who believed the shaman was little better than a slut, despite her shamanic skills, felt pity for a woman who was being so openly humiliated. As, of course, was the entire village. Many of the Mammoth Hunters who watched Ochre recede into the distance wished that they could accompany him if it meant that he could lead them to richer hunting grounds.

The cold, the snow, the fierce winds and the difficulty of constructing shelters in this forbidding place steadily claimed the lives of more children, some of the women and even two of the warriors who like the chief had become feverish on the arduous trek. The death toll rose bit by bit, especially when the inadequacy of the shelters they'd put together was confirmed during a particularly fierce snowstorm where either the wind blew them away or the sheer weight of snow caused them to collapse. Other than the shelters they'd made, the only other places the villagers could rest were in caves that were most often already occupied by cave bears or cave hyenas.

Had the hunting been better then the fortunes of the village might not have been so dire, but the Mammoth Hunters' skills were stretched to their limits. The deer they caught were small and took a disproportionate amount of effort to track through the small forests. The sheep and goats on the slopes were too agile to be easy prey. The village couldn't survive on only the meat of hare, fox and lemming. The small copses of woodland provided meagre pickings.

Although the warriors' numbers were being steadily depleted by accident and ill-health, they knew that the survival of the entire village relied on their hunting skills. The hunting expeditions became progressively more precarious and dangerous. They climbed up steep slopes in pursuit of goats and sheep. They crossed the Great Tongue

Glacier to hunt animals that had got caught in the treacherous chasms, but this only resulted in the death of two warriors who didn't see a precipitous chasm beneath the thick snow until it was too late. They travelled far across the plain to see what there was a day's walk or more from where the villagers sheltered. Chief Cave Lion was too ill to accompany them and many villagers openly questioned whether he was even fit to remain chief. His most loyal supporter was the shaman who everyone now recognised they relied on more than any other person.

The shaman was horrified when the warriors returned across the thick hard snow from one of their expeditions carrying the carcass of a freshly killed mare. The other villagers were delighted. A horse might not be a mammoth, a rhinoceros or an aurochs but there was enough meat to feed the whole village, as well as a valuable source of hide.

"Don't you remember what the Cave Painter said?" the shaman said. "Did you not hear what he said about consequences?"

"They'll never know," said Cave Hyena.

"There is snow everywhere," said the shaman. "There are the mare's footprints. There are your footprints. And the snow will be smeared with blood. The evidence of your crime will be visible from a hill more than half a day's walk away."

Nevertheless, no one could deny that the horsemeat was much appreciated. There was a bonus in that the mare had been heavily pregnant and the meat from the foal inside her belly was also very welcome.

"We have been blessed by two feasts with one kill," laughed the Chief.

He didn't laugh so much just two days later when there was a lull in the winds that scoured the plain and a company of Cave Painters approached the village. Like the

Cave Painters Chief Cave Lion had encountered on his original trek across the mountains not many cycles of the moon before, these warriors arrived in overwhelming force. They stood by the village fire and shouted at the villagers in their incomprehensible language.

The Chief staggered out from his shelter with the shaman. He was clearly not at all well and was wrapped around by the fur that he'd used as his blanket. The shaman spoke to the Cave Painters while the warriors and other villagers stood around as agitated spectators.

Most of the women and children were in the woods foraging when the Cave Painters arrived. The only one of the Mammoth Hunters who returned from the mountains that witnessed the massacre was Red Squirrel. And what she saw was not everything.

Somehow the dialogue between the shaman and the Cave Painters got out of hand. She was clearly trying to be patient and reasonable, while some of the warriors got angry at what they imagined was being said in a conversation they didn't understand. Some of the younger men wanted to impress on the Cave Painters how aggrieved they were that the lands to which they had been allocated were so impoverished and how the restrictions on their hunting rights were so unjust. There were irate shouts and one of the Mammoth Hunters angrily brandished a spear.

Retribution was sudden, brutal and efficient. Before Red Squirrel had the wit to run away, the Cave Painters had killed the Chief, all the warriors and the shaman.

"They killed Glade?" said Ivory whose eyes were damp with bitter tears.

"At least they didn't rape her as well," said Red Squirrel bitterly. "As they did me. And all the other women. And those women that resisted the most were also killed."

When the violence was over, all that was left of the Mammoth Hunters' settlement in the plains of the Great Tongue Glacier were several young children in tears, three or four women in torn furs weeping from shame and humiliation, and a scattering of corpses that would all need to be buried without the prayers of a shaman to placate the spirits. The village had been effectively destroyed.

And all, Red Squirrel believed, because of the slaughter of a pregnant mare.

The Cave Painters collected the skull and hide of the slaughtered horse. They were as offended by its death as they would have been if a person had been killed. They spat on the corpses of the dead, including the shaman, and left the village clearly in high spirits.

The survivors, meanwhile, were now to have a very bad time.

Cave Hyena, the actual perpetrator of this crime against the Cave Painters, was one of only two men to survive the massacre because they'd been hunting elsewhere at the time.

Winter passed, as did Spring and Summer. The survivors struggled through the seasons in which died many children and another of the warriors. The plains of the Great Tongue Glacier were more fruitful in the Spring and Summer, but this was only because there were so few to feed. They were constantly hungry, often cold and always miserable.

Finally, with Winter approaching and with only one surviving warrior, the same Cave Hyena who many still blamed for their misery, the village resolved to risk the long trek back to the Mountain Valley. Unfortunately, the journey took much longer than anticipated. After Cave Hyena was killed by a cave lion when he made a foolhardy and ill-advised attempt to settle in a cave, there were now no warriors. There were only

women and children.

The nights were spent sheltered in woodlands, in caves designed for much smaller residents than the Mammoth Hunters, in the shelter of overhanging rocks, while every day was an ordeal of foraging in deep snow and snaring the occasional hare or sheep. They encountered the occasional Cave Painter on the way, but they were generally ignored. Even when a posse of warriors stopped them and asked questions in their unintelligible language, the resolution wasn't the fresh massacre or rape that Red Squirrel in particular feared but a rather more desultory warning that they still couldn't understand but to which they nodded in pretend agreement. It seemed that as long as the Mammoth Hunters didn't interfere with the taboos and land rights of the Cave Painters they weren't exactly welcomed but they were at least tolerated.

The trek back was much longer and more arduous than the outward journey led by Ochre. The Cave Painter had an intimate knowledge of the land that the Mammoth Hunters lacked. Their main guide was the direction of the Sun and the stars in the sky and on days when it was cloudy or the snow blew across the hills and valleys, they were essentially blind and made very little progress on their journey.

Ivory was overwhelmed by despair. She'd believed that she'd been inwardly prepared for the news of her lover's death but this wasn't so. The confirmation of and the brutal finality of the shaman's death was a blow to her for which only Ptarmigan could minister relief.

Ivory wasn't a young girl any more. She was the village shaman and wife to the

woman who was now indisputably the chief. And the village for which she was shaman and her wife the chief was totally unlike any that had existed before. It was a village of women and children, with only a few adult men, drawn from three different tribes living in a part of the mountains where none of them had ever hunted before.

And now they were to leave the Mountain Valley where they had lived for one year and two winters to a new place that would hopefully provide for them better.

But it almost certainly couldn't be worse than the plains of the Great Tongue Glacier where Ivory now knew her first and still dearest lover's body lay buried.

Ivory's despair at the loss of her lover was ameliorated by Ptarmigan's love and affection, but Glade had no such compensation after she'd buried Demure's body. She now had the same duty to survive while still mourning her devastating loss. She might have thought that after all the trials of her life, this would be just one more, but her grief was so great that she barely wanted to eat the food she'd foraged.

She had no obvious place to go, so perversely she followed a route due north. It was a direction she and Demure had never considered before. They were women of the southern lands. Why would they ever wish to go further north? It was known that the further north one travelled the colder it became. The snows settled forever and it was rumoured that the world came to an end at an endless wall of ice

Glade's route took her along valleys of snow-covered hills, beside a river that was mostly unpopulated and towards the icy chill of the northern savannah. In the north, there were more woolly mammoths, more woolly rhinoceros and larger and fiercer

bears and lions. Glade knew that such a northward trek was unwise. It was almost suicidal, especially as those tribes she passed on the way were travelling in the opposite direction away from the crippling cold and towards the relative sanctuary of the south. If there was ever a wise time to travel north, this wasn't it.

By the time she met Ivory's tribe travelling south, the worst of Glade's depression and self-pity had faded. It was impossible for her to indulge in grief when the daily necessity of finding food and shelter was of such paramount importance, not to mention the need to avoid the lions and hyenas that were gathering along the valleys in anticipation of the migrating herds of deer, mammoth and antelope that were also coming south.

Glade knew the travellers weren't native to the south although they were making a home in the riverside valley where they had settled. Their weapons were far better suited for hunting big game rather than the light-footed animals of the valleys. They wore furs designed to seal every last piece of skin, including fingers, nose and ears, from the ruthless elements. Her first anxiety was whether she would even be able to communicate with the tribe. It was even possible that the villagers would be hostile, though it was very rare to be attacked without provocation.

Her usual tactic when she'd wandered with Demure was to approach an unfamiliar tribe with her palms outwards and her possessions laid on the ground so that the villagers could see that not only did she mean no harm but that she was a woman. There was the danger that the fact she was a defenceless woman would merely act as an invitation for rape and there were occasions in the many encounters she and Demure had negotiated where this was exactly what happened. But it wasn't possible for Glade to travel any distance without the help of other people, so it was a hazard she had to

risk.

“Good morning,” she called out in the Cave Painters’ language, the most widely spoken throughout the northern lands. “I am a shaman. I come to bring succour to the living, the suffering and the dead. If you give me shelter for a few days then I will help you as best I can.”

This formula normally worked when she encountered a new village. Most villages, in any case, had by now heard of the reputation of the travelling dark-skinned shaman women. This was a peculiarity that gave her a currency that spread far along the rivers and sea shores.

The three women and two men who stood by the side of an elk that they were skinning looked at Glade with incomprehension. This was a problem for her. They clearly didn’t understand a word she’d said. Then one of the men spoke. It was brief and expressed more confusion and surprise than anything else. Glade couldn’t quite understand what was said, but she recognised the vocal patterns. These were villagers from the tribe of the Mammoth Hunters with which she’d occasionally come into contact. They were a rough sort that in the south mostly lived a nomadic life on the huge plains where they were just as likely to hunt a tall straight-tusked elephant or *Stephanorhinus* as they were a woolly mammoth. The dialect they spoke was rougher still than that of their southern cousins, but Glade knew enough words of their language to repeat her formulaic greeting in their language even though she spoke slowly and precisely to facilitate understanding.

In fact, Glade couldn’t be more welcome to the villagers. There had been a spate of sickness that had inflicted the Mammoth Hunters ever since they’d begun to follow the river to this part of the valley. It had claimed the life of their original shaman: an

old man who had been blind for several years. It was clear that they believed that they'd somehow been destined to encounter her in their moment of need. And in this way, she was more than ready to help. Once she'd determined that she wasn't going to be raped or murdered, and that her services were required, she was escorted to the Chief. He was surrounded by other villagers including Ivory, who was then nothing more than a child, and her parents.

Glade explained what services she could provide the village and showed off the herbs, spices and other tools of her trade. Chief Cave Lion and his warriors studied the flint needles, the deer-hide bandages, the sinew thread and the carved wooden bowls with great interest. It was quite evident that they'd never seen anything like them before. The Chief also studied Glade's body with an eye that she knew from similar occasions in the past could only suggest lascivious intention.

"What do you want in exchange for the services you'll provide for the village's body and soul?" the Chief asked cautiously. It was obvious that encounters like this with people from another tribe was very rare.

"I want nothing more than food, shelter and respect, my lord," said Glade.

"In that case," said Chief Cave Lion with a relieved smile and a nod to his fur-clad followers, "you are welcome to share with us the meat of the elk and horse we have this day slaughtered."

It was at that point that Glade knew that she could very probably stay with this tribe of Mammoth Hunters for as long as she liked.

"It will be my privilege, my lord," she said.